

The band Keane's distinctive piano-based pop has seduced millions of ears, both in the trio's native England and abroad. In Keane's emotive songs, Tom Chaplin's soaring vocals, keyboardist Tim Rice-Oxley's vintage Yamaha CP70B piano, and Richard Hughes' subtle drum shadings merge into a dynamic and complex sound world.

Following the dramatic success of their Island Records debut, *Hopes and Fears*, and 18 months of world tours—including a captivating appearance on Live 8's London stage—Keane is back in the studio preparing their as-yet-untitled second album. Tim, Tom, and Richard took a break from work to speak with *All Access*.

REINVENTING PIANO POP

KEANE





As a piano-based trio, does Keane have a different band dynamic than a guitar-based pop group?

Tom: I think it makes us unique. The only band we can compare ourselves to in that sense is the Police, who also had a very simple setup, just bass, drums and guitar. We're a similarly strange sort of group, with piano, voice, and drums. It gives us an unusual sort of sound, but it's the best sound for the kind of songs Tim writes, and the best way for all three of us to express ourselves. It's allowed us to stand out from other bands. There are so many four- and five-piece guitar bands knocking around at the moment, and it's kind of cool to go against the grain with something different.

Richard: The way Tim plays the piano more than fills any hole left by the absence of guitars, and we both try to leave room for Tom's voice to come through. If anything, all of the instruments are more exposed, so we have to make sure that whatever we play really fits.

How does a new Keane song come to life?

Tim: It usually starts with me doing a demo containing the basic elements of the song: lyrics, melody and chords. Those demos tend to sound pretty terrible, frankly—I'm not a great singer and I just throw the ideas down. We've been making music together for 15 years, so I rely on Tom and Richard to judge the song. I trust their feelings on what needs changing. They might say the song's just not very good, or they might say it's better than I thought. But the song doesn't really come to life until we start playing it together as a band, especially when Tom adds his interpretation to the vocals.

Tom: Tim and I have been singing songs and playing the piano for as long as I can remember. Actually, we used to be a rather standard guitar band, but even then all the songs were written on the piano, and trying to adapt them to a guitar sound was like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. It just didn't seem to work. I think it's because Tim's piano weaves around the vocal melodies in a very distinctive way. The way the piano and voice work together is definitely an important part of our music.

Richard: We're a rock band, and the bass guitar is still there in recordings, so Tim and I work on the rhythm section together. I think the new record reflects that when we play live, the songs are more stripped back, as we can't play everything we record—but we try to make a big sound for just the three of us.

Tell me about your decision to make the Yamaha CP70B the cornerstone of your sound.

Tim: When our guitarist left in 2001, we suddenly had this great big hole in our sound. I'd been playing the bass until

then. I wanted to play piano, but I didn't want to use a digital keyboard. You can't beat the sound of a real piano. It's such an organic thing—you can feel it booming in a room and rattling through you. I had read about the CP70B in a book that [Beatles producer] George Martin wrote. He said it was a real piano, but that it had pickups and everything. So I began searching for one. I eventually found a battered old one in some London warehouse. And as soon as we plugged it in, it made this massive sound, and we immediately knew it was the sound of Keane. Playing it is a real physical interaction. And it looks so cool!

Tom: As soon as we got the CP70B, it opened up the sound. It suited the songs better and, for me, it felt much more appropriate to sing to than a guitar. That keyboard revolutionized my position in the band—I'd been freed up to just sing, and the piano was an accompaniment I understood.

What are some of the challenges of using an older instrument?

Tim: We've had our ups and downs. I break a lot of strings on the CP70B—every other gig, perhaps—because I really hit it very hard. The first time that happened, it was the climactic point in a big London show, just before the last song. A string broke and it shorted out the whole instrument—it made this horrible growling sound and refused to do anything else! So we had to skulk offstage looking sheepish, just at our moment of glory! But these days, we have a spare waiting in the wings. Actually, I think I've got eight of them now. They're amazing things. I hope more people rediscover the CP70B, because it's really a magical instrument. I'm secretly hoping that Yamaha will start making them again.

