

DEBBIE SMITH

YE NUNS / ECHOBELLY

“I was hungover like a mother,” admits Debbie Smith about the first time we met in 2012, by the banks of Canal Saint-Martin in the Parisian summertime. Decked out in a dapper three-piece, Smith had performed alongside Raincoats luminary Gina Birch in the bohemian surrounds of the city’s Comptoir Général, with its colonial tiling and curio cabinets full of skeletons, rare bird feathers and stuffed animals. Who knew that when Birch listed herself and ‘friend’ as that afternoon’s performers, we’d be rubbing shoulders with seminal Britpop guitarist Smith?

A consistent face in the backlines of the British music scene since 1990, Smith is no stranger to teaming up with iconic figureheads like Birch, performing with everyone from My Bloody Valentine bassist Debbie Googe in supergroup Snowpony, to Au Pairs frontwoman Lesley Woods in Darlings (completed by Ellyot, of influential queercore group Sister George, on drums). Providing a dense layer to the wall of fuzzed-out strings and looping bass lines, Smith was called as a last-minute request, rehearsing a handful of times in Birch’s North London kitchen. She found herself adapting well to Birch’s unconventional musicianship: “She would say, ‘Can you make it sound a bit more sticky?’ Like a stick?” But the guitarist is insistent that’s how she’s found a lot of women musicians communicate, particularly in the DIY scene of bedroom recordings, citing Siouxsie Sioux honouring John McGeoch’s knack for translating a request for “it to sound like a horse falling off a cliff” into the band’s signature style. “It’s not about the technical terms,” she explains. “It’s about how you feel or visualise something, and I enjoyed that because you stretch yourself and it makes you think, ‘How do I make that sound sticky?’ It’s a lot more cooperative if everyone can share ideas, even if you don’t know the chords or the beats.”

Today, we find Smith in the more familiar surroundings of her South East London home, greeted by a strong builders’ tea and her two limby Italian greyhounds. Her living room is something of a creative space for Smith, who often works from her laptop surrounded by an extensive record collection, the shelves bowing with music memorabilia and literature, including David Byrne’s *How Music Works*, Lucy O’Brien’s *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* and Caitlin Moran’s new wave feminist tome *How to Be a Woman*. We’re in good company. Smith was encouraged into musicianship by her frustrated, would-be jazz saxophonist father, who passed on his love of music through countless records (‘Debora’ by T.Rex to mark her birth, which sadly

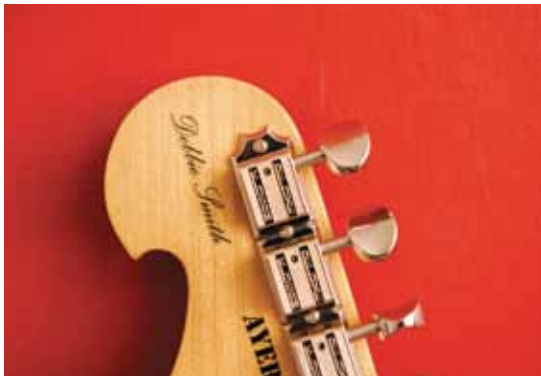
didn’t survive her three-year-old brother’s intrigue) and annual attempts to get her to pick up the guitar. “At 14, my dad had given up buying me guitars after my brother and I would literally tie them up into the tree at the bottom of the garden and shoot arrows at them. But at 14 I decided, ‘Right, I’ll try now,’” she recalls.

“I bought an Argos guitar, a really cheap amp and an Ibanez flanger, which was brilliant,” she says. “It was huge and had six knobs on it and took two square batteries. It was a serious pedal.” From then on, every day after school, Smith would practise behind closed bedroom doors, flexing her chord structures around the first Siouxsie and the Banshees album: “I’ve forgotten a lot of them now, but give me a couple of drinks and a guitar, and I will go Banshees on you,” she jests. “I learned ‘Mirage’, because it had bar chords, but they were all A shapes so I just moved the A shape up and down. I still play like that, I don’t do the correct chord shapes. I just play the way I taught myself, wrongly, when I was 14.” Now, of course, Smith is widely known as one of the formative guitarists of a generation, and even today is challenging perceptions with London girl gang Ye Nuns; a rousing homage to American GIs and nihilistic krautrockers The Monks. But she wasn’t always a la mode, and although her initial collaborations were similarly inspired by some of her influential greats – namely Siouxsie and The Cure – she made her initial steps into the indie scene through far more unorthodox means.

