**SKUNK ANANSIE**

Skunk Anansie were born radical and have stayed that way ever since. It’s there in their music, which slips effortlessly between the confrontational and the tender, the politically charged and the nakedly emotional, the upfront and attention-grabbing and the quiet and restrained. But it’s there in the band’s essence too – in the blend of influences, cultures and personalities they have so successfully brought together.

When the band emerged from the sweat-drenched backrooms of London in 1994, electrifying everyone who saw them and jamming an adrenaline shot into the arm of a decadent music scene, they sounded and looked like nothing that had come before them.

“Nobody in our manor had seen anything like us before”, says singer Skin, who co-founded the band with bassist Cass and guitarist Ace. “We were an earthquake.”

“London in the 1990s was a mish-mash of people,” adds guitarist Ace, “But bands weren’t – it was always four blokes with identical haircuts. We were a band of people who were real. That’s why we were radical.”

Over 25 years later, every other band is still playing catch up. No one before or since has had the cultural or emotional impact that helped propel Skunk Anansie to huge success. The greatest measure of what they’ve achieved is that nobody else has come close to imitating them.

When Skunk Anansie formed in February 1994, with original drummer Robbie France, the clubs and bars of their native London were stirring with the first murmurings of Britpop – a movement largely populated by white 20-something men with guitars whose heroes were the giants of the past: The Beatles, The Who, The Kinks. Skunk Anansie couldn’t have been further away from that scene’s homogenised approach. Their DNA was a glorious mix of race, gender, sexuality, cultural and musical influences. They looked forward, not backwards. “We were outsiders,” says Skin. “We were proud that we were. We came along and showed you could be different.”

Skunk’s base of operation was The Splash Club, a cramped backroom in a ramshackle pub in King’s Cross, one of North London’s sleazier neighbourhoods. As the Splash’s founder and resident DJ, it made sense that Ace would debut the band he had put together with Skin and Cass there. And so it was, in early March 1994, a couple of hundred people packed into The Splash Club got their first glimpse of Skunk Anansie.

“It was super-hot and absolutely rammed,” remembers Skin. “We all had a reputation – Cass was the best bass player, I was the best lead singer, Ace was the best guitarist, and it was his club. Everybody was curious what it was going to be like, in a positive way. Like, ‘This is going to be weird and different and special.’”

It was all of those and more. The band booked a second gig there a month later, on April 5. Packed with dozens of A&R reps from record labels, it was to be a pivotal occasion for two very reasons. Firstly, it was the day that Kurt Cobain died. And secondly, it was the night that Skunk Anansie got their record deal.

“The A&R for One Little Indian was the biggest Kurt Cobain/Nirvana fan ever,” says Ace. “He’d heard the news and wasn’t going to go out. But he went to the gig and it was so mad it turned him around. He said, ‘I have to sign this band – if anything can make me feel better after this, it must be amazing’”.

Less than six weeks after forming, Skunk Anansie’s rise was underway – and the speed only increased. Between 1995 and 1999, the band released a string of hit singles that ran the spectrum of subjects and emotions, from the politically-charged ‘Little Baby Swastikkka’ and ‘Selling Jesus’ to the emotionally vulnerable ‘Weak’ and ‘Hedonism (Just Because You Feel Good)’, through to the anthemic ‘I Can Dream’ and ‘Charlie Big Potato’. The three acclaimed albums released during that period, 1995’s *Paranoid & Sunburnt*, 1996’s *Stoosh* and 1999’s *Post-Orgasmic Chill*, were statements of intent from a band who refused to be pigeonholed.

“As a black female singer, it was hard to get accepted in many ways,” says Skin. “And then I was onstage, doing exactly what I envisioned in my dreams. And I felt for the first time that I was accepted.”

Skunk Anansie have frequently been described as a political band. And they undeniably are – as their take-no-prisoners 1996 track ‘Yes, It’s Fucking Political’ pointed out, ‘Everything’s political.’ But politics are just one part of what they are: Skunk address love and rejection, anger and sadness, frustration and rage. The human emotions we all share.

“In rock music, it’s really easy to talk about partying and shagging girls and all that kind of stuff,” says Skin. “But for us, what we were singing about had to be deeper, it had to mean something. We had to talk about our experiences and what we were going through.”

While Skunk racked up Top 40 singles and Top 10 albums, their formidable reputation was amplified by their fearsome live presence. “Everything that is good that has come out of Skunk Anansie has come out of being a live band,” says drummer Mark Richardson, who joined Skunk Anansie in 1995, muscling his way into the band after being blown away when he saw them supporting Irish outfit Therapy?.

“We’ve always thought that nobody could defeat us. ‘Come on, try and beat us. You won’t.’” Nobody did. With Mark now completing the line-up, they proved this over and over again, whether it was as part of the NME-sponsored Brat Bus club tour in 1995 or opening for the likes of David Bowie and U2 a few years later.

