Gorillaz are ready to monkey around in Australia, writes Sally Browne

AFTER years performing in a successful band, most singers might head off and do an underappreciated solo album or two.

But not Damon Albarn.

With Gorillaz, the former frontman of British superstars Blur, went from a four-piece to a

'A 70-piece," he corrects me on the phone from San Francisco, where the band are taking their very big show on the road. The Gorillaz might be fronted by

The Gorillaz might be fronted by four cartoon characters (2-D, Murdoc, Noodle and Russel – the other character is "Cyborg Noodle", added for their third album *Plastic Beach*) but behind the scenes, there are many people pulling the strings.

The Gorillaz show includes back-

up singers, brass section, a full string ensemble, the star power of Bobby Womack and The Clash's Mick Jones and Paul Simonon, as well as guest appearances by De La Soul, Little Dragon, the Syrian National Orchestra of Arabic Music and more.

The key puppet masters are Albarn and sidekick Jamie Hewlett, the man responsible for all the artwork, animation and stage design for the virtual band.

design for the virtual band.
The logistically massive machine
is finally undertaking its first world
tour, which includes dates across
the US, Europe, Asia, Australia and
New Zealand. It's no budget road New Zealand. It's no budget road trip, and one wonders how Albarn has any pocket money left. "I don't," he laughs. But such is Albarn's pull in the music community that whatever he

music community that whatever ne dreams up, comes true.

His talent is for thinking outside the box, or creating a new box altogether in which he puts his magical ingredients of hip-hop, rock, dance, world music and whatever else he lays his hands on.

On his light of enhymments are

On his list of achievements are: co-creating, with Hewlett, Monkey: Journey to the West, a full-blown, stage musical based on the ancient Chinese story and headlining the iconic Glastonbury festival two vears in a row; once as Blur and once as Gorillaz, joined on stage by

no less than Snoop Dogg, Lou Reed and influential UK stars Shaun Ryder and Mark E. Smith.

Ryder and Mark E. Smith.

He's a musical pied piper where
celebrities follow.

Right now, he's even in the
running for the role of artistic
director of Britain's 2012 Olympic
Games, up against Stephen Daldry,
director of Billy Elliot.

So how does he react to being

arrector of Billy Elliot.

So how does he react to being called a genius?

"Well, I think it's sort of ... bblllfffrrrrfff," he exhales through his lips in a moment of speechlessness. "I don't think it's a read result that a beautiful his ...". speecnessness. "I don't trink it's a word really that should be applied to pop music. I just love what I do, so I'm definitely an enthusiast."

And he's not above a few "pinchme" moments when he's on stage

me moments when he's on stage playing with his own heroes.

"Oh god yeah, yeah, yeah," he enthuses. "When I'm singing Stylo with Bobby, it's just amazing really. And some of the tunes which are really rocky and powerful live, like Calitter Freeze, seeing Paul commanding the stage at the front is amazing."

Not only that, by bringing

together a diverse range of artists, the Gorillaz are cross-pollinating genres, bringing performers and fan bases together. "That's been the most extraord-inary thing about the States," says Albarn, who, while on the road, has

which is the roat, has been working on a new album, on an iPad in the bus, no less.

"We're playing sizeable places and the audiences have been so mixed. I mean, not only in black and white audiences, but also age wise – a real mixture."

wise – a real mixture."

It also means that artists who
may not have mixed before are
hanging backstage and sharing a
drink and a joke. "There's something about the nature of a really thing about the nature of a really big collective that it's almost im-possible for people to have sizeable egos. So, it's a very sociable place." But while there are many talents in the mix, it's Hewlett and Alban

in the mix, it's riewett and Albarn who are the core of the group. They came up with the idea of a virtual band years ago while sharing a flat. Their friendship is a bromance, if you like.

"A what?" says Albarn, the king

of culture momentarily stumped.

You know, a close friendship between

two guys.
"That sounds very "That sounds very Australian," he says. "It's definitely a bromance, but I've got bromances going on all over the place," he chuckles. Ideas can come from anywhere. The

Ideas can come from anywhere. The Plastic Beach of the album's title refers to the giant floating mass of rubbish in the Pacific Ocean. The album turns it into the setting for the Gorillaz' latest adventures, giv-

impossible to present something as kaleidoscopic any other way so I just have to accept that I'm a bit of

just have to accept that I'm a bit of a hypocrite occasionally."

Despite the huge production and 70 needs to cater for, Albarn reckons that being backstage at a Gorillaz gig is a much safer place to be than at a Blur gig.
"Blur gigs in the early days were," he pauses, choosing his words, "very, very, er, chaotic. I mean, really, really quite right on the edge a lot of the times. This is much more civilised."

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The Blur gang recently got to ride again when they headlined Glastonbury in 2009. This time around it was a "far more grown up" experience. "In the sense that there wasn't any – I shouldn't say any – there wasn't much of the sort of stuff, mad, drunken, irrational behaviour that was there in the past. But on the stage, none of the old chemistry was lost at all. I definitely felt that we bowed out at

much more civilised.'

Blur gigs in the early

days were very

we see Murdoch, Noodle, 2-D and Russel, old and grey one day? "To be honest with you, we never really look any more forward than what we're doing. I don't plan to do another Gorillaz record. I've done one on the road so there will be something coming out hopefully before Christmas."

In the meantime, he's looking forward to hitting Australian shores.

Gorillaz perform at the Brisbane Entertainment Centre, December 19, ticketek.com.au, 132 849.





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