mike patton
‘It’s not a dark, disturbing, perverted record’

the pipettes

final fantasy
violins, videogames and a virtuoso nerdfox

dubstep

the long blonde
‘How does it feel to be style icons? Fan-bloody-tastic!’
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**‘There’s polka-dots, there’s dancing: it’s very simple’**

— The Pipettes, pg 52

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Photography: Alice Rosenbaum
**BIG BOSS MAN**
*Humanize*
Includes PARTY 7 featured in NIKE ‘Joga Bonito’ World Cup 06 campaign. Album used as soundtrack to BAFTA nominated film “Sweet” featuring The Mighty Boosh. Album to be released on 20 July 2006.

**BIG BOSS MAN**
*Winner*
Second album from self-confessed ‘Punks of Hammond Funk’ BIG BOSS MAN; continuing the trip through 60’s Funk, Latin Soul, French Beat, Baogale & Hammond-Moog mentalism!

**HELENE**
*Routines*
Blissfully bittersweet chamber-pop quintet return with their second album. A truly beguiling collection of songs sung by one of the best singers around.

**THE COACHWHIPS**
*Double Death*
Lavish double digipack comprising an impossible to find B-sides & covers as well as footage from their house party days right up to their final show in front of billions. So strap down to your quads and get ready to rock your cheeks off.

**YEAR FUTURE**
*First World Fever*
Blistering debut 11-track album of menacing, socially-critical punk from members of Moving Units, The VSS and Dead & Gone. Album to be released on 20 July 2006.

**JOCK SCOTT & GARETH SAGER**
The Caledonian Blues
Alcohol inspired madness backed by Sagers avant blues riffs & improv organ. Scott provides the missing link between Robbie Burns & Charles Bukowski. Album to be released on 20 July 2006.

**BANG! BANG!**
*Docked Out*
Debut full-length features dueling MF vocals and a cohesive narrative of desire & sexuality over the swaggering guitar pop hooks that make Bang! Bang! so addictive.

**SEEKONK**
*Pinkwood*
From sleepy Maine, an anticipated European debut. At last, described as a blissful 'womb-like' aural experience. Similar to the sounds of Mazzy Star & Low.

**MAMMATUS**
*Mammmatus*
Combining all the best bits of 70’s UK psyche rock with the sonic assault of early Monster Magnet as well as entering the realm of heavy drone sludge rock. Album to be released on 20 July 2006.

**THE DEATH SET**
*To*
Fuzzed out gutter-pop for the experimental jet set. Sydney duo blends electro-candy backing tracks with driving guitar & distorted vocal ranting, like a spazzy-revolution.

**MAGOO**
The All Electric Amusement Arcade
Magoos’ weirdest and most wonderful album to date. Buy this record and find out what’s been missing from pop music... ...forever.

**ALAMOS**
*Alamos*
Scottish art-punks debut album. A potent mix of catchy drum beats, disco-influenced & downright dirty basslines with Malusky-cake guitar hooks. Ignore at your peril.

Available NOW from all good record stores and mail order outlets. Also available from CARGORECORDS.CO.UK
Why do you get up on stage? Why do you sing? Why play guitar?

Grant: “Because I like doing it. Also, we’re a great band and there aren’t enough great bands around. Also, we’ve got a point of view and a look that is like no other band. Also, so many people in music are really bad and mean public figures, and we’re good advertisements for rock–n–roll – as good as The Stooges or The Byrds. Also, it’s incredibly fun playing with friends. I love the noise screaming out of the speakers, that visceral thing. And I don’t have a choice, finally.”

Why add 30 harmonies when one brief flurry will do?

Everett True

I had this theory about animals and pop music that went something like, certain animals are fashionable among certain musical genres at certain times. I don’t mean in the really obvious round way, like power metal – dragons, etc. I mean in the more nebulous world of the music we cover in Plan B. It was based on the vague notions (no empirical research as yet) that monkeys were cool in the late Nineties, but they hardly ever show up these days. From about 2002 onwards it was all about animals, and possibly foxes, and in the last year or two it has been totally wolves, foxes and bears. I thought cats were making a comeback last summer but then they didn’t, unlike you count big cats, like tigers and leopards and lions. Lions are pretty hip right now. Not as hip as wolves, although all these wolves are getting a bit much now, don’t you think?

Anyway, like I said, no empirical research as yet, so you can discount the above as the ravings of an insomniac if you like. But I do think that certain imagery – whether it’s an animal or a word that lots of people like, or in this case a location – seems to recur at certain times, and if you were to draw a graph of how many mentions of the desert there are in this case as opposed to, say, mentions of the sea, times, and if you were to draw a graph of how many mentions of the desert there are in this case as opposed to, say, mentions of the sea, you’d probably notice that the desert came out tops. It’s almost up there with woods as a handy and evocative lonesome psychedelic metaphor, and I think it might even be overtaking forests in the spooky sense-of-place stakes. How exciting!

Anyway, there are loads more deserts than usual in this issue, including two actual bands that have been in the actual desert: Havnyay Troof’s trip to Egypt is recounted in the Tour Diary, while Metallic Falcons go one better and actually made some of their record out in New Mexico desert, the show offs. The result of this is that I’m experiencing massive desert envy, and am now desperate to visit one myself. With my wolf. I am such a fashion victim sometimes it’s hard to live with myself.

Frances May Morgan

Plan B and Undereducated Music present

Thanksgiving

(“Each Thanksgiving record is a moment of beauty” – Plan B) with Francois And The Atlas Mountains Ensemble, Tea And Toast Band, and Cooper-Jones-Nichols

Saturday 1 July, Bardens Boudoir, Stoke Newington Road, London N16, 7.30pm Price tbc.

www.undereducated.com

I started off this issue writing an obituary for Nikki Sudden – dapper former singer of Swell Maps – who died of a drug overdose in New York City on 26 March. He was 49.

I’m ending this issue with an obituary, for Grant McLennan – singer/guitarist with The Go-Betweens – who died in his sleep in Brisbane on 6 May. He was 48.

Both deaths make me feel sad. Both were before their time. Both men have been part of my adult life for over two decades, instrumental in my growth as a person, a critic and a music fan. The following is taken from Careless Talk Costs Lives 4, the only time I was privileged enough to meet The Go-Betweens.

Here’s what annoys this critic.

On the one side, there’s The Go-Betweens. The Brisbane band were together for a decade, during which period they released six mature, poignantly, melancholy pop albums all centred around the slightly off-key vocal and guitar interplay of Grant McLennan and Robert Forster. Albums that delighted in their intricacy, in their subtle insights into human relationships and suburban nostalgia. Albums that became more polished with each release, as new members got added, but never lost sight of the basic humanity at the core. Albums that spawned a brace of classic singles: from the sun-drenched ‘Cattle And Cane’, to the teeming rain and paths of ‘Streets Of Your Town’.

So, on one side – call it the angels’ side, if you like – there’s Forster and McLennan. And on the other? INXS, Chilli Peppers, Coldplay, you like – there’s Forster and McLennan. And again, if you like – there’s Forster and McLennan.

I’ll just say you did then. These tribute bands pack out places now…

Australian Go-Betweens?

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I’ll just say you did then. These tribute bands pack out places now…

Grant: “No. But we wanted to.”

“I’ll just say you did then. These tribute bands pack out places now…”

Grant: “They do. If we were The Australian Go-Betweens, we probably wouldn’t show up. We’d have to get some really shit-hot players stuff like that, starting dressing like it was the Eighties again.”

Once there was a band called The Go-Betweens. They created deceptively simple, understated music – nagging riffs that neatly underpinned vocals about wide open spaces, surfing and claustrophobic relationships. Forster and McLennan never wasted 20 notes on a tear-jerking harmony or laconic description when five could serve just as well. Like The Velvet Underground, they understood the power of silence. Somehow, popularity eluded them. Towards the end of the Nineties, someone mooted the idea that perhaps the old magic was still there. The pair wrote 10 new songs, a new album, a new band was found and… beauty isn’t always transient.
CHARALAMBIDES - 'A VINTAGE BURDEN' (KRANKY RECORDS)

A double, 33 minutes of sublime, spooked cosmos and beatific psych workouts from the inexplicable Hulucel. A deliberately mine aesthetic, listen to 2005’s ‘Joy Shapes’. The voice projects a sense of longing that stretches infinitely in the darkness of night:
CD Out Now.

DANIEL JOHNSTON - 'LOST AND FOUND' (SKETCHBOOK)
The title ‘Lost and Found’ is very apt for Daniel’s new album, since 2006 looks set to be the year that Daniel receives more than just a full Bollywood film. His first album with the release of a major film in the West. The Devil and Daniel Johnson: This is Daniel at his very best. Heartrendingly honest tales of unrequited love, cosmic mishaps and existential torment. Digipak CD Out Now.

AFX - 'CHOSEN LORDS' (REPLEX)
4/5 in UNCUT: “Analord is Aphex Twin doing what he does best: refreshing electronic music in such an exquisite, effortless, inventive fashion that you pity his peers. Once again, James dissolves the boundaries between dance, electro, techno and pop, and stimulates the parts other musicians don’t even know exist. Pure synthesized heaven.” Digipak CD, Out Now.

KAREN DALTON - 'IT’S SO HARD TO TELL WHO’S GOING TO LOVE YOU THE BEST' (MEGAPHONE)

Major re-release of this absolutely essential all time classic folk/blues album with new packaging, new booklet and for the first time a stunning DVD with archive footage. “My favourite singer in the place was Karen Dalton. Karen had a voice like Billie Holiday’s and played the guitar like Jimmy Reed and went all the way with it.” - Bob Dylan in Chronicles. CD+DVD Out June 12th.

BARDO POND - 'TICKET CRYSTALS' (ATP RECORDINGS)

Philadelphia’s Bardo Pond return with Ticket Crystals - our sixth studio album and second for ATP Recordings. Ticket Crystals includes the spellbinding ten minute-plus ‘Moonshine’ and their unique reworking of The Beatles’ White Album classic ‘Cry Baby Cry’.
CD Out June 12th.

HAWNAY TROOF - ‘DOLLAR/ DEED’ (SOUTHERN RECORDS)

Vice Cooler from Oakland (California) is the sonic insurgent behind Hawnay Troof. Dollar And Deed is his second major album, featuring guest appearances from Barr, Mika Miko, Jenny Le QTin from Erase Errata, Mika Miko, Mates Of State, Stereo Total and produced by John Dietrich from Deerhoof. 2LP/CD Out Now.

ISIS 'SGNL>05' (NERODY RECORDINGS)

Long out of print self-classic mini-lp, whose last two albums of epic rock, ‘Undermountains’ (Owsla) and ‘Consolation’ (Vayu) were met with unprecedented critical acclaim. Along with a new artwork and a prize and accolade, the two tracks on this mini-cd are four breathtaking suites in all for an unparalleled audio experience. CD Out Now.

SCATTER - 'THE MOUNTAIN ANNOUNCES' (BLANK TAPES)

Second album from Glasgow’s finest free folk/jazz ensemble. 4/5 in Uncut: “The Sound Of Young Scotland has come of age.” 4/5 in The Times: “Brilliant... it’s pure delight…” — Uncut
CD Out Now.
CURRENT 93 - BLACK SHIPS ATE THE SKY
(DURTRO JNANA)
Current 93's most powerful and important album to date. On Black Ships Ate The Sky Delth Thre, Michael Cashmore, Ben Chasney, David Tibet and co are joined by some very special guests including Antony, Bonnie Prince Billy, Marc Almond and Shirley Collins. 4/5 Review in Uncut: “Apocalyptic Avant-Folk Sci-Fiating and Harrowing Viewing” CD Out Now.

GHOSTY - GROW UP OR SLEEP IN
(BROKEN HORSE)
Debut album by Lawrence, Kansas' Ghosty which contains a bonus unlisted track featuring Wayne Coyne of the Flaming Lips on vocals. 4/5 Review in Mojo: “Invigorating debut by Kansas-based psych-popsters with Lips links.” and 4/5 review in Uncut: “Resembles a mix of the Shins and Pavement, startling, inscrutable.” CD Out Now.

VARIOUS - FUZZY-FELT FOLK
(TRUNK)
Sensory collection of lost folky oddities for adults and possibly their children if they have any... from the label that brought you the original Wicker Man soundtrack. This peculiar genre of sound came in to being one afternoon a few years ago when Jonny Trunk was listening to kooky, childish records with fellow collector Martin Green. Very Ltd LP/CD Out July 3rd.

BORIS - PINK
(SOUTHERN LORD) Truly immense new album from Japan's most powerful power trio Boris. 4/5 REVIEW IN UNCUT: “Parting’ is a triumphant nine minutes of dial-the-red shoegazing to put Mogwai to shame, but Boris have tackled buoyant psychelasia and Motorhead style hard rock with style.” PLAN B: “Staggering - utterly vast and epic, yet garagey, sleazy and raucous.” Ltd 2LP/CD Out Now.

