

# FEEL THE NOISE

NOISETTES' FRONTWOMAN SHINGAI SHONIWA SAYS THE BAND'S NEW ALBUM DRAWS ON HER ZIMBABWEAN ROOTS - AND IS AIMED AT GETTING PEOPLE BACK DOWN THE PUB

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PEACH MARIBOU FEATHER BLOUSE, £740, PAULE KA



**S**hingai Shoniwa certainly knows how to put the noise in Noisettes. Frontwoman in the three-piece band, she's also its centrifugal force, whether found swinging from a rope ladder during gigs, or demanding her fans follow her rhythm on their new album *Wild Young Hearts*. Today, though, she's more concerned with how she looks in the outfit she's wearing for her *ARISE* fashion shoot. "Can you see my knickers through these trousers?" she asks no one in particular as she checks out her outfit in the mirror. Yes you can. "Maybe I should wear a black pair instead!"

In a bolero jacket, diaphanous sinbad pants and five-inch platform sandals, all topped off with her bleached and plaited afro-hican, she looks as formidable as she sounds on vinyl. "Hmm, maybe I shouldn't wear knickers at all..."

The first photos done, she takes a break to talk about her recent trip to Africa. Although born and bred in London, Shoniwa's roots are in Zimbabwe. Her father was a politician involved in the civil war of independence during the 1970s, which meant the family moved around a lot, eventually settling in the UK. She's made several pilgrimages to the country since, witnessing first-hand the effect Robert Mugabe's presidency has had on its economy.

"The wads of money you have to carry around over there are ridiculously thick. I'm telling you, the local kids are probably the best mathematicians in the world - they can count it out with their eyes closed," she says, referring to Zimbabwe's hyperinflation, which hit the headlines this year when the

**LEFT: BLACK CHIFFON SHIRT-DRESS WITH REDRUFFLE SKIRT, £945, TINA KALIVAS; GOLD OWL NECKLACE, £359, PAUL & JOE; NAVY BLUE AND GREEN SUEDE PUMPS, SHINGAI'S OWN**

**CENTER: GOLD NECKLACE, £1500, KABIRI; BLACK SKIRT, £220, DIANE VON FURSTENBURG**

**RIGHT: FOX NECKLACE (WORN AS HAIRPIECE), £200, JACEY WITHERS; GREY LIGHT-KNIT DRESS WITH METAL STUDS, £405, KYSTOF STROZYNA; BLACK PATENT DR MARTENS, SHINGAI'S OWN**

**OPPOSITE PAGE: BLACK AND WHITE STRIPED LINEN BOLERO, £350, PPO; BLACK BRA TOP (WORN UNDERNEATH), SHINGAI'S OWN; FELT NECKLACE WITH EMBROIDERED CRYSTAL AND METAL BEADS, £822 AND PLATED MESH BELT WITH EMBROIDERED CRYSTAL AND METAL BEADS, £666, BOTH ERICKSON BEAMON; BLACK TULLE HAREM PANTS, £237, ARMAND BASI; EARRING, SHINGAI'S OWN**





CREPE BUSTIER, £80, PAULE KA;  
 BLACK JERSEY TUBE SKIRT, £135, BETTY JACKSON;  
 PERSPEX AND PEARL BEAD BANGLE, £390,  
 ERICKSON BEAMON FOR KURT GEIGER;  
 GOLD OWL BRACELET WITH SWAROVSKI  
 CRYSTALS, £359, PAUL & JOE;  
 BLUE AND WHITE BEADED COLLAR, GOLD  
 NECKLACES AND BLACK SUEDE SHOES WITH  
 GOLD PLATFORM, SHINGAI'S OWN  
 SEE STOCKISTS P86

HAIR STYLIST **KENNA AT TERRIE TANAKA**  
 MAKE-UP **SINDEN AT STREETERS**  
 STYLISTS ASSISTANT **VIOLA LEVY**  
 PHOTOGRAPHERS ASSISTANT **ANDREW LEO**

government was forced to issue its first trillion-dollar notes.

The human rights abuses, lack of basic resources for most people and escalating economic ruin brought about by Mugabe's Zanu-PF party are well publicised in the West, but Shoniwa insists these negatives are not the whole picture. "There are so many countries that are still facing postcolonial struggles, but the media doesn't talk about all that when it comes to Zimbabwe. It always focuses on one or two bad people, forgetting about the spirit of the real population, who are the heartbeat of the country. They're the ones still going out farming, hunting and surviving whatever happens. There's so much going on creatively too, with an emerging art and music scene happening from the ground up."

