tindersticks

‘Soft tissue’

A tangible sense of mutual curiosity propels the five members of Tindersticks to fresh territory on *Soft Tissue*, their 14th album proper. Previously, on *No Treasure but Hope* (2019), these mavens of mood and beauty had embraced a kind of dusky, live-sounding naturalism, followed by the bracingly executed experimental left-turns of 2020’s *Distractions*.

As resilient and flexible as its title suggests, *Soft Tissue* connects and exceeds those extremes, drawing new life from the contrasts and convergences of its tight, intuitive songs and restless details.

Nurtured into being by the band and their collaborators as a kind of open “conversation”, says singer and producer Stuart Staples, the result is the sound of a band inspired by a fervent shared desire – and capacity – to surprise themselves.

“I think I was looking for both these elements,” explains Stuart, reflecting on the record’s fluent navigation of intimacy and experiment. “We wanted to find a way to have the energy of the band playing together and that scrutiny of songwriting but to not let up on how interesting the music can be sonically.”

These contrasts find instant focus on opener “New World”, the first track written for *Soft Tissue* and a springboard for the album’s thematic concerns about personal/public worlds knocked off-kilter. The arrangements pick up close to where 2016’s *The Waiting Room* left off and steer the record into febrile terrain, balanced between Julian Siegel’s brass arrangements, Dave Boulter’s pensive keys and Gina Foster’s soulful backing vocals. Meanwhile, Staples’s introspective reflections lead to a refrain that takes a more outward-looking slant, flagged up on a banner in the song’s playful promo video: “I won’t let my love become my weakness.” The video, as well as the album’s sleeve, are made with Staples’ artist daughter Sidonie Osborne Staples.

A sense of nagging anxiety is sustained in incremental details on “Don’t Walk, Run”, where strings shudder over a crisp funk rhythm set by Dan McKinna’s bass and Earl Harvin’s drums – a one-microphone recording that was, says Stuart, “infectious”. Boulter’s mellifluous organs add texture to the fretful “Nancy”, while “Falling, the Light” is a quiet reverie, its soft ambience and twilit keys kept afloat by the unusual clip of Harvin’s drums. “Always a Stranger” pitches Neil Fraser’s beautifully liquid guitar work against Staples’s vocal shapes, Dan McKinna’s string arrangement and Terry Edwards’ emphatic trumpet; arriving as a near partner piece, the hushed beauty of “The Secret of Breathing” features shimmers of violin from Lucy Wilkins, sidling in like haunted dispatches from an old radio. Throughout, the sense of a band listening closely to one another sits alongside an openness to deviation and disruption; witness how the “everyone wants a piece of me” refrain bursts out of “Nancy”.

Meanwhile, another sense of contrast buoys up the album’s emotional arc on the soul-influenced “Turned My Back”, where Gina’s voice contrasts with Stuart’s to provide what he describes as “an element of positivity”. Finally, “Soon to be April” arrives set to a shuffle rhythm that feels unusual for Tindersticks, closing the album on a note of dappled hope.

This journey there began during a break from the tour for Tindersticks’s 30th anniversary compilation *Past Imperfect*, as Staples began writing “New World”, “Always a Stranger” and “The Secret of Breathing”. Ideas were knocked around in the studio, McKinna bringing the start of “Falling, the Light” and “Soon to be April”, and the record began to creep forward.

That growth proceeded at a studio in Girona, Spain – not a “fancy studio”, says Stuart, but one that offered the vital attributes of rooms big enough to play, cook, eat, hang out and listen to music together in. “To me, working with a band is a conversation. It’s about people. When a songwriter provides ideas for people to bring to life musically, it starts a conversation that everybody’s involved in and has some kind of ownership of. I suppose it starts off from me with an acoustic guitar singing the start of ‘New World’. I know what that song means to me, how I want it to feel. But at the same time I love to be surprised, it’s all about those conversations being alive.

“And it’s fun,” he adds, “to work with people like Gina and Julian, and within the band, with ideas flowing. We can have ideas but that’s just the start of the conversation. When you’re actually there in the room and things start to happen, things can really fly. You can walk away from the studio feeling so enlivened. It can be a fantastic feeling.”

With the vocals, strings and brass completed in London, the result upholds Tindersticks’ extraordinarily sustained commitment to ambition and exploration, stretching back more than three decades. If the symphonic ruminations of Tindersticks’ trio of 1993-7 albums established them as trend-averse explorers of great depth and reach, *Simple Pleasure* (1999) and *Can Our Love…* (2001) proved equally adept at exploring contrasting textures within tighter contexts. After 2003’s twinkling *Waiting for the Moon*, and an emotional live performance of their second album in 2006, the band said farewell to three old bandmates, leaving Staples, Fraser and Boulter to start again. McKinna (multi-instrumentalist) and Thomas Belhom (drums) joined for the warming rebirth of *The Hungry Saw* (2008), before Harvin took over on drums for the increasingly confident *Falling Down a Mountain* (2010) and the palpably freeing *The Something Rain* (2012).

Later work equipped Tindersticks’ inquisitive impetus with fertile focus. Between compositions for the First World War commemorations (*Ypres*, 2014) and F Percy Smith’s microscopic movies (*Minute Bodies*, 2017), 2016’s *The Waiting Room* crackled with global sounds. Staples then delivered a solo album (*Arrhythmia*, 2018) and the soundtrack to director Claire Denis’s science-fiction film *High Life*, strengthening the band’s long-term ties to the filmmaker – soundtracks to Denis’s *Stars at Noon* and *Both Sides of the Blade* have since followed.

*No Treasure but Hope* and *Distractions* affirmed the band’s readiness to stretch themselves, to live and breathe inside their music. More recently, two 2023 France shows devoted to their hugely varied 10-film work with Denis upheld the band’s adaptable determination to actively pursue ever-bigger challenges. Says Stuart: “It’s about being more demanding, more ambitious, and then coming out the other end of it feeling as though you’ve achieved something.”

On *Soft Tissue*, that ambition takes the form of a fluid, questing take on what Tindersticks can be, anchored by a sense of trust between the bandmates. As Stuart explains, “In this band, I think that there’s so much… I was going to say talent but it’s got nothing to do with talent, really, it’s about that desire, that need to reach for something and to go to places you haven’t been. And I feel that comes from everybody. I didn’t feel as though there was any kind of restriction about, or any dogma about, what this record could be, beyond where it takes us and what excites us.”