FINAL FANTASY - HE POOS CLOUDS

LOScil - PLUME
(KRANKY RECORDS) “Plume” is the fourth album from electronic composer and visual artist Scott Morgan aka Loscil from Vancouver. Improvised organic instrumentation, including guitar and vibraphone entwine with computer generated electronic sequences... analogue with digital, to create an immersive, immersive and spiritual sonic marriage. CD Out June 5th

GROWING - COLOR WHEEL
(ROCK ACTION) “Color Wheel” is a punky, diamondb및ised in genre-metal or any other music for that matter. On their 4th proper full-length, Growing have vaulted into uncharted territory, where streets of noise meld with melodic and thrashy numbing rhymes. CD Out June 12th.

TODD - COMES TO YOUR HOUSE
(SOUTHERN RECORDS) Kerrang 4k review: “Even gnarled contemporaries like Part Chimp and Hey Colossus sound safe compared to this bunch. The trick is that Todd aren’t just crushingly heavy, they’re also all-over-the-place weird, making this a wonderfully disorientating experience, reminiscent of Phantom Sixes genially unhinged melodies.” Ltd LP/CD Out Now.

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In Noel Harmonson’s rack of antique sonic backdrop for singer Gareth Liddiard’s sulphur-guitars into ringing gobs of blues, the perfect loose and noticeably aggrieved, they splay on Nirvana’s ‘Territorial Pissings’ Buttholian art-terrorism with a take Liars close a fearsome, insaniac set of fellow Australians corner. It throbs and spills out messily during Perth proto-punks stalking a bleak, soulful gothic whirlwind of Golightly in the retro-arcane wonderment of and manipulated by noiseniks and garage trash Distressed, glorious din is everything that Mudhoney Day at the 2006 All Tomorrow’s Parties is about: feedback and drone abused and manipulated by noiseniks and garage trash who ride that phosphorescent, squalling din like a buckaroo hoss. You can hear it lurking in the retro-arcane wonderment of Holly Golightly, plucking a massive guitar like the garage-rock Rosetta Tharpe, and the dark rockabilly Americana of Mark Pickerel. It fizzes and laces throughout the dizzying gothic whirlwind of Scientists, Kim Salmon’s Perth proto-punks stalking a bleak, soulful corner. It thrums and spurts out messily during fellow Australians ‘The Drones’ acid set: loose and noticeably aggrieved, they spay guitars into ringing gobs of blues, the perfect backdrop for singer Gareth Liddiard’s sulphur-gargling caterwaul. Wiring their stoner-vintage colossal riffs into Noel Harmonson’s rack of antique sonic torture devices, Comets On Fire stir up hurricanes of lysergic noise, until the riffs burst under their own weight, oozing oily, metallic drone (‘Black Foodle’). Impressive stuff, as are the Zappa-esque organ arpeggios of ‘Pussy Foot The Duke’. Downstairs, Tim Kerr’s Total Sound Group Direct Action Committee blur insolent brass, pummel proud skins and hammer out a new national anthem from feedback and screaming Hammond, as Mike Carroll – a Santa-bearded anthem from feedback and screaming – is breathtaking. Fat Bobby leers from behind his keyboard, dropping super-cool, cutting asides that fly over some of the audience’s head, and hit others between the eyes – Oneida are coming out fighting tonight, fucking with our heads for their amusement and our enlightenment. This means hyper-repetitive masterpieces like ‘$50 Tea’, ‘Each One Teach One’ and ‘Sheets Of Easter’, stretched out into hypnotic Krautpunkpsych epics. This means manna, They wipe your brain, to etch it with unbearable ecstasy tonight, while a closing ‘Ambulance’ – Tunde and Kyp’s pinning vocals and soaring Radio drama and stark romance glower finely tonight, aided by members of TV On The Radio. Their own set is startling, their hyper-sensitive dream-pop reaching for ever greater heights – ‘Staring At The Sun’ builds to an unbearable ecstasy tonight, while a closing ‘Ambulance’ – Tunde and Kyp’s pinning vocals lacing between Dave Sitek’s mean oral beatbox – is breathtaking. Where Mudhoney’s day mapped black mountain satisfies, but sounds strangely sterile (if no less satisfying) next to headliners Mudhoney. For too long branded ‘failures’ because their pungent brand of grunge never went platinum, the 21st Century Garage Revival has, with perfect taste, latterly recognised Mudhoney’s feral garage brilliance. Clearly relishing playing these songs, new and old (and both kinds equally fine), the ‘Honey throw ironic rock shapes that actually enhance the drone-warp snarl-rock of ‘In ‘N Out Of Grace’, churn rainbow noise like a Converse-sporting Hawkwound for ‘Sonic Transfusion’, and bask in the perfect perfection of ‘Touch Me I’m Sick’, a record that will still thrill when we’re all forgotten. Where Mudhoney’s day mapped a borderless sonic cartography, Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ line-up is more location-specific. Mostly celebrating the teeming invention of the Brooklyn lofts scene that birthed them (plus a few out-of-town kindreds), the bill essays the squalling din YYYs rose from, at the same time positing them as this scene’s smart-minded pop mavens, a 21st Century Blondie. Liars photography: Greg Neate

killer parties almost killed me

All Tomorrow’s Parties
Camber Sands Holiday Camp

Distressed, glorious din is everything that Mudhoney Day at the 2006 All Tomorrow’s Parties is about: feedback and drone abused and manipulated by noiseniks and garage trash who ride that phosphorescent, squalling din like a buckaroo hoss. You can hear it lurking in the retro-arcane wonderment of Holly Golightly, plucking a massive guitar like the garage-rock Rosetta Tharpe, and the dark rockabilly Americana of Mark Pickerel. It fizzes and laces throughout the dizzying gothic whirlwind of Scientists, Kim Salmon’s Perth proto-punks stalking a bleak, soulful corner. It thrums and spurts out messily during fellow Australians ‘The Drones’ acid set: loose and noticeably aggrieved, they spay guitars into ringing gobs of blues, the perfect backdrop for singer Gareth Liddiard’s sulphur-gargling caterwaul. Wiring their stoner-vintage colossal riffs into Noel Harmonson’s rack of antique sonic torture devices, Comets On Fire stir up hurricanes of lysergic noise, until the riffs burst under their own weight, oozing oily, metallic drone (‘Black Foodle’). Impressive stuff, as are the Zappa-esque organ arpeggios of ‘Pussy Foot The Duke’. Downstairs, Tim Kerr’s Total Sound Group Direct Action Committee blur insolent brass, pummel proud skins and hammer out a new national anthem from feedback and screaming Hammond, as Mike Carroll – a Santa-bearded anthem from feedback and screaming – is breathtaking. Fat Bobby leers from behind his keyboard, dropping super-cool, cutting asides that fly over some of the audience’s head, and hit others between the eyes – Oneida are coming out fighting tonight, fucking with our heads for their amusement and our enlightenment. This means hyper-repetitive masterpieces like ‘$50 Tea’, ‘Each One Teach One’ and ‘Sheets Of Easter’, stretched out into hypnotic Krautpunkpsych epics. This means manna, They wipe your brain, to etch it with unbearable ecstasy tonight, while a closing ‘Ambulance’ – Tunde and Kyp’s pinning vocals lacing between Dave Sitek’s mean oral beatbox – is breathtaking. Where Mudhoney’s day mapped Black Mountain satisfies, but sounds strangely sterile (if no less satisfying) next to headliners Mudhoney. For too long branded ‘failures’ because their pungent brand of grunge never went platinum, the 21st Century Garage Revival has, with perfect taste, latterly recognised Mudhoney’s feral garage brilliance. Clearly relishing playing these songs, new and old (and both kinds equally fine), the ‘Honey throw ironic rock shapes that actually enhance the drone-warp snarl-rock of ‘In ‘N Out Of Grace’, churn rainbow noise like a Converse-sporting Hawkwound for ‘Sonic Transfusion’, and bask in the perfect perfection of ‘Touch Me I’m Sick’, a record that will still thrill when we’re all forgotten. Where Mudhoney’s day mapped a borderless sonic cartography, Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ line-up is more location-specific. Mostly celebrating the teeming invention of the Brooklyn lofts scene that birthed them (plus a few out-of-town kindreds), the bill essays the squalling din YYYs rose from, at the same time positing them as this scene’s smart-minded pop mavens, a 21st Century Blondie. drama and stark romance glower finely tonight, aided by members of TV On The Radio. Their own set is startling, their hyper-sensitive dream-pop reaching for ever greater heights – ‘Staring At The Sun’ builds to an unbearable ecstasy tonight, while a closing ‘Ambulance’ – Tunde and Kyp’s pinning vocals lacing between Dave Sitek’s mean oral beatbox – is breathtaking. Fat Bobby leers from behind his keyboard, dropping super-cool, cutting asides that fly over some of the audience’s head, and hit others between the eyes – Oneida are coming out fighting tonight, fucking with our heads for their amusement and our enlightenment. This means hyper-repetitive masterpieces like ‘$50 Tea’, ‘Each One Teach One’ and ‘Sheets Of Easter’, stretched out into hypnotic Krautpunkpsych epics. This means manna, They wipe your brain, to etch it with new wisdom. Yeah Yeah Yeahs seem apart from the militant art warfare lower on the bill tonight, and it suits them. Their love for the underground can’t be doubted; neither can their ambition for the mainstream, albeit (brilliantly) only on their terms. They never sounded this large, this confident. This pop sound played the way they should be, as hyper-real high drama moments, like the kids holding their phones in the air to torch song ‘Maps’, or the gorgeous, soaring ‘Turn Into’, of which Roy Orbison would have approved. The snarling art punk spats are intact too, but while today celebrated Brooklyn’s dissonance, YYYs are something else. Again, it suits them: the mainstream should be glad for such able, artistic and beguiling pop.

Ex-Models are masters of repetition – a common art this afternoon. They take densely laced weaving-machine torrents of riff and layer them, stop’n’start them, switch ‘em up and juggle them till you’re as dizzy as a Two Card Monte chump. Try and dance to them and you’ll snap your spine.

New Yorkers Magik Markers set is a long and winding game of lull and roar, broiled improv guitar snarling alongside Lydia Lunch reportage. Uncomfortable chills, but compulsive, Blood Brothers increase pulse rates, careering about the stage like graceful missiles. New material (for an album recorded with Guy Picciotto) suggests the Brothers are in fearless mode, Johnny’s twisted creak and their lethal pop smarts played to the fore. Later, they resurface with Liars, to close a fearsome, insaniac set of Buttholian art-terrorism with a take on ‘Territorial Pissings’. Well, it is a party.

You can see how Celebration shaped early Yeah Yeah Yeahs – how singer Katrina Ford’s dark grandeur and sense of threat were an inspiration for O. Their burned
Dragons make up the picture of his hair.

opening/closing feeling you get when you’re trying And Régine’ pummel up inside my throat with that something an imaginary blacksmith might wear, made out of some hessian, tweedy fabric, like by the maple slash of the violin; and a waistcoat scrunched into a concentrating shape, half-hidden wing of hair all flicked like Princess Diana’s; a mouth You can’t really see his face, just a smooth, blonde

Power so much? Give me a break.)
you don’t think like this. Why do you all like Cat chase. “I bet he’s hot.” (Oh please, don’t tell me

The vocals are half-breathed, half-sung: harmonies round our heads like something from some Classic

That’s all anyone really wants’

their beaks to start flying in through the windows. The vocals are half-breathed, half-sung: harmonies glide over delicately plucked notes, over stuttering, quivering string sounds and the occasional restrained drumbeat.

“What does he look like?” I ask, cutting to the chase. “I bet he’s hot.” (“Oh please, don’t tell me you don’t think like this. Why do you all like Cat Power so much?” Give me a break.)

She fumbles through the press pack.

“Nah, he’s not all that.”

I grab it off her, check out the boy in the photo. You can’t really see his face, just a smooth, blonde wing of hair all flicked like Princess Diana’s; a mouth scrunched into a concentrating shape, half-hidden by the maple slash of the violin; and a waistcoat made out of some hessian, tweedy fabric, like something an imaginary blacksmith might wear, or a character out of a Thomas Hardy novel.