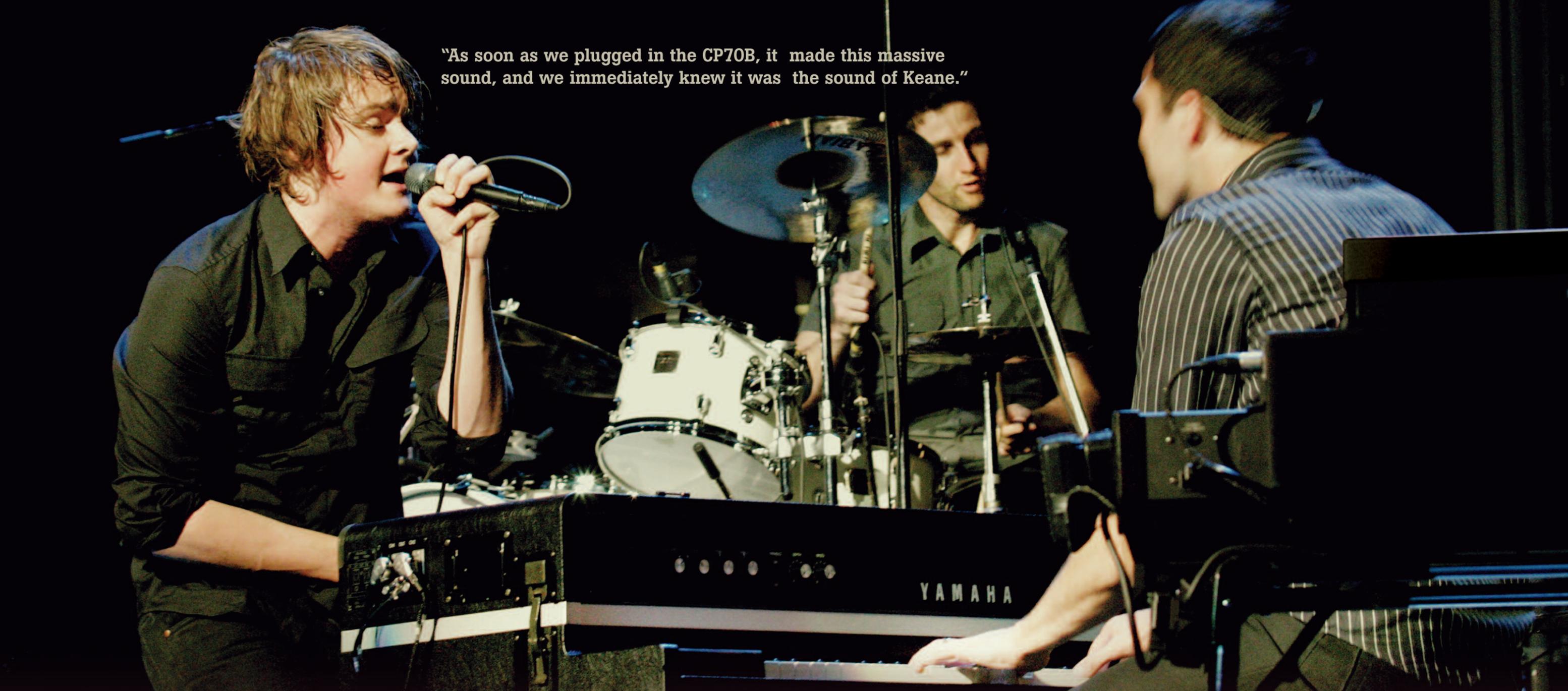
You also use a Yamaha S90 keyboard. Do you use it live or in the studio?

Tim: A bit of both. I like the vintage Rhodes sound and there's a nice tremolo Wurlitzer sound as well. The S90 is brilliant for that. I think it actually sounds more like a Rhodes than a real Rhodes—and it's much more reliable! I also use those Rhodes and Wurlitzer sounds during shows—and if the CP70B has a fit, I can quickly switch to the S90's piano sound. The keyboard feel is great as well.

And Keane uses Yamaha drums as well.

Richard: Yes, for about three years now. I have a 12"x8", 14"x14", 16"x16", 22"x18" white mica Absolute Maple Nouveau Custom kit, with a matching 13"x6" Oak Custom Snare. I haven't worked out if I'll use the same configuration on the next tour—I've borrowed an 18" floor tom and a 14" rack tom, and I was using a kick drum as a floor tom to beef up one particular pattern. In the studio, I've been using a

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few different snares, including a 12"x4" steel, a 13"x6.5" brass, and a fantastic 13"x7" Akira Jimbo Signature with wooden hoops. Yamaha drums are incredible. Just looking at the hoops on the Akira Jimbo snare, for example—they're amazing, and I have no idea how they make them! I love the way Yamaha will try out a new idea and just go with it, like they did with their Nouveau lugs. They are so innovative. I'm still on the first set of hardware, too—it's the best.

What have you learned about making records since you started out?

Richard: The challenge is to do something different, and get the atmosphere onto a track. There are some great moments in the studio where you hit upon something exciting, and you've got to be able to capture it.

Tim: In many ways it's a lot more complicated than I'd imagined. At the beginning, you get very excited—you think it's all happening very quickly and everything will be finished in a couple of weeks. Then you realize that some things aren't quite working and you need to keep trying different ideas. Then there's the moment when everything clicks into place and you know exactly where that song is going sonically—and suddenly it's finished. You've got this magical thing that's almost appeared out of nowhere.

Tom: That's the amazing thing about music: a lot of the time you stumble across ideas and sounds by chance, just by playing and trying different things. What really matters in the end is that you have a track where the sound of the instruments lends something to the mood and feeling of the song.

How involved are you in the production process?

Tim: Very! We're in here working every day from 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning until midnight or later. We're very control-freakish about the whole thing! The producer is Andy Green, who also produced *Hopes and Fears*. He's a fantastic guy to work with. We have very firm ideas—we're open-minded, but we've also learned over the years to trust our instincts. We're very determined to do everything the way we want to do it, which I guess makes us quite difficult to work with! [Laughs.]

Richard: We're entirely free to try whatever we want. We've been trying to get as real a drum sound as possible, with very little in the way of dampening. We've also been messing around with the drum tunings, like taking some drums as high as they

will go, so the snares really cut through.

Tom: The Yamaha CP70B is also a big part of what we're doing with this record. It's a sound that hasn't really been explored—it's given us a whole new range, a new dynamic to use in our sound.

Tim: I think the new record is going to sound very different from the first one. We've been running the CP70B through all sorts of vintage effects pedals and nice little tube amps, really screwing with the sound. We're taking the whole concept of what a CP70B can sound like to a completely different place. I think it's going to be a great record—and I hope people get a bit of a shock when they hear it!