



Leading lights: Stereolab's Laetitia Sadier, Andy Ramsay, Tim Gane and Simon Johns play Brisbane next week

BUSINESS AS UNUSUAL

Cult band Stereolab have always blended different genres to create their own sound, and are continuing their strange evolution, writes **Sally Browne**

IT'S difficult not to like a band with such quirky song titles as *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, *Margarine Rock* and *Neon Beanbag*.

And with Anglo-French band Stereolab, their music lives up to the promise.

The band have developed a healthy cult following since they formed in Britain in the early 1990s. Their unique sound, defined by French singer Laetitia Sadier's bilingual vocals, has migrated through many forms, from the layered buzz guitar drone of the early 1990s to '50s and '60s-inspired lounge music and playful pop.

Late last year they released their ninth studio album, *Chemical Chords*, which is ripe with lounge-suite sensibilities and captivating rhythms.

Key songwriter Tim Gane, who used to be married to Sadier, isn't quite sure that he sits comfortably in that "lounge".

"Lounge" music was a term applied retrospectively to the jazz pop that emerged from tiki bars of America in the late 1950s. Gane says the band weren't directly influenced by lounge music, but by the predecessors of that sound.

"The term is a really weird one, in that it includes lots of music that was

never really written for the context of the lounge," he says from his home in Berlin, Germany.

"So it includes lots of soundtrack composers like Ennio Morricone.

"For me, the music is very strange. I like (American tiki composer) Martin Denny, for instance, because I think his music sounded really odd, not because it sounded really loungey or cocktail, because I've never gone to places like that."

For *Chemical Chords*, Gane wanted to make "short, dense" pop songs, "like a city that goes up in the sky".

"I had in mind a kind of silver sound and I wanted to base it in the kind of arrangements that I heard on tracks from the early '60s in America. I just feel there's something strange about the music, in that it's very old now and yet it sounds really complicated... It sounds so odd."

Gane says he has been fascinated by French music such as Serge Gainsbourg's since his early 20s.

"This music was very exotic, even though it was only over the (English) Channel, technically 18 miles (28km) away. But there was a world of difference," he says.

Stereolab's fan base is largely in the UK and the US, rather than in France, but it doesn't seem to matter

that they can't always understand the lyrics.

"I don't listen to lyrics even in English, so it makes no difference to me," Gane says. "I think unfortunately Gainsbourg is someone who you really ought to know what he's saying. Any French person will tell you that that's half the song."

For almost 20 years, Stereolab have proved that age-old rivals the Brits and the French can cross the cultural divide. Various other key personnel have featured in the band over the years and have bonded over art, culture and politics.

Having played in many different places means performing to a range of people, Gane says. "But the people who come to see the band would be more similar (to each other) than the general population.

"I think it's the same with the music. You work with people who are more similar to you than people in the street in your home town."

One of those people was Mary Hansen, who moved to London from Maryborough, Queensland, in 1988 and joined the band to play guitar in 1992. She played with the band for 10 years.

Hansen was killed in 2002 when she was hit by a truck while riding her

bicycle. Her untimely death left a huge hole in the band. Sadier wrote a song for her called *Feel and Triple* on their 2004 album *Margarine Eclipse*.

"It was incredibly difficult to know what to do," Gane says. "She's someone who was a very great friend. That's what happens when you do music with people. You become really good friends.

"I've never had a close friend die before and I haven't since, thankfully, so it was very alarming and strange. I didn't know what to do. What you have to try to keep with you is all the positive memories and the spirit, the way she was.

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"She was super funny, very funny, very warm and definitely the essential spirit of the band when we played live. That was her place, when she came to total fruition as someone who played music. And she really loved that whole aspect of being on stage and being in front of people — unless she had a guitar solo to do. She was nervous about her guitar solos."

When Stereolab perform in Brisbane next weekend for the first time in six years, they will be catching up during their stay with members of Hansen's family.

The band perform at the travelling street party St. Jerome's Laneway Festival in Brisbane in a lineup that includes Architecture in Helsinki and Augie March.

Later in the year, they may release a body of work to complement *Chemical Chords* — 15 or so other tracks that didn't fit on the album — either online or on vinyl. Stereolab have always been committed to releasing compilations of their outtakes for dedicated fans.

Chemical Chords is out now. St. Jerome's Laneway Festival is held at Alexandria St off St Paul's Terrace, Fortitude Valley, on Saturday. Tickets: www.moshtix.com.au or 1300 438 849.