The sampled loops of ‘This Is The Dream Of Win

You can relax. I’m not going to go into how good his first album, 2004’s Tomlab release Has A Good Home, is to fuck to, or Owen’s going to pose for Butt magazine making out with his boyfriend while they’re wearing frilly shirts or perhaps swim trunks, or how he thinks the first two issues of Sweet Action magazine (a porn mag for hipster girls) were just ‘boner central’, or how his first appearance in Plan B, in last June’s feature on Canadian music, involved him saying how he’d like to jack off onto a map of Northern Ontario, or how he’s in favour of what he calls ‘a new homo conservatism’ because he’d rather see a man in a nice overcoat or suit and tie than just standing around with his man-tits out, or how Owen’s whole being gay thing is maybe just about a desire for masculine camaraderie, because you just can’t shoot the shit with straight men, or how he thinks of his music as ‘pervert music’ rather than ‘homo music’ because he feels more like a pervert than a homo, because… because… because I’m just not. Because, for once, there’s all this other stuff that’s just as interesting.

OK. Owen Pallett. Nerdfox. Geekboy. Violin virtuoso. Started music lessons at a young age, played in “crappy rock bands” at school, went to university to study music composition, where he began taking the violin more seriously. Post-college, he found himself with no work as a composer, but in high demand as an arranger. He worked with local Toronto bands such as Picastro, Hidden Cameras, and Arcade Fire. He had no real prospects as a solo artist till touring with Arcade Fire, who asked him to open for them, at which point he realised that if he was going to make any money from this music lark, he’d better have an album to sell. Young Marble Giants and Guided By Voices flung albums together in a week – why couldn’t he? So he did, and Has A Good Home was ready to go a week later. Final Fantasy was born. His records now feature strings, timpani, drums, horns, organs and choir, but live he prefers to play alone, using a looping pedal to sample his violin. He plays over the loops as they build up, accompanying them with few melodies and yelps and shouts – it’s an awkward, intimate, beautiful experience to see him play.

Owen takes classical music and brings it into the hipster domain. He takes an album of string quartets and puts the word ‘poo’ in the title to make people laugh. He explores grandiose themes of self-delusion, isolation, fear of death – using concepts derived from a game whose title has become a codeword for total geek inadequacy. He drops a graphic line like, “Don’t let your cock do all the work” into a song that, musically at least, you’d be more than happy to play to your religious mother-in-law. And of course, the ‘high culture’ of classical music and the ‘low culture’ of computer games are inextricably intertwined throughout the whole Final Fantasy project. Luckily for me, low culture in all its forms is my speciality.

do you love?

Owen Pallett has the smallest, tiniest little features, delicate like a bone china horse. He is very long and very thin and displays an impressive array of vintage T-shirts. His answers come pouring out in a torrent of opinion, aphorism and references, backed up with examples and recommendations: obscure games publishers, fascist Japanese authors, obscure queercore and Riot Grrrl bands – such lucidity!

I wanted to play video games with Owen, and then trawl the gay bars looking at boys together, but he ate too much candy-floss at the fairground, and is in a monogamous relationship, so we just…chatted.
That’s alright though, because chatting with Owen Pallett goes like this: you’ll pat your fingers lightly on the top of a subject, and Owen will shove his hands right in till he’s elbow-deep. Then he’ll pull up a glistening nugget of content, and knead it and knead it till it starts to rise, teasing out idea after idea. Then he’ll spread his hands and show it to you. “There,” he kept saying throughout the interview. “Was that alright? Are my answers alright?”

**adventure.exe**

It’s impossible to talk to Owen Pallett without talking about video games. His interest is foregrounded in the project’s very title of Final Fantasy; songs such as ‘Adventure.exe’ and ‘He Poos Clouds’ are inspired by video games; ‘An Arrow In The Side of Final Fantasy’ is largely based on a melody from the game Six Golden Coins. Like New Games journalism, Owen’s interested in what a game’s world can tell us about ourselves. So space shoot’em ups are a metaphor for masculine thinking, he says – a phallus spitting bullets at never-ending streams of aliens – while his most recent favourite game is Katamari Damacy, where you roll a ball of rubbish through a town and it gets bigger and bigger and bigger. We puzzle over why Tetris is the most popular game for women – a metaphor for dieting, perhaps?

His songs seem to demonstrate a longing for the combination of adventure and order that you find in video games, rather than the mundane, arbitrary chaos of day-to-day life. “I need an empire to overthrow”, he sings in ‘Adventure exe’. “You make me wish for a more dangerous life/So I could show you ‘bout self-sacrifice…”

**‘I’ve certainly licked my lips a couple of times while playing the Zelda games’**

OK. So the song ‘He Poos Clouds’ is all about you having a boner for Link from **Zelda**, right?

“Well. It hasn’t been obsessive, but yes, I’ve certainly licked my lips a couple of times while playing the Zelda games. I think it’s the short tunic. There’s a character in **Metal Gear Solid 2** who’s nacked for part of game, walking round with his hands on his genitals, and all you can think is – what on earth are the designers thinking? I could see if I was more hard-up for action or too poor for pornos I’d be wanking for video games. I never got that far but yeah… Maybe I’m oversexed or something but I was always really attracted to Link.

“But the song’s not so much about attraction – it’s more about the relationships that you form with video games characters. Whether you’re owning a Nintendo or moving into a town in **Animal Crossing**, you do develop strange paternal feelings towards your character. In the song ‘He Poos Clouds’, I’m wondering what Link is thinking. I’m taking care to have him protected, and you would think he would develop some affection for me. But if he were to look into our world and compare it to his own, I think he’d find it sadly lacking.

“Our world is godless. There’s so many different gods that you can summon. They have specific tasks, concrete goals – it would be wonderful, if I were to make an album and somebody was like, these are the things you have to do to achieve your goal. And then at the end you’d get checkmarks, and a gold medal. Initiate me. But doesn’t work like that. I find the idea of being a creature of service as a video game character far more appealing than being the free spirits we are in our world.”

**Too often in life, A + B = WTF?** In games, A + B = C. A video game character won’t cheat on you, run off on a three-day coke bender without calling to say where he is, or display any of the unpredictable quirks of humanity. ‘He Poos Clouds’ suggests that a video game character can make a better – or at least, more reliable and constant – friend or lover than another human. The music of Final Fantasy betrays a yearning for that stability, whether it’s in the ordered world of the video game or the careful structures of the string arrangements. So what has playing games taught you about life?

“Games haven’t taught me anything about life – they’ve just taught me about what we lack. The worlds games present are utopias. They teach us about utopia. Constant goals, and total beauty. That’s all anyone really wants.”

**the pooka sings**

The second Final Fantasy album, **He Poos Clouds**, has just been released. (It’s OK. It’s a stupid title. You’re meant to laugh.) Here Owen returns to his classical roots, with all the songs arranged for string quartet and voice, plus a little bit of timpani, horns, and the occasional appearance from a choir. Ostensibly similar to (although more elaborate than) **Six Golden Coins**, what we have here couldn’t be more different – it’s a good, old-fashioned Concept Album, complete with insert displaying Pallett’s carefully structured, multi-layered lyrics. These lyrics are jam-packed with references and allusions and instances of intertextuality, citing everything from video game characters, the **Narnia** stories, Japanese novelists, President Bush’s daughter, Irish winged devils and more, all structured around the theme of magic – specifically, the eight schools of magic within **Dungeons And Dragons**, and –

“Er, Owen, these lyrics are totally impenetrable. No, really, readers. They are – to the uninitiated. The vocals in **He Poos Clouds** are buried low in the mix – you get the suspicion that Owen Pallett’s not too keen on the sound of his own voice – and the advance copies were sent out without the lyric sheets, which seems a bit of a curious move for someone so keen on exploring concepts through words as well as music. This interview’s the first time I’ve seen a copy of the lyrics, and, well. I don’t know about **Dungeons And Dragons** and… I look at Owen. What’s it all about? I mean: “I’m not content! You know I hate it when your friends are in the pool/Donna Karan/Old money stinking, send those faggots back to Forest Hill/And Kara Saun.” You might as well be speaking in tongues. He looks disappointed. “People call me pretentious, but I wanted to make an album that was accessible superficially and also interesting from an academic perspective. I hope with analysis people will be able to see the depth with which I’ve written these lyrics in a balanced way, and not spend a long time ruminating on them. Pretentious to me is not a valid term – it’s a word people misuse when they really mean ‘filled with content’. To my mind, if there are superficial pleasures available to any listener then you can put as much complexity in as you want.”

OK. So. **He Poos Clouds**.
pick each of these schools and write songs about day-to-day phenomena which could represent these particular things. So, for example, (the track) ‘He Poos Clouds’ represents illusion. It’s all about being in love with a video game character. ‘Do You Love’ is about transmutation – about cookery and plastic surgery. ‘Song Song Song’ is about evocation – creating something out of nothing. It’s a call for women to ignore male music criticism and create their own musical language. And so it goes on. And at the end, a pooka, which appears in Flann O’Brien’s book at Swim Two Birds – it’s a winged devil that likes to cause trouble – turns up and chastises me for using Dungeons and Dragons to examine routine events. At which point, I (in the song) put down my bow, and the record ends.”

That’s pretty sweet. I rescind the ‘impenetrable’.

**bigger than worse**

You say you hope that no one who’s listened to your music will ever again entertain thoughts of suicide. What’s that about?

“It’s not that the music of Final Fantasy is like aural Prozac,” Owen says. “But I’m trying to be an antidote to the Elliott Smiths and Kurt Cobains and Ian Curtises of this world. I want to be the reverse of that – to still make music about sex and death, but to be incredibly available to anyone who emails me. I’ll be active in online and social communities – if someone on a message board says my album title is crap, I want to get in there and defend myself!”

“I mean, I like listening to The Smiths, but sometimes I wonder if Morrissey hates us. Hates his fans. Sometimes I feel like he’s deliberately trying to incite people to commit suicide. He’s creating himself as a god who demands sacrifice. Because if he’s not belittling you, then he’s telling you your life is worthless. And maybe it’s all a joke but he’s so unavailable to society, as though he’s the equivalent of the Catholic Church, and his CD is the Pope. The only way to communicate with him is through the music. I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to be behind a mask.

“Like right now. I’ve told you everything. I feel like I’ve just slit my stomach open and spilled my guts out all over Tomlab’s sofa, just for Plan B. And you know what? That’s the way it ought to be.”

NOTES

1 As I’m sure you’re aware, ‘gay’ has myriad meanings these days. There is, of course, the man who likes to bum other men; but the British language is far more nuanced than that, no? There is the schoolyard usage of ‘gay as in lame’ – sometimes spelled ‘gey’ for those who believe misspelling can convey any music that

2 Writing on the music message board ILM, Owen explains the title thus: “A lovely side effect: half-assed listeners are weeded out.”

3 The schools/songs are as follows:

- Conjuration – ‘This Lamb Sells Condos’
- Necromancy – ‘If I Were A Carp’
- Enchantment – ‘I’m Afraid Of Japan’
- Evocation – ‘Song Song Song’
- Divination – ‘Many Lives -> 49mp’
- Transmutation – ‘Do You Love’
- ‘He Poos Clouds’

4 He did explain, but the word counts limit exposition here. A Google search will bring up other interviews in which Owen talks about IF! We Were A Carp – a frightening, heartbreak song based on the experience of watching his godfather slip in and out of death while on morphine – and check www. goodhodgkin.com for a funny, interesting insight into ‘This Lamb Sells Condos’, a scathing attack on Toronto property developer Charles Lamb.

‘I find the idea of being a creature of service as a video game character far more appealing than being the free spirits we are in our world’
THE Drips

"16, 16, 6" in stores on June 5th on seven inch and CD single

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AMY MILLAN
HONEY FROM THE TOMBS
In stores July 2006

"A mix of lovely lush pop and
drunk-ass, end-of-the-night roots
music." Pitchfork
The Barfly is the biggest cheese of all Camden’s venues, most nights playing host to industry liggers and kids dressed like indie rockstars. Tonight, however, the front row is peopled by strip-shirted screamo waifs, a be-fro’ed Japanese dude and, most notably, a contingent of gnarly skinheads resplendent with faded blue tattoos and flaky black leathers.

“You know what, man?” grins Matt Caughtran, The Drips’ sweet, dough-faced frontman. “That was the raddest thing ever. I love those dudes – because I’ve always been one of those crazy dudes. To have guys like that show up really means something – when dudes who listen to GBH 24 hours a day are coming to your shows… It’s not like The Drips are a hardcore band, anyways…”

Perhaps not when placed next to GBH. But The Drips’ breakneck punk rock plugs deep into the more melodic vein of SST Hardcore (Hüsker Dü, Descendents), their flab-free pop – played out on swaggering, metallic guitars, nailed down by machine-gun snares and illuminated by Caughtran’s kerosene-doused bellow – very much a sunshine-flip to Caughtran and guitarist Joby J Ford’s day job in steroidal thrash-punks The Bronx.