Teaming up with a friend from sixth form college, Smith remembers: “We actually played publicly a couple of times, but the only time I can really remember was at someone’s bar mitzvah, performing ‘Carcass’ by Siouxsie and the Banshees. Essentially, two spotty teenagers playing post-punk and Henri Mancini at this bar mitzvah, very atonally because we weren’t very good.” Jumping into another band shortly after, covering Mod-esque hits, the pair actually went on to support That Famous Subversa with Vi Subversa of anarcho-punk band Poison Girls in a local pub, which Smith notes as a career highlight. Then, of course, there was her stint on bass in Salisbury-born The Siren, and her sojourn straight into Mouth Almighty, “the drinking lesbians band” with two girls called Debbie and a set of identical twins – who all liked to drink. Playing for four or five years, the group disbanded, only for something rather fortuitous to fall Smith’s way – not to mention the phone call that would change her career – all in the space of a week.

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Sifting through Melody Maker and NME small ads, her girlfriend at the time stumbled on the advert placed by Dean Garcia and Toni Halliday of alt-rock duo Curve, looking for a bass player. “I saw the ad on the Tuesday, phoned up on the Wednesday, had the audition on the Friday and by the time I got back I was in the group,” she laughs. But the shift from her lo-fi roots to a professional session musician didn’t come without its difficulties: “It was difficult for me to adjust to being a hired hand, and being in a professional band where you don’t have to carry your guitar – the roadies do that. It was very odd that you didn’t have to do any of the donkey work.”

In 1994, it seemed as though they were on the cusp of doing great things, but with Garcia’s young children and the realities of touring for five years straight, the decision was made to end the band. But just as her response to the small ad had led to extensive touring following Curve’s debut release ‘Doppelgänger’ (including a US tour alongside The Jesus and Mary Chain, who Smith would also team up with in indie supergroup Snowpony), serendipity would strike again, as Savage and Best PR (who managed Echobelly, and were largely responsible for the Britpop movement of the mid-to-late ‘90s) were looking for a guitarist at the time: “Glenn [Johansson] fractured his wrist just before a UK tour so they asked me to come in and play, but by the time it came round, his elbow was better, so they just added me as a guitarist.”

Echobelly was fronted by Indian-born Sonya Madan, and the 28-year-old singer was heralded as “a cultural icon, a female Morrissey and the UK’s first Asian pop star”. Adding an Anglo-Caribbean tomboy lesbian to the lineup, Echobelly were a welcome break from the white lad culture of much of the era. “Britpop was a bit laddy,” Smith acknowledges, “but a lot of great women did get into the limelight. It was just a little tokenistic.” She continues: “The women were always objectified; Louise Wener was objectified, Justine [Frischmann] was objectified, Sonya was objectified.” And it’s an attitude that filters further down within the industry: “You can ask any woman who was in a band at that time – or right now – and they will have met a sound engineer who wants to plug their guitar in. You know, I’ve got to where I’m doing a gig, you’d think I’d know how to do that by now.” Even when it comes to musicianship, Smith contests there’s still a way to go: “Women are generally judged on how they look, or if they’re not good-looking, it’s all ‘Oh, but she writes brilliant songs’. What do you mean, but she writes brilliant songs? She does write brilliant songs. There’s always a double standard for women.”

Regardless, there’s no denying that Smith was a fresh take on the standard doe-eyed nature of guitarists at the time. In fact, Skunk Anansie frontwoman Skin and continent-defying bassist Yolanda Charles have both noted Smith as one of the “only current black British female guitarists either one of them

could think of”. It’s something of which Smith is aware: “You can speak to women of colour who are into punk today, and they will tell you exactly the same thing – there are no black women there. It’s a white teenage, male scene. Maybe black people think it doesn’t have anything to say to them, but I only have two words for them: Bad Brains.”

Snatching from the fretwork stylings of her post-punk sisters – The Slits’ Viv Albertine, The Raincoats’ Ana da Silva – Smith is still surprised when people hold her up against such luminaries. “People have been telling me that I have a fantastic guitar style and I never really thought about it,” she says. “I just copied guitarists that I like.” In reality, her treble-drenched tones strung from her cream Stratocaster was Britpop at its finest: “I am fond of the treble. The treble normally goes all the way up. I’ve started peeling it back a bit lately, but I definitely played a really trebly guitar before I had any pedals. It was that really Au Pairs, Raincoats metallic twang.”

Debbie Smith comes in many guises: from Britpop’s Echobelly to indie juggernaut Snowpony, she’s the embodiment of the sound of over two decades, who has transitioned and collaborated with more punk icons than you can shake a stick at. And she shows no sign of stopping just yet. As Smith herself says: “There will always be people who blaze the trail and who are ignored, but then eventually someone will pick up the baton and run with it.” ■

PEDAL TO THE METAL

- Boss CH-1 Super Chorus
- Butterfly Effect MFKR Distortion
- Mooer Cruncher
- Jim Dunlop Cry Baby Wah
- TC Electronic Spark Mini Booster
- TC Electronic Ditto Looper
- Pro Co Turbo RAT
- Boss DD-3 Digital Delay