She brought several tapes back from Zimbabwe and has cherished them ever since. "I love mbira music, which traditionally was used to contact your ancestors. There are a lot of musicians who are trained in these ancient instruments but are transforming the beats using electric and bass guitars that they have made themselves. It's thumping music with beautiful melodic parts and lyrics about all kinds of subjects from your cousin's crazy wedding to what the crop was like this year. There has been great music there for thousands of years and the current problems won't stop people making it, the music is just going to get better."

Growing up a world away in south London, music filled Shoniwa's home. Her uncles were all in bands, making music influenced as much by African genres as Jimi Hendrix and Miles Davis. Her mum's record collection included Billie Holiday, Queen and Grace Jones, while at her convent school she was exposed to choral music and listened to Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston and Bobby Brown with her friends. Yet with music all around her, she didn't initially see it as a career choice. "In Shona culture, everyone sings - when someone dies, you sing, when someone passes an exam, you sing - it's just normal. So I never thought 'Oh, I want to be a singer'. I'd also see my uncles come back from being on the road with their battered instruments talking about how they weren't

getting paid enough, so it wasn't a glamorous occupation to me."

Shoniwa initially wanted to be an actress, but while studying theatre at college she ended up in a Diana Ross covers band to make money. And then she met fellow student Dan Smith, now the guitarist in Noisettes, who persuaded her she could marry music with performance. It was 2003. "When we started writing original music together I realised there was actually plenty of space for putting the drama back into pop music. Around that time there were no heroines like Nina Simone or women with stories like Kate Bush, so I thought I could use my theatrical influences to make pop that would take people away from the humdrum every day."

Finding drummer Jamie Morrison on the live music circuit ("There are only five good drummers in London and he's one of them!") the band took shape and they put out their first EP, *Three Moods Of The Noisettes*, in 2005. A major label deal, the 2007 debut album *What's The Time Mr Wolf?*, five singles, and 18 months of international touring with the likes of Muse, Babyshambles and Bloc Party followed, gathering fans and accolades along the way. This bruising schedule cemented the band's sound and they got stuck into album number two last year. They recorded in cottages in Cornwall and studios in Brighton, played around with old keyboards and organs, and worked with producer Jim Abbiss of Arctic Monkeys fame. The fruits of their labours on *Wild Young Hearts* are sometimes soulful, sometimes jazzy, sometimes raw, but always rock & roll.

Lead single *Don't Upset The Rhythm* is a straight-up party tune. "There are a lot of difficult things happening in the world right now so this song is something to cheer people up. Put bluntly, it's saying get off the gym treadmill and get back to the pub. Shut up, stop whinging and let the music play."

The title track meanwhile berates today's Western society for valuing youth over experience. "Everyone has their own tapestry, we're all ageless and some old people have a more youthful attitude than most young people. That's really nice." Elsewhere the acoustic cut *Atticus* brings a lump to your throat. "A lot of African fables can be tragic and romantic at the same time, and *Atticus* is the same - it's sad but there's light at the end of the tunnel."

More than its predecessor, this album also allows Shoniwa to explore her range of different vocal characteristics. "You know how women are, one minute we're hot, one minute we're sour. One minute confident, the next

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vulnerable, so the boys [Smith and Morrison] have created space for me on this album for my different voices to come through."

Noisette's sonic parables really take shape when the band are performing live on stage. Through her voice, lyrics, theatrics and stage clothes, Shoniwa acts up for the audience to create her Noisettes persona. "If someone has paid to come and see you, I think you should make some effort. The music speaks for itself, but dressing a certain way and creating an image is part of the package."

Away from the stage, she likes her dress sense to reflect her cultural heritage. "My mum and nan are my fashion heroes because they blend all these beautiful African beads and fabrics with Western pattern designs. I think that's so beautiful. I always look to Africa for inspiration when I want some colour and excitement in my wardrobe."

And with that, Shingai Shoniwa looks down at her outfit again, and dashes off to change for the next set of photos. She returns in a feathered top that would have done just the trick in her Diana Ross phase. Mistake her for a Motown diva though at your peril. "I'm a soul singer yes, but I'm also a young black female growing up in Britain. I'm here to learn and try something new." ●

□ *Wild Young Hearts*, Noisettes [Universal], out now