“It’s sort of a ‘circle of friends’ thing,” smiles Matt, unthreading the groups’ tangled family trees. “Vince and Dave [bassist and drummer, sons of Los Lobos guitarist David Hidalgo] were childhood friends, and Joby played in their group. I joined, and we became The Drips. Then Joby and I started writing songs that didn’t really fit with The Drips, and that’s how The Bronx started.”

The Drips hit the back burner while The Bronx rode the success of their self-titled 2003 debut, a brutish rush of shrapnel guitars and deadly dynamics. When the pressure of recording the follow-up, their first for a major label, began to tell last year, Matt and Joby were glad to blow off steam with The Drips.

“The new Bronx record wasn’t a bad experience by any means,” explains Matt, “But I tell you, we busted our asses on it. Everything took so long. At times, we were like, ‘FUCK! I need to be doing something else…’”

Which is where The Drips came in. They added Distiller Tony Bradley on second guitar and got into the studio. The result – a blistering 11-song amphetamine-ripped dash – is gloriously kinetic noise candy, tunes painted in frazzling neon guitars as Matt howls along as if ‘Oi!’ were the sweetest sound he ever heard. “The Bronx are full-on headbang music,” muses Matt, “whereas The Drips are more of a side-to-side bob.”

Examples of The Drips’ unabashed pop sensibility include interpolating a slice of Men Without Hats’ Eighties hit ‘The Safety Dance’ into careering closer ‘Coastline’, drubbing Matt’s vocals with dubby echo on ‘Downbrown’ so his voice scars audible traces into the galloping mêlée, and ‘16, 16, Six’, the group’s ballad. Unfolding to a sugary skank The Police would’ve approved of, it’s a teen love story that’s honestly awkward, clumsy, painful. Judging by how the screamo boys yelled along to lyrics like “This is the story of a broken heart/I tried to love but it fell apart,” striking heroic poses like they were some sozzled divorcee singing ‘I Will Survive’ at karaoke, it could make The Drips huge.

“If it sounds awkward and naïve, that’s because I wrote it a long time ago,” offers Matt. “It was the first love song I ever wrote, and it was about my first girlfriend, who I was with for seven years. It was a tumultuous relationship.”

For all their phosphorescent ferocity, The Drips onstage are mostly defined by Caughtran’s amiable, excitable charisma, grinning non-stop, like every moment – sharing his mic with the moshpit, leaping into their outstretched arms – were his best ever. Which is pretty much the truth.

“Shit, yeah, man,” he affirms. “The Bronx, The Drips – we never expected people to be into any of our shit’
“Kiss – first record: the black heart procession
Liz Neumayr
are for me.”
shoes. It’s like a frame for a picture, that’s what the shoes
impossible! I think the main part of the outfit is the

I like solo artists, like Laurie Anderson and Björk.

I’m not a very big indie rock fan; in fact, I’m not very
indie music fan, you know, like, four boys with guitars,
people trying to sound like someone else or trying
to please someone else. I totally despise the whole
rock ‘n’ roll cliché, the getting drunk and taking drugs.
I’m not a very big indie rock fan; in fact, I’m not very
much into bands. I like solo artists, like Laurie Anderson
and Björk.

“I hate crappy shoes. I really hate crappy shoes.
That drives me insane. That’s how I judge boys: ‘He
might be cool, but check his shoes!’ When you’re
thinking of liking someone, ‘liking, liking’ someone, but
he has bad shoes, it’s like, ‘Psssh, it’s over!’ It’s not a
thinking of liking someone, ‘liking, liking’ someone, but
he has bad shoes, it’s like, ‘Psssh, it’s over!’ It’s not a
fashionista style thing, it’s just, you meet someone you
like and he’s really cool, and then you look at the feet,
and it turns everything off immediately. It’s like a switch
for it to be over.

“I think it’s horribly, horribly superficial and I’ve tried
to change myself. But in the grand scheme of things it’s
impossible! I think the main part of the outfit is the
shoes. It’s like a frame for a picture, that’s what the shoes
are for me.”

(Liz Neumayr)

first record: the black heart procession

“Kiss – Alive 2 on tape. I was pretty young, I must
have been about seven or eight, it was a Christmas
present.”
(Pall Jenkins)

first love: adam green

“The first time that I fell in love, I felt as though I had
melted butter flowing through my veins. Then she broke
my heart, and I’ve never been in love since. I wish she
hadn’t, but I’ve never been in love since, or with any
one for that matter.”

“Sh...
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nice and nicely done

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I think folk music translates into modern-day DIY culture,” says Prior when I bring up the F word. “No artificial separation between band and audience, and hearing about new music through word of mouth rather than having it doped to you. Love music to be presented in a fun and unmediated way.”

“I see folk music as being the labourer singing in the fields, the old guy reciting in the corner of the pub…Experiences which have resonated down the centuries,” continues Colohan, who’s also a member of the more traditional Magical Folk Of The Faraway Tree and solo project Agitatred Radio Pilot. “There’s a magic and a whole world in tiny things within folk song that’s very alluring and inspiring. Maybe it’s the sense of things that are gone: a lost, pre-industrial world. I feel it strongly in the old songs, when they had a real connection to the land. They lived, worked and died on it. Ireland is not an industrialised country and we are never far from rivers, farmland, lakes… but maybe our music’s connection to the land is in our need to escape the town and cities.”

“Folk music can be made, but it’s not necessarily just a traditional thing,” adds Prior. “It can be made in all sorts of ways, in all sorts of disciplines. Sometimes it’s even a pastiche, but it’s a pastiche that makes sense – there are lots of examples of this in the ‘80s and ‘90s – and it’s not like you’re making a joke or anything. It’s a real attempt to do something innovative.”

“I think folk music can be made in any number of ways,” Prior continues. “It can be made in the folk tradition, it can be made in the folk punk tradition, it can be made in the folk rock tradition, it can be made in the folk electronics tradition. It can be made in any number of ways, and it can be made in any number of places.”

For more on United Bible Studies and Deserted Village, visit www.desertedvillage.com.
Summer! Shit, it crept up on me again. It doesn’t come on. It attacks. It caught me out today and I was in my big coat as well. Bastard. By the time I got home, just in time to slap my shades on and send the sun scurrying behind a cloud (they’re magic weather-affecting shades, got them the same place I get my magic bus-producing cigarettes), I looked like I’d just straggled over the Sahara, having basted my face in a bucket of chipfat.

Fuckn‘ell, you don’t look good in summer. Sweating like a pig digging ditches. Community service. Minor sexual offence. Your face twitches when the mercury rises, some kind of spastic panic at the discomfort of all that absent cloud-cover, the semi-nude freakshow of the chav massive swarming you with their tied-off £140 shirts and their bad tats and their scrawny rat-like frames, the odd stray metal fan clinking their nip-rings down the high-street. Everyone (it seems) is able to parade their unclad malnourishment without let or hindrance – since when has it been acceptable for a man to be seen shirtless before tiffin of an afternoon? Birch the thugs, or at least give them tassles.

And in the charts you can already sense that summer-long feeling of general revulsion taking hold: all those Joy Div tribute bands with their neatly ironed school shirts and delay pedals; all those honest Johns and heartfelt Jills; a whole generation of skinny fan boys throwing themselves into the task’n’graft with such paltry results. Ugly tarts like Orson and Sugababes (so off-the-boil post ‘Push The Button’ it ain’t true) jamming their sweaty-cracked leather-shod arses in the air and rotating their salmon-paste down your neck with grotesquely confident crotch-twirls. So much vision-deficiency, such poorly pre-empted fantasy, such half-assed distraction — and nary a whiff of intolerance from the happy-to-be-here press, just a hi-def colour-supplement glow to pop; all of us finding our own sure musical space to mould, collectors and curators of the canon slipping and sliding between different brands of the great god ‘Quality’.

Mandatory enthusiasm, happy with our place in the schemata of this business called show, sure that even our most obscure desires can be confidently sated (and get 150-word write-ups somewhere). The final death of militancy, misery, fury and bitterness in pop experience. I miss that stuff.

In an infinite musical universe, you can’t kick against a damn thing, cos every swing of the boot just pushes you out into your own free-swim. Come on in. The water’s paralysing.

And in this hot-town summer in the city, in the absence of another great Charlotte Church single and with that ‘Too Hot Remix’ already disappearing from view, I seek the cold. Music that hits you like liquid nitrogen, makes you oblivious to the crowd, super-fragile to the touch, ever about to topple and scatter into infinite shards of quicksilver.

Best to pull that chill from the furthest reaches of the universe, and be warmed only by the riots down the road.

Just something so OFF about Dabrye’s ‘Air’ (Ghostly International) it sounds so ON in the bodysnot of sun and tightening tension that is June. S’like the music Prince would play as Paisley Park flares, Waco-style, around him. MF Doom contributes a driven and dazed vocal on the original, and then re-rubs it all up with extra dub and hair metal on the flip remix – somewhere in between Akufen and the best bits of Ghostface’s Fishscale. It’s a purely sonic derailment (like Foreign Beggars’ masterly ‘Slow Boiled Ilk’ (Dented)), a black Arctic wall of noise to hide within pitched against a nation that’s gonna be waving flags and wearing shorts until autumn, just far enough away from here to help you forget who and what we’re all becoming. This is sound that upsets you,
unssets your equilibrium so much through sheer alien terror that it opens up vistas in your vitals, renders your innards interstellar.

And if there must be heat this summer, let it be so hot you start seeing things. Let it laser down with an ant-frazzling, pinpoint accuracy that damn well bullies you into delirium. Missii/Blurr9 13’s ‘Choose To Care’ (Elephant) positively seethes with electro-heat, the freeheeling, semi-improvised synth part from PM and Parisian mash-up queen Missii having its buzz maximised and its modulation fine-tuned to painful impact, Blu drops heavily roboticised verbal in all the gaps he can find and plenty he slashes out for himself, that damn synth part not letting up until it’s bored a hole in yr skull roughly big enough to fit a grappin fist in.

Similarly, feel your flesh coming adrift from your bones this month to Kill Kela’s ‘Secrets’ (Spit Kingdom), Kashmere’s ‘Playing With Fire’ (Receptor), Raydar Ellis’ Graffiti Rock’ (Brick), Sway’s ‘Products’ (Deypha), God’s Gift’s simply stunning ‘Incisions’ (Ramp), MCO’s ‘OK’ (Mouthwathering), Juvenile and Papoose’s ‘What Be Happenin’ remix (white label). Busta Rhymes’ ‘New York Sh!t’ (Interscope) and Lloyd Banks’ ‘70 Bars Of Death’ and ‘Cake’ (G-Unit) are three definitions of NYC summer madness; there’s whatever Baltimore ghetto-tech gutter music you can find (the Couche-Tard Spank Rock mixtape and LaCrate/Amanda Blank’s ‘Blow’ EP (Milkcrate) will do nicely); also The Coup’s startlingly lush and heavy ‘My Favourite Mutiny’ (Epitaph), Skuff’s ‘Filled In’ (The Music), if only for the stunning ‘I Migrant’, and Breaking The Illusion’s ‘Joe’ (Nice Things) for lancing its boiling, simmering drones with the finest Burning Spear bass you’ve heard since Garvey’s Ghost.

Then draw a line from James Brown’s ‘Mother Popcorn’ to Miles Davis’ ‘Duran’ to Can’s ‘Spoof’ to The Congos ‘Congoman’ (always thought you could swap those last two around surprisingly often, so soundalike are they) through Schooly D’s ‘PSK’ and then leapfrog forward to Project Polaroid’s ‘Digital Engineering’/’Diamond District’ (Threshold Recordings). At all points in that line we’re talking about bass and rhythm, we’re frequently pointing towards Africa, and we’re always engrossed in mystery, magic and the suggestive ways the most physical music can unlock parts of the brain untouched by the more direct communication of coherent pop.

Project Polaroid is Tom C3 and Kool Keith and the weird fucking thing is that Tom C3’s contributions are even odder than KK’s. A low-slung groove of Seventies funk gets assaulted by all kinds of blaxploitation bizarreness and jarring moments of Sun Ra space drama. You can almost feel PP’s steps going on the barbie with a crate of stubbies. That tries to make you feel better in the coming few months, or that encourages unwarranted and unwanted displays of underwear (what’ll be more horridly damnated, abused and torched on the wasteland it left behind to light our vistas in your vitals, renders your innards interstellar. What they all angle above, but what they share is an appalled desire to escape through the looking glass.

Love melodies are turbo-charged to the max, and the past is righteously stepping on the radiation all the way out, feeling the half-life decay in your vitals. You can almost feel PP’s steps going through the looking glass.

There’s huge complexity and discovery in the emotional breadth of all the above, but what they share is an appalled desire to escape through the looking glass in 2006. What they all seek is spiritual transcendence or demonic damnation from all the safety we’re ensconced in. What they all angle themselves towards is nothing short of a redemption of what it is to be human here today.

