

Teenage Fanclub: Exclusive Interview

By [Drew Fortune](#) 621 days ago

Norman Blake discusses '90s rock, Kurt Cobain, and Teenage Fanclub's own markedly un-tortured legacy.

Photo by Laura Gray

"It's only music. Nobody's dying. So why get too uptight?" This sentiment from guitarist/lead vocalist Norman Blake sums up everything about iconic Scottish rockers Teenage Fanclub.

Their brand of perfectly understated power pop picks up where Big Star left off, and with a new record "Shadows" (Merge) that continues to perfect their recipe, Kurt Cobain's favorite band have quietly grown into elder statesmen, always there but always flying just under the radar.

Their music is great, always has been, and I implore everyone to check them out. It's ice cream for the ears. But the real story for me lies in the character of Norman Blake. I've interviewed lots of musicians. I can usually peg what the artist will be like based on the music, their appearance or lore. For instance,

Nick Cave behaved exactly like I thought Nick Cave would behave: quiet, moody and slightly menacing. When I interviewed Puff Daddy (or P. Diddy...I forget what he's going by this week), he had a cold, seemed very tired, and left after five minutes. He smelled great though.

Artists tend to push their agenda, and all the warm smiles and handshakes don't really mean anything after the twenty minute interview is over. I'm just another journalist on the junket, no matter how much I like to think I'm charming and special. One of the questions I get asked most often is, "Who was your favorite interview?" I interpret that question as who was the coolest and most interesting. For a long time, [Wayne Coyne of The Flaming Lips](#) held the top spot of nicest artist I've ever had the pleasure of interviewing. Prepping my interview with Teenage Fanclub, I kept reading and hearing from Merge publicists that unofficial Fanclub leader Norman Blake is the nicest guy in the rock biz. Needless to say, I was dubious. Well folks, the legends are true. Norman, congrats. You've taken the top spot in my unwritten favorite interview list. Sorry Wayne...I still love ya!

From the moment I met him at Chicago's Lincoln Hall, Norman was humble, exceedingly polite and funny. Soundcheck? Nah, Norman's not bothered. He'll have another cup of tea. We're not done talking! Solo photo shoot in the wings of Lincoln Hall? No problem. Personal song requests from me? Well, the band played "Sparky's Dream" last night, but no worries! We'll do it for ya, Drew! Cheers Norman...it was a true pleasure.

"Shadows," in a lot of ways, sounds very mature to me, and I don't mean that pejoratively.

No, not at all. We aren't young. We've been making records for a long time and the idea of guys our age trying to make a young record is a bit depressing. We like to make music that reflects our lifestyles and the way we feel and where we're at. I couldn't write the songs I wrote 20 years ago. I wouldn't be able to. I'm a different

person. I have a different outlook on life. So, I take it as a compliment if you find the record mature.

Can you still relate to your older material?

We still play those songs, and I would never overanalyze it because I suppose I could sit and dissect a lyric and think 'Well, that's not very good'. The point is I was younger then, and I don't look at the world the same way. I'm still the same core person I've always been, but I've gained a lot of experience and perspective since then. I always remember John Lennon talking about the early Beatles stuff and being embarrassed by it. At the same time, everyone starts as young, naïve songwriters and there's nothing to be embarrassed about by that. It's something you did, and then you evolve. I think he was the kind of person who thought about it too much and overanalyzed. If you do that, you end up driving yourself crazy.

By the same token, you've never been angry young men.

You get people who create a persona for themselves, an onstage persona, and they don't always literally take their costume off when they come off stage. We always thought that keeping up that persona was too much hard work. I don't think anyone in the band has ever been particularly angsty. Kurt Cobain was an angsty guy. He was a sensitive soul. A friend of mine who died recently, [Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse](#), was a real sensitive soul. He was a lovely guy. I knew Mark really well, but he was always so sensitive. We're not like that. I think all you have to be is honest. I take the idea of me trying to come off as depressed or bitter as really dishonest. Because I've never been that kind of person in my personal life. I've always been on a kind of even keel.

Seems like a real rarity in this business...

Probably not. I think a lot of artists love to come off as tortured. "Oh, my life is shite!" When really, they've got it pretty well-off. Kurt Cobain's life was really hell, though. He had a lot of pain and anger. But truthfully, most people in the music business don't have that, although they love to pretend. It's an affectation that you can have because it makes you appear a bit cooler. Some people are generally troubled and that can lead to great music like Nirvana and Mark Linkous.

Did you ever get to experience the beautiful side of Cobain in those days?

Yeah, he was a nice guy. We toured the "Nevermind" tour, but we'd known them before that. He was a regular guy, but obviously troubled. There's a nice photograph of myself and Cobain at the Reading Festival and Kurt's giggling with a big smile on his face. He was happy that day, as happy as anyone I'd ever met, and that's kind of the way I like to remember him. I think he couldn't handle the expectancies forced on him as an artist. In his wildest dreams, he never thought that Nirvana would be anywhere near as famous as they became. It's a shame that he ended up taking his own life because I would imagine that if he could have pushed through it, we're roughly the same age, he would have been a pretty happy guy. Some people just don't make it through.

In the early days, were you ever pushed into the role of grungy nihilist?

Yeah, we were friends with all the grunge bands, but it was more the kind of DIY punk aesthetic that bonded us together. We knew Calvin Johnston from K Records and that's how Cobain got to know about us. It was never a musical thing, but more of a doing it yourself kind of musical mentality. As long as it was personal music, it didn't have to be angry. It could be soft, gentle music, and that's what we all related to...the idea that you were doing it yourself and you were a little community. You weren't playing the game of the major labels.

What is it with great music coming out of Scotland?

I don't know! There's a good art school in Glasgow and if you're young and Scottish, you kind of gravitate towards that area. Where there's artists, there's bands, so it sprang from that. It's the biggest city in Scotland in terms of population, within a ten mile radius there's about one and a half million people living there. Before the early 80s, people would go to London if they wanted to have a band. A label called Postcard Records sprang up from the guys in a band called Orange Juice. They were this really cool independent label who said they were gonna do everything from Glasgow. The singer in Orange Juice was a fellow named Edwyn Collins, and they

were hugely influential. You ask any band from Scotland what they think of Orange Juice and they'll sing their praises. I'm speaking of everyone from Mogwai to whoever and they have a massive amount of respect for those guys. Glasgow's a small enough place where everyone in the scene pretty much knows each other.

I've interviewed established Scottish acts like Mogwai to younger bands like Frightened Rabbit, and they all agree that it's a pretty supportive scene.

I think you take somewhere like New York or London, and it's where people move to when they get or want to be famous. They create a new identity, and there's lots of hipsters around and it can be a bit depressing with all the people competing against each other. I suppose in other cities you don't have that. People come out to support the scene and want to be a part of it and contribute.

It seems like you guys have always stuck to that mindset. You want to create your music and leave all pretensions behind.

Like I say, the city is too small to be in any kind of feud with a band.

Can you pinpoint one thing that has kept you guys together over the years? You're obviously a happy musical family.

We take extended musical breaks, although never breaks from each other. The dynamic of everyone in the group just makes for good chemistry. We get on really great. I live in Canada now, so I only really see the guys when we tour or are recording. We still love working together.