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*One Of Music's Best
And Busiest Collaborators*
GOES IT ALONE

Damon Albarn, the Grammy winner behind Blur, Gorillaz and much more, plumbs his dark side for first solo album: "I drive myself to the edge of insanity most days"

By **RICHARD SMIRKE**
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Scattered around the youthful-looking 46-year-old's studio are numerous subtle reminders of just how productive his gift for so-called flagellation has been. Despite the millions of records that he has sold as the quixotic frontman for Blur and Gorillaz, there are no framed platinum or gold discs on the walls. Partially hidden behind a sofa in an upstairs office is a framed poster by his (reportedly now estranged) Gorillaz bandmate Jamie Hewlett. Above it is a print by graffiti artist Banksy, who produced the artwork for Blur's last studio album, 2003's *Think Tank*. Downstairs, an antique map of the Congo Belge — referencing Albarn's ongoing cross-cultural music-exchange project, *Africa Express* — hangs in the main studio room. At its side is a black-and-white photo of Bobby Womack, whose 2012 album, *The Bravest Man in the Universe*, Albarn co-produced with XL Recordings founder Richard Russell.

There's a noticeable shortage of ephemera from Blur, the huge-selling Britpop band he has led for more than 20 years, though it hasn't released a new studio album since 2003. But Albarn has stayed busy. In addition to the aforementioned, his recent credits include two operas, *Monkey: Journey to the West* and *Dr Dee*, and supergroup collaborations The Good, The Bad & The Queen and Rocket Juice & The Moon.

"I don't dwell on stuff. When I've done something, I move on to something else," says Albarn, who is now taking on an entirely different guise and challenge: that of solo artist.

"It just never occurred to me before," he notes of his latest move, not entirely convincingly. "I like working with people. I'm a collaborator, really."

True enough: *Everyday Robots* was made in partnership with Russell, who acted as co-producer and musical director, contributing the richly textured bed of samples and moody electronica that underpin much of the album. "It needed someone I respected and was

prepared to take shit from," says Albarn. The result is "a very intimate record" created out of a "world of memory, reflection and melancholy."

"It's not necessarily going to trail-blaze through the hit parade with a succession of fabulous pop ditties," he says, "but it feels like an important record for me."

"Hollow Ponds," a mournful acoustic ballad that sits at the heart of *Everyday Robots*, was the first song that Albarn and Russell recorded for the 12-track work. Referencing key points in the artist's life, beginning with Britain's 1976 heat wave, it helped establish the album's reflective, autobiographical direction, which resulted in some of Albarn's most soul-baring songs to date. "You and Me" alludes to his past experimentation with heroin ("Tin foil and the lighter ... Five days on, two days off"). Meanwhile, Albarn's "existential crisis" about technology is explored in the album's stirring title track, which features the singer intoning, "We are everyday robots on our phones" over plaintive piano chords and a chilling violin sample. Elsewhere, Brian Eno guests on the redemptive, gospel-flavored "Heavy Seas of Love."

"Every song is about an experience that I have had," says Albarn.

"Mr Tembo," a playful ukulele-strummed highlight, is about an orphaned baby elephant he met in Tanzania — which promptly relieved itself upon hearing the song. "I am yet to find out if it was sign of appreciation or disdain," says Albarn with a laugh.

In March, Albarn performed well-received shows at South by Southwest, and he returns stateside this summer, with appearances at the Governors Ball festival in New York and Bonnaroo in Tennessee already confirmed. A busy schedule of European dates is also booked. But if he has any free time during the coming months, the artist will likely be once again holed up in his studio: Next on his agenda is an unspecified theater project.

"I try and do all the things that I am interested in, but not to the exclusion of anything else," he says.

So does Blur figure in that? Albarn laughs. "Not at the moment. But who's to say that in a few years we won't meet up and go, 'Let's do something? We're friends, so it isn't really a case of there being an end. It's not that sort of story.'"

One certainty is that Albarn will not

let up in his tireless devotion to making new music, whatever fascinating form or guise it takes. "I'm really quite mediocre. It's only through hard work that I make any progress," he says. "But that's great. What on earth would be the point of it if you couldn't improve? I don't do it for the money, so why do I work nine-to-five religiously? It must be because there is a lot more to do." ●

"I don't dwell. When I've done something, I move on to something else," says Albarn from his West London studio.



BIG NUMBER

7m



The number of records Albarn has sold in the United States with Blur and Gorillaz, according to Nielsen SoundScan.