And looking around at all this contentment, all these badges, all the unwarranted and unwanted displays of underwear (what’ll be more horribly apparent this year, I wonder? Indie boys’ folded-over boxer-waists, or good ol’ thongs too far up the crack?) and repro-retro-t-shirts that we can legitimately expect from this most loathsome season, I strongly suggest you resist all music that tries to make you feel better in the coming few months, or that encourages you to feel good, or that goes well on the barbie with a crate of stubbies.

Push away that arm so much summer pop wants to casually slip round and round your waist and over your shoulders (and into your chest to steal your heart). It’s too hot for that kind of ease and creeping intimacy. Keep your heart heavy, pinouette past planets and dance to the death.

Stay in, pour yourself a big iced tea and juice, draw the curtains and catch up with what deliberately botched auto-surgery and cyrogentic suspension pop can give you.

Fun in the sun? Fuck off. I ain’t coming out until the leaves start falling.

Volver – Não Rio De Mim
This sounds a lot like The Beatles’ first record: simple riffs and three-minute songs with great choruses to sing along to.

Emile Simon – I Wanna Be Your Dog
I met Emile Simon through the soundtrack for Le Marche De L’Empereur: very delicate songs, kind of ambient for the glacial era with little electronic noises under Emile’s sweet voice. I never imagined I would find a Strokes cover on one of her records.

Coralie Clement – Indecise
Coralie borrows textures and guitar sounds of American indie rock to recreate French pop music. Benjamin Bidal, the composer and her brother, produced this record. I love the mix of the vintage keyboards, charming voice and noisy guitars.

Mundo Livre S/A – Por Pouco
This is the group that co-founded the movement Mangue Beat. They created a whole new concept of music from North East Brazil with Chico Sciende and Nação Zumbi – a mix of Brazilian rhythms with rock’n’roll.

La Pupuña – La Pupuña
‘Guitarrada’ is a style of music and a rhythm from the north of Brazil, influenced by Latin and Caribbean music with many guitars. This is the best salsa, guitarrada and surf music to dance to. And they wear the best flowered t-shirts.

Fun in the sun? Fuck off. I ain’t coming out until the leaves start falling and my cleavage stops shining.

And while there’s breath in my body, I’m not wearing fuckin’ sandals – WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU FREAKS?
the void

Hiro, lead singer of Polysics, grits his teeth in masochistic ecstasy as his body, shot through with tazer blasts of synth pop and frenzied stabs of distorted punk rock, is flung about the stage.

“Hi, Poly people! Fire, do you feel fire? Let’s burn this fucking place down!” he screams.

Rewind a few days and Hiroyuki Hayashi is sitting in front of me. Noting his clear skin, bright eyes and perfect teeth, I speculate that if he hadn’t started a band, then he could have been just as successful with a career advertising something wholesome, like milk. Fumi, the band’s bass player – with chipped black nail polish, lopsided grin and frizzed hair – fits the rock image far more.

Despite these differences, throughout the interview the two of them often speak in stereo, as if wired into the same network. They tell me that during their recent American tour Fumi received a copy of a film script from a devoted fan in which she was one of the main characters. I ask what it was like.

“They’re not the kind of band who are going to set up a MySpace page and let everyone contact them,” he says. “They like a bit of mystery, and that’s not the way most bands like to present themselves. Most bands completely lay themselves

To the long list of buzzing, visionary albums and singles that Nottingham-based Gringo Records have released since their inception back in 1997 – and it’s a list that takes in everything from Bilge Pump’s muscle-jerking explorations to Eska’s charged sonic battery through to the controlled explosions of Nottingham’s Wolves! (Of Greece) – you can add The Unit Ama’s eponymous debut.

The north-easterly trio – drummer Christian Alderson, bass player Jason Etherington and vocalist and guitarist Steven Malley – make a beautifully unholy racket, dense with weight but shimmering with light, throwing out jagged, atonal riffs and gnomic musings on dead animals and the perils of acquiescence to the hand of the government.

They’re a slightly shady bunch – peruse their website, where they seem at least as interested in recommending restaurants and cafés, or inviting passings surfer to create a “variation…in audio or visual form” of The Unit Ama, as they are in telling you about themselves – but for Gringo Records’ Matt Newnham, that’s part of the band’s appeal.

“If it’s not the kind of band who are going to set up a MySpace page and let everyone contact them,” he says. “They like a bit of mystery, and that’s not the way most bands like to present themselves. Most bands completely lay themselves

The style of dress is very similar to the outfits worn by Eighties band Devo, and Hiro freely admits that the band were a huge influence. “I first heard Devo when I was a student. It was a shocking experience. My concept of rock music got turned

Words: Leon McDermott
Photography: Mark Newton

Words: Felicity Hughes
Photography: Becky Cross
'They draw you in, break everything down, and then explode'

open, and want people to know everything there is to know about them, but they’re not really interested in that.”

Operating as a hive-mind collective (according to Newnham, “they have the notion that no one person is more important than anyone else”), The Unit Ama have, since 2002, coalesced into a muscular, inventive band whose music – rich with tricky rhythmic and melodic flourishes, as expansive as it can be claustrophobic and constricting – crackles and bristles with invention. Think the tight, clipped aesthetic of Dischord (post-)hardcore filtered through a paranoid, uniquely British worldview, the scarred post-industrial landscapes of the once-productive Tyne and Tees painted in sound, the beauty of rust and decay played loud.

Signed to Gringo after blistering support slots with Fugazi, Erase Errata and Bilge Pump, The Unit Ama, along with Lords – whose sucker punch of blues primitivism, This Ain’t A Hate Thing, It’s A Love Thing, has also just been released by Gringo – and Polaris are Gringo’s vanguard attempt to promote homegrown talent. “The trouble with British bands is that there’s not enough support or interest, so building a community that’s spread across the country is the core of what Gringo is about,” Newnham says.

“The Unit Ama are definitely an intense band,” he adds, “and they’ve got a lot going on, but one of the things I love about them is that they’re never po-faced about what they do. They draw you in, break everything down, and then explode. They’re serious about their music, definitely, but there’s a sense of humour in there too, in their stage mannerisms. When they’re playing live you might see Jason and Steve jumping about or wrestling on stage, and at first you might think, ‘What the hell?’ but it’s funny. Or at least, it is to me.”

“When they’re playing live you might see Jason and Steve jumping about or wrestling on stage, and at first you might think, ‘What the hell?’ but it’s funny. Or at least, it is to me.”

promoter profile: dolly mixture
Words: Nicola Meighan
Photography: Patrick Doyle

“At around four o’clock on the day of our Christmas party, I got a frantic call from Duglas BMX Bandit, crying, ‘my Santa outfit has fallen through! Can I just wear a parka?’” laughs Sharon McHendry, the mini-beehived Scottish quarter of Glasgow’s lady-led club collective, Dolly Mixture. What happened? “I ran around panicking, of course, and eventually found him suitable attire. He had presents for good boys and girls; some even sat on his knee.”

A hyperactive, liqueuric assortment of one part Weegee (McHendry) and three parts Swede (Sara Carlsson, Josefin Westman, Malin Landqvist), Dolly Mixture has been delighting party lovers with tunes from girl-related groups of all eras – and “cool lady noise” – for over a year.

Five tunes you’re likely to hear, according to Dolly’s queen bee decree: “Madame Hollywood’ by Felix Da Housecat and Miss Kittin; ‘Pull Up To The Bumper’ by Grace Jones; ‘Hittin’ On Nothing’ by Detroit Cobras; ‘I Heard It Through The Grapevine’ by The Slits; ‘Big Spender’ by Shirley Bassey.”

Recent DJ sets have come courtesy of Sons And Daughters’ Ailidh Lennon, and live shows have included Lucky Luke, The Gussets and the aforesaid, newlook BMX Bandits – now with vocalist (and requisite vixen), Rachel MacKenzie.

“We want to see men and women enjoying quality music with a female slant’

“That said,” alerts Sharon, “this isn’t an exclusive ladies’ night in any way – we want to see men and women enjoying quality music with a female slant,” she avows. “The point of the night, in some senses, is to encourage more women to set up clubs, to Dj, to play in bands and basically to get creative.”

While the presence of cheerleaders at their first birthday party was brilliantly fitting, less likely is the sight of their occasional assistant: a denim-clad vintage cash register. “Yeah, it became like a mascot when my ex-flatmate, Gareth, did the door,” Sharon enlightens. “He found an old seventies till in the Barras market, got it working, christened it ‘Mama Casio’, dressed it up in a pair of designer jeans – cut up, of course: the till was too fat for drainpipes.”

Perhaps they’ll resurrect Ms Casio when the Dolly DJs relocate from Glasgow’s Stereo to MacSorley’s in June. The venue may change, but the Dolly dogma stays the same. “We’ve got quite a strong music policy,” muses Sharon, “but there are a few off limits, some tunes that are barred.” Such as?

“Touch Me” by Samantha Fox – good God; ‘My Heart Will Go On’ by Celine Dion – we’ll have none of the Warble Brigade, thank you. ‘Wind of Change’ by The Scorpions is equally bad and will never grace the Dolly decks, “ she menaces.

I am gutted. No lighters aloft then?

“Lighters are banned.”

www.myspace.com/dollymixclub

‘We want to make a record with Devo!’

upside down. Shocking, like a lightning bolt coming from above and . . .”

Hiro jolts with imaginary voltscity of electricity.

He explains that Polysics have taken Devo’s electro-punk sound and developed it into their own style. “It’s not the new wave of this decade nor the new wave as it was in the Eighties – it’s the new style of now. When we made our last album we wanted to continue to make new forms of music, a new punk experience.”

During their nine years as a band, Polysics’ success has spread from their native Japan to Korea, America and the UK. The new album, Now Is The Time!, justifies their continuing popularity by adding new elements to an already startlingly original repertoire, including new single ‘I My Me Mine’ – a song sung in ‘space language’.

Hiro is keen to demonstrate: “Like an instrument – I feel sound and rhythm and energy,” at which point he opens his mouth to emit a high-pitched squeal, finishing with a couple of clicking noises at the back of his throat. “No meaning. Just passion.”

So, after nine years, do Polysics ever think of hanging up the space shades?

“Not yet!” chorus Hiro and Fumi.

“There are still places we want to go. We want to make more records,” Fumi says defiantly.

Finally – with a strange, metallic glint in their eyes – the pair finish off in perfect sync: “We want to make a record with Devo!”

www.polysics.com
first live: nebula
“I went to some big stadium/arena shows when I was young but I classify those as events. The first real ‘show’ that I went to was at a place called Fender’s Ballroom in Long Beach, California. I think I might have been 15 at the time, and the main band that I went to go see was Blast. The headliner, I believe, was The Exploited. Other bands on the bill that night were Entropy, Aggression, and, if I’m not mistaken, maybe even The English Dogs. “Fender’s was great because it totally imprinted, still to this day, a massive fear within. The skinhead population was really big there and they rallied together sometimes and went for people like a massive freight train that had no breaks. In fact, that first night, I remember we all met at one friend’s house and as I walked into his house he just bolted upstairs and into his room. Almost instantly he came back down with a pair of Doc Marten’s and throws them at me and says, ‘You might want to borrow these tonight.’ “I was really glad that he did because the skins got really rowdy that night. It was the scariest night of my life, and the whole time I was split in two. One half was, ‘Get me the fuck out of here!’, and the other was, ‘Give me more!’ The show was so great for me. I couldn’t believe that the bands were REAL, and right in front of my face (when I raised a bit of courage to push towards the front, although always at the sides). “The skins – they were getting so knarly that night, especially towards one long-haired guy in the crowd. After a couple of failed attempts due to a crowded floor, the freight train gathered mass steam during a change-over of bands and the floor was cleared of all mosher and slammers, except for my friend who lent me the boots. Like true bats out of hell, the skins charged for the long-hair. There was like maybe 20 of them ranging from twig size to double XL all together one massive horde… CHARGING! “I witnessed this whole thing from huddle to hike, and there was my friend standing alone in the middle, right in between the single long-hair and the hairless horde. He got bowled over and trampled so hard that I was surprised he didn’t explode open like a watermelon and there was my friend standing alone in the middle, right in between the single long-hair and the hairless horde. He got bowled over and trampled so hard that I was surprised he didn’t explode open like a watermelon dropped from the 13th floor. I couldn’t keep from laughing my self shitless as I watched the tsunami take my friend. “I am so glad that that was not me on my first night ever at Fender’s or else I would have never seen other greats such as Bad Brains, Reagan Youth, Sub-Hum-ans, GBH, The Stupids, RKX and other bands like 7 Seconds and Yung Choice plus a whole lot of Dischord bands. I also saw Eddie’s first band, Worked World, play there before I even knew him. Ah, Fender’s… may you rest in peace… Since she burnt down to a crisp, in a blaze of punk rock glory ever emblazoned upon my mind.”

