

“We’ve not stopped for almost a decade. It’s been brilliant and exhausting in equal parts,” English Teacher vocalist, guitarist and synth player Lily Fontaine laughs, reflecting on the band’s ascent over the last five years.

The band - Fontaine, Lewis Whiting (lead guitar, synth), Douglas Frost (drums, piano and vocals) and Nicholas Eden (bass) – began writing together after meeting while students at Leeds Conservatoire. Early support from local organisations Music Leeds, Come Play With Me and BBC Radio Introducing, who regularly played their earliest offerings and helped garner support for the band, led to a pivotal signing with indie label Nice Swan Records. During lockdown, English Teacher’s fanbase grew online and 2021 single ‘R&B’ had the music industry buzzing. A much-lauded debut EP, ‘Polyawkward’ followed, providing further insight into the diverse sonic and uniquely self-made aesthetic world of the band, and appearances at Glastonbury and Leeds Festival soon made English Teacher one of the most talked about bands in British music.

Since then, they’ve toured with Parquet Courts and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, played on *Jools Holland*, and sold out all their UK and EU tour dates as well as Elsewhere in Brooklyn, New York City. They’ve graced the cover of the magazine they used to spend their pocket money on as teens, *NME*, had single ‘Nearly Daffodils’ placed at number 7 in the top ten songs of 2023 by TIME Magazine, and more recently acted as ambassadors for Independent Venue Week (following in the footsteps of Arlo Parks, Wet Leg, Wolf Alice and Beabadoobee), in a nod to the grassroots venues where they learned their crafts.

Now, they’re about to release their debut album, *This Could Be Texas*. Representative of the four songwriters’ sonic journeys to date, some tracks were written at university in 2016-2019’s post-nest-fleeing nostalgia, while others found themselves whole in the weeks before entering the studio. Listening to *This Could Be Texas*, it’s evident the band have spent a long time crafting the album, with its intricately layered and meticulously crafted melodies that explore far-ranging themes including social issues, struggling to belong, mental health and science fiction. As *NME* wrote in the band’s recent first cover article for the publication, their new music is a “bold, rhythmic, revamp,” drawing on influences as varied as “psychedelia to wobbly art punk.”

Speaking about the album’s sonics and themes, Fontaine says it is about “the in-betweens”. She explains: “I want the album to feel like you’ve gone to Space and it’s just like Doncaster, or you’ve gone to Doncaster and you feel like an alien. Sonically and lyrically, it’s about not being quite like one thing, nor quite like another, existing in that space between being assigned a choice and completing it where anything is possible.” On several songs, Fontaine reflects on growing up as a mixed-race individual in a place, she says, “where many didn’t have understanding or even tolerance towards people who are different” which only became more evident as she gained adulthood in the era of the Brexit referendum. The propulsive, ‘The World’s Biggest Paving Slab’ is a good example, where Fontaine sings: “*I’m not the terrorist of Talbot Street, but I think that ruins have beauty.*”

Explaining the song, Fontaine says: “In Colne, where I spent the majority of my childhood, it was quite a far-right area. When Brexit came around, and the Nigel Farage’s of this world emerged, there were lots of divisions, lots of unpleasant conversations in public spaces. A few streets from where I lived, on Talbot Street, the largest haul of bomb-making materials was found, in the home of a white supremacist, which is brilliantly ironic considering the jokes you would often hear in school about the brown kids being the terrorists. But there are also a lot of beautiful people there, set in some of the most stunning countryside, and the song, and a lot of the songs on the album, are about that juxtaposition. ‘Albert Road’ talks about these divisions in a really cathartic way for me. You come to realise that certain people are hateful because of situations they were brought up in.”

The gentle, gorgeous balladry of ‘Albert Road’ is a heart-breaking exploration of this. “*Don’t take their prejudice to heart / They hate everyone / The world around them never showed / How loving can be fun,*” Fontaine sings on this emotive closing track. Guitar-driven with touches of synth, harmonium and cello, it’s reminiscent of the crushing heart-on-sleeve lyricism of The National’s Matt Berninger. “*And that’s why we are how we are*” Fontaine sings at the song’s end, as it builds up to a screaming crescendo.

The screams make sense in light of some of Fontaine’s experiences of home – a theme that re-emerges throughout the album. She recalls trying to organise a charity night of music for Syrian refugees in her

hometown when she was 18, the crisis “having really affected her”. “I got all the local bands to play at this venue to raise money for the British Red Cross,” she explains. “I wrote about it on the town’s Facebook Group and there was just so much hate – just people decrying me for putting the event on.” She says the divisions are something that have shaped – and continue to shape – her music as she “finds a place to exist that’s free of such divisions.”

The reworked ‘R&B’, which has been described as a “brooding narrative” sees Fontaine grapple with the unfair judgements that are placed on her as a frontwoman of colour. “*Despite appearances, I haven’t got the voice for R&B / Even though I’ve seen more Colors Shows than KEXPs*”, she says on a track that is open about the prejudices she’s faced in the music industry and beyond. “There’s a lot of judgement that I had early on,” Fontaine says. “Being a woman of colour fronting a band shouldn’t even be a thing to talk about; we need to just get on with it – only then will the narrative around that change.”

Many of Fontaine’s lyrics are observational as she takes snippets of daily life and finds the bigger meanings in them. The sci-fi leaning ‘Not Everybody Gets To Go To Space’ is a good example of Fontaine observing inequalities in the day-to-day as Britain undergoes a cost-of-living crisis and continued austerity. “This is probably the most overtly political track on the album,” Fontaine says. “This song was written after I’d read George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and *1984*. I just needed an outlet to convey how moved I was by his writing, how much it made me see the divisions around us and make sense of them.”