The highlights came thick and fast: just over a year after they formed, they opened the second stage at the 1995 Glastonbury festival – an appearance that nearly didn’t happen after three-quarters of the band were held up in traffic en route to the site. “I was standing on the side of the stage, going, ‘Where the hell are the rest of them?’” says Ace. “They literally turned up, ran onstage and started playing.”

Two years later, Skunk Anansie became the first international multi-racial band to tour South Africa, playing three sold out arena shows. The following year, they were invited back to the country to perform at a massive concert held to mark the 80th birthday of former South African President and global icon Nelson Mandela.

“The night before, Skin and I were invited to a birthday meal in his honour, and we both got called up onstage to meet him,” says Cass. “All of sudden, Stevie Wonder starts playing Happy Birthday. And next to me are Nina Simone, Michael Jackson, the actor Danny Glover, and we’re all singing Happy Birthday to Nelson Mandela. I’m, like, ‘This is surreal.’”

There were other mind-blowing moments, such as being joined onstage by Luciano Pavarotti at a benefit concert organised by the Dalai Lama, when the opera singer sang Skunk’s ‘Follow Me Down’ with the band. “Going out to play with Pavarotti really gets the adrenaline going,” says Mark. “But then a big part of the band is about running on pure adrenaline.”

In 1999, Skunk Anansie’s meteoric rise reached a new height. Just four years after their debut Glastonbury appearance, the band were invited back to headline the festival. For Skunk, bringing the last Glastonbury of the millennium to close was the perfect end to a perfect decade.

“You look out and see all these people and go, ‘This is a long way from the Splash Club’,” laughs Ace. “That was definitely one of the highlights of our career.”

The new millennium brought new considerations. For Skunk Anansie, it meant embarking on a lengthy hiatus, during which they could reflect on their stellar achievements while branching out and flexing their muscles away from the mothership.

“Being away from each other made us appreciate what we had with the band even more,” says Cass. “When we got back together, it was, like, ‘We’ve got unfinished business.’”

When the four members reconvened in 2008, at Cass’ Black Mushroom Studios, it was with renewed purpose. The first thing they did at their first rehearsal back together wasn’t run through one of their old hits, it was write a brand new one. “We were, like, ‘Shall we play something old to warm up,” says Ace. “And Skin goes, ‘Let’s play something new.’ And we wrote ‘Because Of You’ in about ten minutes.”

The break had made them realise just how important they were to each other, how the chemistry they had together was irreplaceable. “The weird thing about Skunk Anansie is when the four of us come together, something happens,” says Mark. “It’s the chemistry we have together, the sound and feel of the band, the energy. That’s never, ever changed. And it never will.”

It was with this eyes-fixed-forward mentality that Skunk Anansie embarked on the second chapter of their career. Since getting back together, they’ve swerved the nostalgia circuit to release three acclaimed albums – 2010’s *Wonderlustre*, 2012’s *Black Traffic* and 2015’s *Anarchytecture* – that showcase a band who remain as single-minded in their intent. Many of the issues they’ve confronted over the years haven’t changed either, but Skunk Anansie are still fighting the good fight, taking no prisoners while they do it.

“Racism still exists, sexism still exists, homophobia still exists, and since Trump, it’s just open warfare,” says Skin vehemently. “Things have gone backwards, and we’re not going to tolerate it.”

“The more oppressive or fascist or repressive the regime is in the country, the more we bring out the opposing faction,” says Cass of the band’s lightning-rod nature. “We get the rebels because we are the rebels.”

Twenty-five years after they exploded from the backrooms of London, Skunk Anansie marked the milestone with *25LIVE@25*, a live album that brought together the greatest songs from the six studio albums they’ve made. Their exhilarating live shows are a hurricane of energy, noise and personality, an exhortation to become part of something much bigger that’s impossible to resist, so it was fitting to mark the occasion with a live album that provide both a celebration of Skunk’s unmatchable career and their importance as a musical and cultural force.

Expanded and extended thanks to the pandemic, the tour that accompanied 25LIVE@25 saw the band visit 13 countries, headline festivals across Europe and receive some of the best reviews of their career. At the same time, the mainstream British media have strongly embraced their importance within today’s culture with the likes of Channel 4 News, Newsnight, The One Show, Radio 2, national newspapers and broadsheets hailing them as iconic pillars of Britrock, as well as wide-spread acclaim from music and fashion press including Kerrang, NME, Classic Rock, Dazed & Confused, Phoenix Magazine, Diva Magazine, The Quietus and many more.

Skin’s contribution to music and British culture was recognised in 2023 when she was awarded an OBE at Buckingham Palace by King Charles. Her iconic status had also been recognised with the ‘Inspirational Artist’ award at the 2018 Music Week Women In Music Awards, and the band won the Kerrang ‘Hall Of Fame Award’ in 2019. In 2022 they were nominated for the inaugural Best Alternative Music Act at the MOBO Awards.

Skunk Anansie are currently in the studio working on new music to follow the band’s acclaimed recent singles Piggy and Can’t Take You Anywhere. Hold on tight for the next chapter from one of Britain’s greatest ever rock bands!