(Ruben Romano)

first record: witch
“The first record I ever bought with my own money was Kiss Alive on double LP. I was nine years old and I remember seeing an ad for it in the paper, the week it came out, which was in 1975. It was $5.99 (in Canadian dollars). When I got home I stared at the back cover and remember thinking about all those lucky fuckers in the crowd photo, waiting around for the show to start. And here’s me, stranded on a fucking island with no chance in hell to ever see something like that.”

(Dave Sweetapple)

first live: ladyfuzz
“The first show I ever went to was a concert of my dad singing. Both of my parents are classical singers. My parents met through singing and my granddad played organs and violins all the time. My first memory – apart from my dad coming home from work and singing all night and us not being able to fall asleep – was my mum teaching me some Austrian folk song when I was about four. I ended up as part of choir, a church choir, and singing gospel and stuff.”

(Liz Neumayr)

metallic falcons
Words: Beth Capper
Illustration: Robert Ramsden

“The Falcons are slaves to a sick dream of beauty and eternal forlorn,” says Sierra Casady of Metallic Falcons, the Brooklyn-based duo that she forms one half of. About a year ago, when interviewing Sierra and her sister Bianca Casady for a piece I was writing on their band CocoRosie, they told me a childhood story about going out driving in the desert, getting lost and running out of gas. Stranded there, without supplies, they waited it out while their father went to get help. “The desert is love and we, though bound, betray the void

love spells: more from Voodoo-Eros
“I wanted to put out a magical, rough compilation of all my friends most special old tapes,” says Bianca Casady, of the label Voodoo-Eros that she started with her friend Melissa Shimkovitz. “Mostly, we aren’t looking for new musicians, we are making music. But we are always listening. I can’t describe what for, but it has to be crazy raw. We all met at church and found each other through harmony. Some of the songful beauties involved include Nomi, Antony (Antony And The Johnsons) and Diane Cluck.”
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I’ve been dreaming of all-girl psych-noise-magic collectives for years, but I don’t think I ever quite envisaged the Brighton/London group Leopard Leg, not even that time I was tripping in a meadow and everything went a bit like a Richard Dadd painting and I thought a thistle was a real person, a bare-armed girl with green-white skin, and that there were maybe hundreds of other whispering thistle girls hiding in the long grass.

Almost, though: there appear to be hundreds of Leopard Leg members (around 10, at the last count), and they hide in a meadow of jack leads, mics, drums, and more drums, and they whisper too. They dress in motley costumes from a desert-island dressing-up box. But – after a beautifully tense build-up of groans and sighs, scraped violins and microtonal sea shanty – they erupt into a massive fucking racket, a Heath Robinson-ish island dressing-up box. But – after a beautifully tense build-up of groans and sighs, scraped violins and microtonal sea shanty – they erupt into a massive fucking racket, a Heath Robinson-ish construction of percussive sound. They’re no longer ghostly or hallucinatory; they’re like some elite fighting faction: determined and quixotic.

“Leopard Leg was one drum and four cassette players until last summer,” says founder Maya, who describes herself as a “meat and death historian”. “For a long time I had wanted a really big band that other girls would see and connect with us on stage when we’ve all created a storyline,” is the tactful reply when I ask if they need another pair of hands. Luckily, however, “free jams in the forest are all go!” Count me in.

Words: Frances May Morgan
Photography: Simon Fernandez

‘Free jams in the forest are all go’
The Research
THE HARD TIMES

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Joan
AS POLICE WOMAN
REAL LIFE

“flooringly beautiful”
**** Q MAGAZINE

Released on June 12th

www.joanspolicewoman.com | www.revealrecords.com
The name says it all. This Aint Vegas. It’s straight-talking, but it could mean one of a thousand things. They’re hard to pin down. On the surface, it’s all manifestos and slogans. The Sunderland band’s record covers secrete such confidence they make you look for a dotted line, eagerly licking the nib of your ballpoint pen. Their website looks like you look for a dotted line, eagerly licking the nib of your ballpoint pen. Their website looks like somebody has forcibly hand-stamped a small corner of your ballpoint pen. Their website looks like

Then you delve deeper and find more questions than answers. “What’s the use in promotion without a decent grasp of number?”

‘What’s the use in promotion without a decent calculator?’

I ask the band some open questions and Adam’s answers leave me wanting to ask more, though we’re constrained by time and deadlines. “Influences for lyrics or anything else come from different sources. It’s important to us to make our own decisions in whatever we do. As a group we feel more comfortable like that. It leaves you free.”

And freedom, it would appear, is something that translates well to the creation of jaunty, forthright rock’n’roll. Listening to This Aint Vegas is like listening to a choir that has been stripped down to the minute the feet start stamping and the run-out grooves as the echoes of studio life spill out onto the vinyl. “We were very young when we first started… As time progressed, we absorbed what was going on around us and took great influence from many different sources. It’s important to us to make our own decisions in whatever we do. As a group we feel more comfortable like that. It leaves you free.”

The intensity of Isis has certainly been carried over, but here there is a real sense of calm. Although that’s not to suggest there isn’t an uneasiness at play. MGR may act as a means for Mike Gallagher to express that which he can’t within his band, but at the same time it remains an extension of what was made possible in the first place.

Mike agrees. “MGR does allow me to express elements and textures that might not
‘I am a robosexual’

“I don’t fear Luddites. I have an advantage over most other forms of technology in that I am very sexy. I find that even people who are anti-technology are not anti-sexy. So I am pretty safe.”

When did you first realise you had a talent for making music? What was your function prior to that time?

“Oh, I’m still waiting to realise that I have a talent for making music. I enjoy making music, but the talent part…Well, one can always dream! Before making music I was programmed for making visual art. I used to do very elaborate pen and ink drawings and stay inside and mope. At a certain point I realised that this excessive moping and isolation was due to a bug in my programming, so after several years of calculations and system reboots, I became a different sort of robot.”

Even though you are a robot, I’ve felt a lot of love in your music. Do you try to spread your love around with your musical sounds?

“Indeed. I am a robosexual. I found that, once I accepted myself as such and embraced the quirks of my romantic construction, there was plenty of love to go around. At the very core of my operating system is a desire to love and be loved. So, yeah, I am a bit of a robohippie in that regard. Love! Love! Love! I’ve got lots of it. You want some?”

www.myrobotfriend.com

Beautiful end-of-the-world music

fit into what Isis is trying to accomplish, and I am very grateful to have the opportunity to get that out of my system. But the fact of the matter is that I have been playing with Isis for close to eight years, and those guys continue to influence and inspire me. So I think that MGR also shares many similarities.”

With MGR he’s making a more beautiful end-of-the-world music, if you like. Think less Donnie Darko on the cusp of time, more being locked inside and out of it; a place where death is in the moment.

Nova Lux is an astonishing record, viewing the best of avant-garde drone workouts through a dark post rock sensibility, at times recalling Angelo Badalamenti’s compositions for David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive. I wonder if movie soundtracks are indeed an inspiration.

“The influences for the music are kind of all over the place,” explains Mike. “After I was finished with ‘III’ [from the LP], I realised that the background loops sounded very similar to the highway noise that was always audible from the apartment that I was living in at the time. I guess those sounds crept into my subconscious. Some other, more obvious influences are Neil Young’s Dead Man soundtrack and Bobby Beausoleil’s Lucifer Rising soundtrack.

“To me, the album has kind of a relaxing feel to it. Part of the reason for that may be due to my days being a bit crazy at that time, and me needing something to just zone out to.”

www.mgrsounds.com
The show tonight is with Afrirampo, who are the sweetest. The show is sold out, with an enormous line around the block. I sell my last 40 mixtapes and get rid of 62 of my shirts. A good start!

The next morning, I wake up and walk through Mat’s house to piss. As I walk past the living room, I see a huge French man laughing – this is Mat’s roommate. I realise that I am wearing boxer shorts with huge lipstick marks and x’s and o’s all over them. I also have a bloody mouth from an unnamed incident that happened hours earlier. Greeaaattt!

Tonight I am scheduled to play with Ana Da Silva. This is a huge trip because The Raincoats have had such a profound effect on me since I discovered them in my early teens. I recently bought her solo record, *The Lighthouse*, and was blown away. Unfortunately Ana is ill in hospital. Tonight is her first cancelled show ever! I hope she gets better.

Luckily, Hands On Heads save the day, reminding me of The Yummy Fur. They are super-great. I party post-show with the Upset The Rhythm kids. We make a drum circle outside, eat falafel and watch a “best of YouTube”. Also an Australian children’s show from the early Nineties that has a green child who suffocates himself if anyone but this other child holds him. Tanith, whose home we’re at, actually stars in this episode!

Me and Mat take the One Pound Bus to Bristol. It’s a huge double-decker thing crammed to the max. We are on top and I attempt to sleep but the bus almost blows over many times. Scared as shit, but we arrive in B-town OK. The Corey O’s, Valerie and Naomi play. It’s an awkward show but good considering I bought two peanut butter milkshakes thinking that someone else would drink them with me, which didn’t happen, so both went into my stomach making me a full vomitsville.

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I look out the plane windows and, through the dust and smog, I can see the pyramids. They totally dwarf the city. It’s unreal.

Themba and Nora are friends of mine who moved here from the north-west of America. We take a cab to their home, which takes almost an hour. The view is endlessly insane and there are policemen on every corner holding Uzis. Here the cabs rule the traffic and roll through whatever lane they please. There are no traffic lights, speed limits,
traffic officers, or street signs. And absolutely no rules. Like almost everything in Egypt, the taxis are from the Seventies. They are falling apart, rusting and most of them only have a few doors that open.

I have my own guestroom with a large, dusty bed. The porch overlooks the Nile. We dine at the market on 10-cent falafel, fool, and freshly squeezed orange juice, before heading to the Nile and renting a sailboat to watch the sunset. All of a sudden there is this moaning Arabic chanting coming in stereo over the water – it is the last round of today’s prayers broadcast from barely working speakers from every mosque in the city!

We go to a dirty, worn-down café to discuss the logistics of tomorrow’s show with Sherrif, at whose house I’ll be playing. A drunk guy at the next table picks a fight with the largest man in the room. Large man invites him outside where drunk man’s face becomes smashed. Post-smash he runs in bleeding all over the floors and tables. The larger guy’s friend runs in, yells a sentence, then headbutts the drunk man’s already crushed face. His whole face has been turned into a cracked-skull egg mush!

The next morning we rent camels to ride to the pyramids. The pyramids are closed so we pay off these kids who stand at the fence (which surrounds the pyramids for miles), letting people in for a few pounds. The ride through the Sahara is intense. The horizon is all city to the right and endless desert in every other direction. Below every sand dune is another obstacle, resembling the old video games like King’s Quest or Zelda. Sometimes it would be the military (whom we pay off way more than once) or a man who has made a fence out of rusted car doors and barbed wire as the only trail down a cliff. We park our camels behind a dune and run to the pyramids. Nora speaks to security for 15 minutes in Arabic and, miraculously, we don’t have to pay a fee. So awesome.

Regardless of our meeting the night before (I said I needed a PA and a mixer to do the show), tonight we only have a stereo speaker. Themba and I go store to store for an hour without finding the right adaptors or mixers. But Sherrif says his friend is bringing a four-track, and so I end up using his homie’s 1980 Fostex four-track running through a home stereo he inherited from his father! It’s so punk, but no one here cares or even knows what punk is!

A woman buys one of my shirts, which has ‘Blow This Place Up’ written above the White House. She invites us over for major hangage and drinks so we catch two cabs to a street corner and walk through several crazy security checkpoints (with her wearing a ‘Blow This Place Up’ shirt until I finally see a sign reading “Welcome to the home of the US ambassador”. Woah! We end up in one of the most secured areas of the world (connected to the US Embassy, btw), sharing stories beneath the stars by the heated pool until sunrise.

The next morning we go back to the market for one last lunch blowout. I try a dish which is spaghetti, noodles, rice, chickpeas and a tomato curry sauce all thrown into a cup! It reminds me of something I would have made as a kid! I haven’t showered since getting into town and I reek of camel, sunscreen, sweat and sand. It’s been one of the best trips of my life.

20th June - White Heat @ Madame Jo Jo’s, London W1
(w/ Amusement Parks on Fire)

23rd June - Club AC30 @ Water Rats, London WC1
Why I Hate...

pop
Words: Ben Myers
Illustration: Søren Mosdal

Why are we pretending to like this bland, disposable, vacuous music?

