

# KELE OKEREKE

*Twelve years after becoming a sensation with Bloc Party, British songwriter Kele Okereke has overcome his acoustic nervousness for his third solo album*

WORDS: GEORGE HENRY KING PHOTOS: RACHAEL WRIGHT

Not long after exploding onto the scene in 2005 as the frontman of British rock band Bloc Party, Kele Okereke unfairly gained a reputation for being somewhat of a 'difficult' person to interview. As a successful, gay and black musician performing a genre of music that had thus far been dominated by white, heterosexual males, music journalists saw Okereke – perhaps subconsciously, perhaps not – as a kink in the indie-rock chain. Questions about his sexuality and ethnicity, for example, often included an underlying sub-text, and as Okereke grew tired of such interrogation, journalists started to approach interviews with him in a hostile and antagonistic manner.

Twelve years on, however, his attitude towards being interviewed appears to have changed. During our time together in the back garden of his South London home, he cracks jokes and relaxingly rocks back and forth on a wooden chair that sounds as though it could break at any minute.

His personality is warm and humbled and his casual attire suggests that he is both physically and mentally at ease; there's an air of contentment. But his interview etiquette is not the only thing that's altered.

The arrival of his first child, Savannah, last December encouraged him to kick some of his bad habits ("I'm not going to say what they are," he smiles), and Okereke, now 35, has maturely acknowledged that he is entering a different phase in his life.

"I knew I had to change and I knew that there were certain things that couldn't carry on – everything before this has gone. You have to say 'you're not a rockstar now', because you've got to be a rock and give stability to someone else and that's what the album is about really."

The album Okereke is referring to is *Fatherland*, his new solo record and his third

away from the democratic constraints of Bloc Party's collaborative writing process. Those who have become accustomed to Okereke's not-so-secret desire to musically challenge himself and produce the unexpected with each album – be it a Bloc Party or solo LP – won't be surprised to hear that it sounds nothing at all like any of its predecessors. But they might, however, be caught off guard by the road that Okereke has this time decided to venture down.

Where his first two solo albums – *The Boxer* (2010) and *Trick* (2014) – saw Okereke swap the electric guitar for electronic beats.

***“The thought of making an acoustic album made me feel nervous, so I had to do it”***

*Fatherland* sees Okereke at perhaps his most vulnerable, instinctive and intimate. His voice is deeper and softer, and his lyrics are eloquently pronounced over musical soundscapes that are primarily driven by the acoustic guitar – an instrument that Okereke, due to his negative preconceptions of singer-songwriters, has always neglected.

"I've always had a slight aversion to singer-songwriter music," he admits. "But I've started to appreciate the music more and I've started to see that actually, there is something very powerful about just an instrument with a voice. There's a stillness and an honesty to it,

and the thought of making an acoustic album made me feel nervous, so I had to do it."

Okereke first started amassing ideas and writing songs for *Fatherland* towards the end of 2015, and the demoing process took place a couple of months later. At the time, Okereke was also on the verge of releasing his fifth album with Bloc Party, and so between fulfilling his tour duties with his band, Okereke spent time in Portland, Oregon, where he laid down the entirety of his new solo album in just ten days, with an ensemble of 20 different musicians. But despite the studio being isolated at the top of a hill and surrounded by a gloriously colorful and beautiful forest – the type of environment that usually has a calming effect on Okereke – having to work quickly and to a rigid deadline proved to be stressful.

"The first day we got there, nothing worked," he laughs. "So, we had to sort that out and then there was a constant sense that 'we've got to get this done in time'. But I don't mind that because I feel like a little bit of pressure forces you to reach for your best, so those types of high-pressure situations usually don't faze me. Too much stress can be debilitating, but a little bit can make diamonds."

Whilst *Fatherland* might act as the full stop at the end of the first sentence of Okereke life, its core themes are also very much concerned with the idea of looking forward to what it will be like to be a father, his relationship with his partner and not adhering to society's deluded vision of the perfect family.

Today, Okereke's mother is spending the afternoon taking care of Savannah in the living room, whilst he opens up his home to *Acoustic*. Every now and then I catch Okereke glimpsing through the backdoor, keeping an eye on his daughter. As an outsider, his domestic lifestyle does seem pretty perfect. His daughter usually sleeps throughout the night, he says, and in becoming a father himself,



Okereke's relationship with his own father – a man who he's never entirely seen eye to eye with – is stronger than it's ever been. Getting to this point, however, wasn't easy. Savannah was conceived via a surrogacy in the US – something that Okereke thought "wouldn't happen in my lifetime, even though I wanted it to" – and the entire process took an agonising three years. If nothing else, it gave Okereke and his partner time to prepare.

"This has been a process of preparing ourselves and myself for her. I was kind of scared a lot last year because I didn't really know what it was going to be like. But I feel as soon as Savannah was born something clicked in me and it was like a light bulb went on and there was a shift. I haven't been on tour yet, though, and the thought of going on tour for weeks or months at a time... I don't really see how I can do that."

Earlier this year, after setting a precedent with the release of *Fatherland* single, 'Grounds For Resentment' – a track on which he sings a romantic duet with fellow gay musician, Olly Alexandra – Okereke called for other

gay artists to be more real and honest when expressing their same sex desires in lyrics. When we talk about the track, he suggests that many up and coming artists perhaps shy away from using pronouns such as 'he' or 'him' when singing about love and lust, because they fear they might not get played on the radio or they'll be pigeonholed. Whilst Okereke assures me he was never "told not to talk about certain things" in his lyrics – although "there was a vibe that maybe it isn't so good to put yourself out there completely" – he rightly states that attitudes still need to change.

"As a gay artist and a gay person, I'm completely bombarded with images of heterosexual romance in music, film and literature and I've had enough of that. There are other stories and other ways to see the world, and now that I've reached this point in my life, I've realised that I need to be presenting and exploring those other ways to see the world."

Towards the end of our conversation, I ask Okereke if, in light of his new role as a father, he'd consider quitting music. Realising as I

said it that, perhaps quite harshly, I'm asking him to choose between the two loves of his life, I suggest that such a question might be a difficult one to answer. To my relief, Okereke doesn't think so.

"No, it isn't a difficult one," he instantly replies. "I could quite conceivably stop doing music to look after Savannah. I'm in a position where I don't need to do music anymore, because I'm not a materialistic person and I've been very sensible with what I've earned. I make more money not doing music, than I do making music. When I want time off, I can take time off. If I want to quit, I can quit."

Soon after, droplets of rain start to freckle the piece of paper on which my interview questions are written, bringing our time together to a sudden end. As I leave, he politely wishes me a good day and thanks me for coming. In my eyes at least, his reputation for being a difficult person to interview, will no longer precede him. ■

***Fatherland* is out now.**

**Info: [www.kele.lnk.to/FatherlandPR](http://www.kele.lnk.to/FatherlandPR)**