She continues: “The song is about how the class system in this country benefits those at the top – how opportunities are unequally afforded to maintain not only the lifestyles of the rich, but their power for power’s sake. I’ve lived the majority of my life under a government that has clung to power, employing the dirtiest of tactics at the expense of the people that they are employed to look after. Orwell was writing about this in 1949 and we’re still writing about it today, so I’m afraid the song doesn’t offer any hope of change.”

The song’s sci-fi sonics – it’s full of cascading electronic synth soundscapes and digital breakdowns – reflect another sonic theme on the album. “Sci-fi has always been a genre that’s progressive and able to tackle current issues,” Fontaine continues. “It explores dystopias, social issues, multicultural landscapes too, but through this kind of surreal frame that we’ve tried to create with our music here.”

Second single, ‘Nearly Daffodils’ illustrates the intricate, math-rock leanings of the band’s songwriting. “This was one of the later ones that came together before the studio, but we’d had the individual parts for it for some time,” Whiting says, remembering their time recording predominantly in London’s Pony Studios. Eden adds: “It started as a Logic project, quite synth-heavy but it ended up as the bass line and predominant melodic driver of the track.” Fontaine says she was “obsessed with the bassline” and “loved it so much”. “It formed the backbone of the song,” she says. While having written the lyrics prior to the bassline being added, she noted that “they just seemed to fit.” She continues: “We added in some drum loops that Douglas made and then it just all clicked into place.”

‘Nearly Daffodils’ is about heartbreak and acceptance of unfulfilled potential, Fontaine says. “It’s about how, no matter how much you may want something, no matter how much effort you may put into something’s growth or development, no matter how beautiful you can envision its fruition, life is a bitch and about as unstoppable as a freight train.”

Literary references abound on the album; as well as George Orwell, there are nods to William Wordsworth, Anthony Burgess, Charlotte Brontë and Greek literature. “There are lots of Easter eggs,” Fontaine laughs. In the case of Brontë, it comes via Fontaine observing the wild landscapes that bordered her hometown; the juxtaposition of the beauty of the surrounding hills with the industrial landscape of the town. The song ‘Sideboob’ illustrates this well and contains an emotive spoken word segment from Fontaine that echoes the dexterous wordplay of Alex Turner.

“The ending of it, the poem part of the song is really a love poem from Boulsworth Hill to Pendle Hill, which are areas of natural beauty,” she begins. “When I wrote the first part of the song, I was studying Romantics at college and was just obsessed with the concept of the sublime. I remember sitting in my childhood bedroom, looking at those hills constantly.” Fontaine says the song has an undercurrent of mental health too. “It’s about

someone who is very depressed and it's an ugly time – literally and metaphorically. It's about that depression cloud lifting and their true beauty being revealed underneath the surface and the importance of looking for that.”

Anxiety is a theme the band return to throughout the album via skittering basslines and disorienting synths. “I feel like we're all quite anxious as people,” Fontaine says of herself and the band, with all in agreement. “Just existing can be quite nerve-wracking,” she says. “We definitely have imposter syndrome,” Eden says, “and we're still learning how to unpack that a bit,” he reflects. The album's frenetic ‘I'm Not Crying, You're Crying’ illustrates well how the band frequently lean into their emotions and use music to unpack them. “It's also about pretending to be okay when being anything but,” Fontaine explains. “It's about pretending you don't care when you really do and how eventually, that is not so easy to cover up.”

One of the hardest things to grapple with is how indecisive they each are – and how they all have very different tastes. “I've got a soft spot for heavy metal,” Eden smiles. “Whereas I have a soft spot for a lovely voice over a twinkly-twangy acoustic guitar or piano,” multi-instrumentalist Frost laughs. The drummer can often be seen switching to keys for songs such as the album title track ‘This Could be Texas’ which thematically sees the band break the fourth wall addressing the anxieties of writing an album. “But this means that there is really no manifesto for what we're going to do. We each bring all these different influences or collages to the table and what comes out when we combine them all is very much unique to us as a band.” Whiting adds, whose style was self-taught by the works of artists like Television and Sonic Youth.

‘Mastermind Specialism’ tackles this decision paralysis, and ends on a note about being at a “fork in the road”, something that mirrors the band's own anxieties as they work hard to find their own path. These fears were well tackled in the hands of Grammy-nominated and MPG-winning producer Marta Salogni – known for her work with Björk, Depeche Mode, Black Midi, M.I.A. and Bon Iver. “I was always quite intimidated by the studio,” Fontaine adds. “It made such a difference working with someone who just felt like an extension of the band and Marta was incredible. She understood the importance of linking the sonic to the themes, using tape loops to create other-worldly sounds to infuse the album with a sense of the uncanny. She even asked her father to record himself playing the saxophone and remixed it into the end of a track about my mum, who co-created the album artwork, and our family life, reinforcing the theme of home across the track and indeed, the LP.”

The album is the culmination of four musicians who have worked tirelessly to craft and develop their music – yet despite being one of the most-hyped acts in the UK right now, the band are firmly grounded – and extremely humble. “We are probably four of the most self-deprecating people you'll ever meet,” Frost smiles, as the rest of the band laughs. “We're very much our own worst critics so it did take us a long time to do this album and get it the way we wanted,” he explains. “It was a bit of a struggle for us all, but we're really proud of how it turned out.”