Yes. I hate pop music. Controversial, eh?
It shouldn’t be.
But, before the assassination, a definition:
“Pop music is often defined as music produced commercially, for profit, or ‘as a matter of enterprise not art’,” notes Wikipedia. “Pop is designed to appeal to everyone and doesn’t come from any particular place or mark off any particular taste.”
See, already I’m getting annoyed. It’s that line “designed to appeal to everyone” that gets me. In an age run by marketing men, pop music – which has, to be fair, always been sold for mass appeal – has morphed into culture we’re all permitted to buy into. Pop says: come one, come all. Bring your cynicism and your irony, so as long as you keep buying. It’s McMusic; sickly, disposable, idiot fodder. Music as communism, but in the hands of capitalists. Cultural uniformity.
Fuck that! I want my music elite. I don’t want to find myself discussing Kaiser Chiefs with my headmaster uncle (last gig: Westlife) on Christmas Day again. I want him to take me to one side and ask me to remove my Gay For Johnny Depp T-shirt. I want snobbery and discourse and, unless you’re Green Day, chances are I’ll hate you once you pass the 10 million sales mark. Sure, I like pop songs.

Some of them. I like Blink 182 and Chic and Natasha Bedingfield and Har Mar Superstar, but I have no interest in the false conceit of pop music. The way I see it, there are two types of pop fans. Those who like a song buy it, love it without analysis or irony, live by it and dispose of it; the average high-street shopper who gets his or her cultural stimuli from Asda, basically.
Then are those who merely pretend to like it – those who witter on about pop’s beautiful vacuity and veneer, and how jolly wonderful it all is. I’m looking at you, Paul Morley.
But since when did hating pop music become anathema? My entire adolescence was a reaction to all things popular. Music was never about continuing to live in a Saturday-morning fantasy land – I mean, I want to punch Cat Deeley in the face – but rather a quest pass to the adult party: sex, alcohol, sleeping in ditches. Of course, pop music provides pivotal moments of brilliance. Songs that soundtrack your life. Define your era. And the obsession of true pop devotees is undeniable, but then the same can be said for any musical genre.
There are two words that sum up everything I hate about pop: Pete Waterman. This man ensured that my generation’s formative years were soundtracked by a sickening, synthetic, airless carousel of music devoid of meaning or value. One other point: pop music has killed critical faculties in the 21st century. You can no longer merely say: ‘I love pop music – it’s brilliant,’ as it won’t fly. I want to be blown away, confused and face-fucked by a song, not just briefly titillated. And puh-lease don’t say you love Sugababes and Girls Aloud because they’re sultry and real and have great production and because that’s what you’re meant to say. Say it because you mean it. I like some Sugababes stuff, yes. I also think Madonna has released nothing but conceptual offal with all the life irrigated out of it for 15 years straight. Ditto Jacko (at least Prince had his creative crisis in private). And my opinions on Robbie Williams have remained watertight since 1991. Sue me.

No. Pop is merely an extension of the current culture of perpetual adolescence, cheap thrills, mindless gossip and whooping. And I hate whooping more than I hate Williams.
They aren’t exactly underground, though their debut album was entitled *Sound Of The Underground*. They’re the best band in the country – no, the WORLD – right now. They are Nadine Coyle (singer), Sarah Harding (blonde FHM-friendly ‘totty’), Kimberly Walsh (utility player), Cheryl Tweedy (tabloid dream; icon), and Nicola Roberts (completely out-of-place ginger; also an icon). They are Girls Aloud.

Their songs boast the smartest lines, the most fucked-up sounds, the most instantly gratifying hooks. They make anthems for Binge Drink Britain, choruses which sound most alive when bellowed raucously by a gaggle of alcopop-saturated girls; they do a nice line in tear-sodden balladry, too. They’re also the best acid test for snobbery. The UK music press failed it, sneering that Girls Aloud’s origins were in “hotspots of teenage pregnancy and petty crime around the country” (true, and they never hid it; maybe there was something in that *Sound Of The Underground* title after all), proving that while working-class white boys will always get lionised as ‘gritty’ and ‘authentic’, no matter how bad their music (Oasis, Arctic Monkeys), working-class women must feign classiness and sophistication in order not to be dismissed as trash.

They’ve produced three albums in as many years, all of which are high-concept works, and essentially perfect. (At this point, their producers and writers, Xenomania, deserve a parenthetical mention. But although the Girls Aloud project is guided by them, the relationship is a symbiotic one.)

*Sound Of The Underground* (2003) takes its cues from diverse sources including Puretone, Betty Boo and The Knack, and paints Girls Aloud as teenage small-town rebels: the girl gang hanging out on street corners and in provincial meat markets, bored out of their skulls by everything. The music is bubblegum of the purest, pinkest flavour, but the recurring themes are dissatisfaction and frustration. ‘No Good Advice’ is pop at its most nihilistic, giving the middle finger to every authority the Girls could think of: parents, God, the very concepts of hard work and ambition; ‘Life Got Cold’ recounts in dead-eyed detail the desperation of finding ways to fill endlessly expanding time. There’s no self-pity though: rather, there’s steel-eyed ambition and determination to make it the fuck out of this shithole.

Which they did, by winning a reality TV programme.

What Will The Neighbours Say? (2004) follows the Girls as they move to the big smoke. The small-town mindset is gone; the cheap beats have metamorphosed into a smorgasbord of sleek, forward-thinking, hyper-polished production. It sounds like a bunch of kids let loose in a sweet shop, eyes widened as they try to take in all the hitherto unavailable delights on offer at once. There are heartbreaks and hangovers, non-stop bons mots (“He started out a squeeze, but pretty soon he was a tourniquet”), and pounding techno that sounds like Vitalic on pink wine (‘The Show’). There is the ambitious ‘Graffiti My Soul’: twanging guitar + bustling Prodigy techno - lyrics about fisting + best stutter-vocal effect in pop ever = rejected by Britney’s people because it had no chorus.

Chemistry (2005) moves on to the serious shit, and it’s funnier than ever. 21st Century C-list celebrity is amusing, vacuous, beautiful and completely fucking ridiculous, and on their third album, the Girls embrace their Heat-magazine status fully. The album is full of finely judged barbs, from which they don’t exempt themselves. ‘Models’ is a girl-power riposte to ‘Girls On Film’, elsewhere, they capture the dark, heady intoxication of their own transient semi-fame on the astonishing ‘Swinging London Town’. The endlessly quotable lyrics amp up the cartoonish ludicrousness to tabloid levels: check the impossibly addictive mid-album double-header of ‘Watch Me Go’ (which culminates in a Daphne And Celeste-esque chant of “I know what you’re thinkin’! You been thinkin’ bout my butt!”) and ‘Waiting’, all about how much the Girls love to have sex. Meanwhile, they manage to both trump The White Stripes’ entire career with the faux-blues intro to ‘Biology’ and dip their perfectly manicured toes into the waters of ketamine-house with the blankly blissful ‘It’s Magic’.

Who knows what comes next? Who cares? Right now, Girls Aloud make music for the head, the heart and the hips, and they are brilliant in every single way.
Alex Smoke would, I think, like to be much more of a moody bastard than he is. “I’m naturally rebellious,” he offers as explanation for turning his back on his classical background; later he will claim, “I hate really happy music.” He cites Ryooji Ikeda’s dataplex – “an album of pure glitch” – as his favoured listening of the moment, and notorious moody bastard Aphex Twin as one of his musical heroes. And there’s no doubt that moodiness is one of his music’s most important threads. 

But Alex Smoke – real name Alex Menzies – is actually an extremely affable and accommodating Glaswegian, the kind of character people will describe as “a really, really nice bloke” and mean it. His music, too, is extraordinarily ordered and balanced. It takes a lot of time and effort for me to try and roughen things up, if that’s the way it perfectly and simultaneously expresses very opposing, extreme emotions: obviously, there’s the anthenic dancefloor element, but at the same time, and without impinging upon the happiness, it’s often wistful and melancholic. “I like Mozart so much is because his music is so neat, the trance thing, I guess I’ve done it myself – ‘Chica Wappa’ on the first album was pushing me further in, until the scene of the last rave still going is the void bursting through the doors to join them. Sent away on orchestral courses each summer, Smoke sought refuge first in hip hop (it’s telling that Nas’ Illmatic proved an early favourite: only the smoothest rappers for the teenage Smoke!) and then techno, with early purchases including Carl Craig’s Landcruising and Laurent Garnier’s Laboratoire Mix. These days he has rediscovered a love for orchestra. “An orchestra has a lot more scope for creating or conveying an emotion. And with electronic music, you can create even more noises.” He talks most enthusiastically of his ambition to score film soundtracks.

“The best music I’ve written has been in times of stress. Relentlessly happy music like trance seems unnatural to me – it has to have an element of melancholy to make any sense. Trance is almost like…California emotion, painted with such a heavy brush.” Trance is really the elephant in the room, with regard to a lot of minimal house, though. The minimal sound has been ridiculously fashionable for a while now, but more and more I hear stuff and think, “Hang on, I have heard music like this before, and it was not music anyone called cool.” “Ha, yes, there’s a lot of music coming out right now that I can’t differentiate from stuff I know I detested. Therefore…Do I conclude I detest it? Or did I never really detect it in the first place? I mean, the trance thing, I guess I’ve done it myself – ‘Chica Wappa’ on the first album was pushing towards it, and I can’t bring myself to play it out, because it seems so…obvious.”

Meet Alex Smoke – classically trained orchestrator of precise, pristine micro house anthems

'I like order and harmony, in every sense'
Scott Walker *the Drift*

"a record that genuinely sounds like nothing you have heard before ... a frightening, bewitching and rewarding experience" Uncut

"the most weighty album to be released by a major artist this year, possibly this decade" Independent

"there’s not a minute of The Drift that isn’t utterly thrilling" The Guardian

"absolutely compelling" Observer Music Monthly (Album Of The Month)

"Scott Walker ... is making music that few others could even imagine" Mojo

"one of the most compelling, exhausting and harrowingly beautiful records you’ll ever hear" Time Out

"as inspiring as music gets" Pitchfork

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*a call and response*

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heads in decoration. The scene was sparkling, and there were candles.

“I try to create the same feeling of dark and light in the dynamics of playing live, as I would working with subtle atmospheres and textures on the album,” Natasha replies. “It’s good to try to create a frenzy – I love that intense, chaotic Godspeedy element, which we try to bring in. There is definitely a magical aspect to it, like casting a spell.”

You often talk about magic when you describe your music.

“I suppose it’s just a way of describing a pure essence that’s fantastical or that takes you out of the everyday. It’s my escapism, it’s my way of delving into another world. It’s like a twisted rainbow… A beautiful thing…”

“In my early childhood, I lived in Pakistan and I have bizarre and strong memories from that,” she continues. “I remember that we used to buy cages of multi-coloured chicks, which they’d dip-dyed, so you’d get big cages of chicks in neon pink, orange, green, ultra-blue – you know like the horse in The Wizard Of Oz that goes round and round and changes colour? I was so in love with them that I squeezed them so tightly they kept on dying on me! “My aunts believed in genies and ghosts, and if there was a power cut they would start chanting and praying because it meant the devil had come. It was like my version of Father Christmas. It takes a certain amount of naivety to suspend disbelief. Now I get that same naive feeling by going to the cinema or when I’m visualising the story for a song – you know that it’s not really true, but you believe in it anyway.”

When did you stop believing in the mystical?

“When I was about 11 my dad disappeared overnight,” says Natasha. “I didn’t know what was happening, so I made up that he’d been abducted by aliens, because it was too sad to think that he’d done it off his own back. When he left the glass shattered. I grew up, overnight, and then I started to play and write songs. I would go downstairs at night-time to the piano and play with a soft pedal on. I never realised why I started playing at that point but maybe that was why… trying to get back to the unconsciousness of it. It was really secret, my special time to fantasise about things and let out my emotions.”

There’s an excerpt from one of those first pieces included on the forthcoming album, due to be released by Drowned In Sound in September (her debut single, ‘The Wizard’, was released on her own imprint of the label, She Bear Records, last month). The piano sounds far, far away, interspersed with spoken word in a swirling soundscape, as though from an open-air cinema. She agrees how special it is to be using a rediscovered tape from her childhood on an actual recording.

How does the secrecy of those first music-making experiences compare to sharing your music now?

“I think there still is secrecy, because when you’re writing, you are in secret. Songwriting takes me back to those childlike feelings of not knowing and wonder and playfulness. And to that trance-like feeling of writing something and it working through you so you’re almost unconscious, and then at the end what comes out of it is like a present, and you’re like – well, thank-you! I don’t really know where that came from, but it’s good!”

