Q&A: Science pop songsters

The US band They Might Be Giants has played rock to adults for more than two decades — and to children since 2002. Next week it releases the album *Here Comes Science*, with educational tunes about the elements and evolution. **John Linnell**, who fronts the band with John Flansburgh, explains why a science-friendly thread runs through their music.

Your 1987 remake of the 1959 children's song 'Why Does the Sun Shine?' is still popular. Why did you cover it?

We have songs about science and also about the pro-science culture of our childhood — the post-war science boosterism that was going on. The science record that we covered that track from was part of the post-Sputnik period in US history when there was a lot of interest in getting kids into science.

Was science a missed calling?

I would have been a crummy scientist but I would have been enthusiastic. I like science a lot and it's something that I think about all the time, almost as an amateur. It was a nice convergence of personal interests and a logical next step that we did an album about science.

How does this follow on from your previous records for children?

We put out *Here Come the ABCs* as a placeholder. We were not overly concerned about teaching kids the alphabet because they are going to learn the alphabet anyway. It was a pretext for entertainment. The follow-up with the numbers was an obvious choice — although we were resistant to doing the *Here Come the 123s* because it was so obvious. Science was a departure from that pattern. And that was really exciting. We got to do something personal to us with the full promotional machinery of the Disney corporation behind it.

From the first song, 'Science is Real', this album seems to be making a statement. Why is that important?

It seems that science has suffered in this country recently, so it was political in a way. There has been some scepticism about science in the past 25 years that has been unfortunate. There's a decadent quality to that — that the culture has lost its way.

Your lyrics talk about evolution being real and how stories about angels and unicorns are just that, stories. Did

John Linnell (above left) and John Flansburgh of They Might Be Giants hope their next album for children (inset) will help boost interest in science.

you worry that this might alienate some listeners?

John Flansburgh took the bull by the horns by writing that song and

addressing that situation, which is that religion cannot take the place of science. It's not something you can tiptoe around. It's important that everybody gets what the discussion is about. If we're talking about the history of Earth, we can't rely on religious tradition to tell us all the information. He says it in the song: as beautiful as the stories are, they don't tell us everything we need to know. It's an old complaint on the part of scientists, but it bears repeating.

Did you hire a fact-checker?

We did. Eric Siegel from the New York Hall of Science listened to everything and gave us very useful information, only some of which we entirely comprehended. He was pointing out, also, things in the videos that were misleading or not making the point in the right way.

In the new album you write a musical retraction: 'Why Does the Sun Really Shine?' Why set the record straight?

We overstated the case in saying that the original song is fatally flawed, because a lot of the information in it is good. The Sun does convert hydrogen into helium and there's a nuclear reaction and that's the source of the explosive radiative energy coming out of the Sun. The only thing that was seriously wrong with the original song is that the Sun is not gas, it's plasma. It's one of those modern distinctions that was lost on the writers in the fifties.

What's next?

I wish we could do a second volume of the science because there's a lot more stuff we haven't covered. I don't know, maybe that's going to be our next move. We could spend a lot more time on science. ■

Interview by **Brendan Maher**, *Nature's* Biology Features Editor.

***Here Comes Science* will be released digitally on 1 September, and as a CD/DVD set on 22 September on Idlewild/Disney Sound.**