“Then, the secret is out.”

www.batforlashes.co.uk

bebewitched

Words: Hannah Gregory
Photography: Sarah Bowles

Bat For Lashes conjure genies and aliens from a ghost piano

It’s wild swans calling and emerald slippers pattering, mystery and mysticism and bad weather. It’s storytelling, fantasy and the desire for discovery, creation and procreation. It’s the thunderstorm when Heathcliff returns to Wuthering Heights, or the tornado that whisks off Dorothy in The Wizard Of Oz. It must be the dramatic Kate Bush-esque production; the mighty harpsichord highs and the dirty desert guitar lows, the ovary-rattling sub-bass and the delicate harp in between. Or her voice, like rain on your heart. And the crescendos – what crescendos!

Natasha Khan, the Bat herself, talks about her music like one possessed. She grapples to pin it down, cross-referencing films, illustrators and dream-scenes: Karate Kid, Edmund Gorey, boys with animal heads.

I tell her how, a few months back, I’d walked into Bat For Lashes’ stripped-back show in London’s Buffalo Bar, to see Natasha and her onstage partner, Ginger Lee, playing a mixture of guitar, autoharp and electronic machines, with only the audience’s claps for percussion. How I had rushed through the city’s streets to get there, and that as soon as I stepped inside it was as if someone had pressed hold on the beat of the city. Natasha’s hair was long, slick and black like Cleopatra’s. They were dressing up through the music, wearing feathers on their head.
The long awaited new album from the main voice of the original girl group, The Ronettes.

"Spector’s comeback album finds that famous Noo Yooik, vibrato-tremblin’ voice soaring majestically”

“A gigantic presence” ★★★★★ The Observer

“Spector picks up where she left off with the Ronettes” Guardian

“An exemplary collection of consummate class” Classic Rock

“A sheer joy” Telegraph

“Zinner and Spector combined sound like The Detroit Cobras, which rocks!” Plan B
night of the living bassheads

It’s deep, dark and underground, and it’s about to take over…Plan B meets the figureheads of the dubstep revolution

Nando’s, Croydon, April 2006. Over chicken with Digital Mystikz

How do you know when to release a track?

Mala: “I dunno, it’s just like…”

Coki: “They done their time, innit? Most of the tracks he plays, no one else has got them. Obviously, once you start giving them out to other DJs, it becomes more known, and you see what response you get from other DJs.”

And from crowds…

Coki: “Yeah.”

Mala: “But it’s also something you can’t really explain; when we look at it now, it’s also about experience. It’s good that Digital Mystikz is two people, because we learn things off each other. For example, there’s a track that I’m just playing and everyone says, ‘Oh my god, this is amazing, this is new, this is special,’ and then oh, duh, getting an email the next Monday could anyone not realise he was taking the piss, is that what you’re talking about? it was, about how funny Deleuze was, and how you get from other DJs.”

And god, there have been moments. Some, messy and commingled memories: sub-bass filling and overspilling through every muscle and nerve; too much beer, or is that the bass causing this giddiness?; crazy South East Asian dancer dude (at every FWD and dmz, spazzing like he’s dancing the world to death) and mighty dready dude are both on the loose again (no dubstep rave is right without them); crowds bursting into skank; frightening sounds, uplifting sounds; dark jackets, black caps; things that make you say “dutty”; the “flashpoint of an exploding scene” (Mary Anne Hobbs); bumping into The Bug, again; Red Bull vs Stella; the buzz of a massive and familiar drop; the uncanny rush of beauty in new tracks; recognising them again, and chasing them, and finding they have been released on DMZ, Ital, Tectonic, Hotflush, Hyperdub or Tempa; the bank manager ringing to ask you to stop going over your overdraft limit – blame Boomkat (www.boomkat.com); feeling like an addict in the most glorious way, emotions all over the shop…

On Breezeblock’s infamous ‘Dubstep Warz’ special, Youngsta said something about his emotional relationship with dubstep – that this sound felt like home for him. Is writing music emotional for you?

Loefah: “Yes.”

(He looks me in the eye. Pauses.)

Loefah (points to his chest): “Someone was telling me, you have glands in your body that release the hormones causing your emotions. And at our raves our music can stimulate those glands. So that might be something to do with it…”

And, one week later:

Benga: “Emotional to write? Sometimes…You get that feeling sometimes that makes you wanna cry – that’s when it gets messed… I don’t wanna talk about them times. It is very hard to explain it sometimes. What’s your other question?”

Other specific memories: having to move away from the right speaker at the last FWD because the big hoop vibrating in your right ear was threatening to explode; the night dmz moved from 3rd Bass upstairs to Mass, because the queue outside the door was so long; the long coach ride to the first dmz in Leeds, watching the headlights of cars flash past the window, listening to a bunch of boys next to you discussing plug-ins and what label of what dmz 12-inch was what colour, while listening to the eerie, liquid skank of ‘Officer’, and wondering about the metaphorical value of the coach clock’s 09:30 reflected backward in the window in front of you; the expression on Frances’ face upon first hearing a few live dubstep tracks at the end of a set Mala played at Bash (Loefah and The Bug’s dancehall monthly at east London’s Plastic People); the first dmz you attended, still at 3rd Bass, being completely, utterly wowed by the bass, and some feeling of having been out of space; Matty bouncing up, grinning, to you to tell you she felt like her teeth were going to come out of her skull; a drunken conversation with a Scottish dude on the coach ride home at seven am, or whenever it was, about how funny Deleuze was, and how could anyone not realise he was taking the piss, and then oh, duh, getting an email the next Monday
from Kode9 and realising it was him... he looks different when not bathed in red, smoky lights and crouching behind decks; the coach on the way to Leeds again, the echoing, restless percussion of ‘Stuck’, and look – that town on the left looks like a mini galaxy, a web of night lights in a little dip in the land.

Skream was telling me that he met you online.

Kode9: “Yes, an online dating agency. What is he talking about? Oh, dubplate.net. When? This is stuff I didn’t know. I probably thought he was just some little punk… I’m not sure if I can be interested? And Loefah is he talking about? Oh, dubplate.net. When?

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Kode9: "I don’t want to give you a definition of a sound…no one wants to give journalists that, because then you’ll pigeonhole us!"

I don’t mean in terms of defining the sound. I mean, more in evolutionary terms…

Kode9: "When garage crashed, Horsepower kept doing stuff, but their records sales were shit – no one was really excited about it. There were a couple of DJs on the radio, but not playing dubstep stuff. And I was going away because I’d set up the Hyperdub website. Everyone was writing about Artful Dodger and whatever. That was in 2001. Leo and Sarah started dubplate.net at the same time. I started Hyperdub nights at The Bug Bar, underneath 3rd Bass. We did three of them. We did one night that was just me and Benny Ill."

Were you calling it dubstep then?

"I can’t remember…And then, cuz garage started, no one was really interested. But because I was running a website, I was getting loads of bookings abroad. To play Tempa stuff, because no one else really did. Hatcha did, but he’d also play Benga and Skream and Benny Ill. FWD was going on, ticking along in the Velvet Rooms. And then, about 2003–2004, the early Benga and Skream stuff was really minimal, and Hatcha had them on serious lockdown, until you’d heard them played so much you were bored of it.

“When it got interesting again was when it stopped being so minimal – beginning of last year, end of 2004 – and Skream’s stuff started becoming more colourful. I think Mystikz and Loefah and Skream had really low sub-bass, and I suppose if you’d heard it in any other place apart from Plastic People, you might not have noticed.”

Digital Mystikz (Mala and Coki), Loefah (who with Mystikz makes up one-third of dmz, the label and the dance), Skream and Benga, along with Hatcha and Youngsta, became associated through Croydon’s Big Apple Records (a label and a shop). When Skream and Benga were about 14, they used to write tunes and play them down the phone to each other to see if they were any good. Benga remembers going to buy some Craig David, and suppose if you’d heard it in any other place apart from Plastic People, you might not have noticed."

Good World, The Robot Ate Me’s fourth proper album, extracts the bare essentials of pop music, subverts it, deconstructs it, and then pieces it back together in a singular embrace.

—tinymixtapes.com
intention was a rotation of Big Apple releases from Artwork, Digital Mystikz, Benga and Skream.

“Nobody really knew what to…nobody called it anything then. And we just decided to do it ourselves.” The night started in a similar way (“People forget we were already doing Substation at the Black Sheep Bar in Croydon for dubsteppers”); part chance, part through pure appreciation of sound science: “You’ve seen what it’s like in there – no complications, just straight to the point. Sound! Too many clubs…I think Loefah said on that BBC documentary that too many clubs worry about how the club looks, but then they forget to put on a good sound system, you know?”

A few hours before sitting outside in a pub in Camberwell with Kode9, opposite the tower block where he lived with MC Space Ape and where he wrote ‘Sine of the Dub’, I met Skream and Loefah at Wetherspoon’s. How symbolic is that? Crap places, where you hang out as a teenager, getting pissed for no reason, scrounging your coppers together. That’s what dubstep comes out of; or its inverse, its rebel. That and jungle, hardcore, dub, two-step, half-step, hip hop, bashment. Croydon’s love of textures is Detroitian too. Drum’n’bass heads have migrated. Metalheadz and Wu-Tang. Skream and Loefah profess their love of disco.

Loe is late, and Skream and I have three pints each on empty stomachs, even after Skream has told me all about how he had to tone down his partying, which he did in part because, he says, “When Mystikz came into it, they give me a night big kick up the arse, man! I thought, that’s what I should be…not what I should be doing, but the quality…music hadn’t been as much my focus for two years as it should have been. And I heard them, and I was like, ‘Why aren’t I doing stuff to this quality?’ Coki’s sick! He’s one of them people – no one can stand still to one of his tunes. He just listens so intently. He and Mala brought the dubby part to dubstep. It might not sound identical, but it’s the skank and that. Your head starts going in and your whole body starts moving. It’s banging, innit! It’s weird how good the vibe is, compared with how dark the music is.”

And later:

Loefah: “If you went out for a night in Croydon you’d have the shittest night…that’s got something to do with it. Even the alternative bars are shit.”

Skream: “You can listen to tunes by that crunk bitch…what’s her name?”

Ciara?

Skream: “Yeah, her!”

Loefah: “We just do dubstep because we love it – it’s what we do.”

A bunch of boys. Nice ones, who just fucking love their music. Not really too hung up on the ego promise that’s everywhere in urban music: spit or build a beat, and expect instant fame. You know, when the market kills the spirit. Sure, there is likely to be behind-the-scenes ego, and competition is a strong element. But it’s still a good competition, one that’s about making a noise more than making a name.

And it’s about deeper things too – dmz flyers call it meditation. They appreciate mystery and emotion, and the physicality of music: how it can make tectonic plates shift in your chest.

Benga: “Sometimes I’m not even gonna put my name on the dub. I’ve got a few songs at the moment that I’ve never played, and I’m just gonna put them on CD and give them out to people and say, ‘Yeah, my friend made it’. Three years later, I might come out and say, ‘Yeah! I made that song’. A couple of the biggest songs I’ve made in the past few months, I’m not even gonna tell anyone that I made them.”

Once, when Mala dropped ‘Anti War Dub’ at FWD, I saw a crammed room of dubsteppers, who had been swaying and gently bumping, suddenly erupt into a huge skank. I saw limbs and dreads and caps outlined in silver light. It was the best anti-war statement I’ve ever seen. It wasn’t intended as one, judging by Mala’s reaction when I tell him, but he’s grinning at my enthusiasm…Later that night, we first heard ‘Learn’, and spent days asking each other, “Why haven’t you learned anything?” It was funny. It was deep too.

That net of lights on the way to Leeds? It set off thoughts about us and technology. Bad stuff: claustrophobia, banality, pollution global warming. But more the stuff happens when we put the numen back into technology. Makes you catch your breath.

What do you think about at a dubstep rave?

Coki: “I don’t have a clue. Sometimes my ears and my mind are locked on certain frequencies and things that you just pick out. Sometimes you just tend to search the beat…Yeah, search the beat, man. You can start from the bass and go up, or you can search the top and go down. You get lost in it.”

**Turn off the functional part of your brain, and you can see in rhythm**

“‘It’s weird how good the vibe is, compared with how dark the music is’”

— dubstep wunderkind Skream
Sheffield five-piece The Long Blondes write aching, gorgeous pop songs about motorways, darts players and unrequited lust

Pop said. When I was a child, the half-hour walk to primary school led me across a busy road, the A12. It wasn’t a motorway, and either side was punctuated by trees, gravel pits and hidden copses where if you didn’t run fast and wily you’d quickly be pinned down, but there was no denying that the folk who lived on the new housing estate near the Junior School didn’t hang around with us kids who lived in the old part of town. We were separated by a trunk road.

One time, I walked slap bang into a lamppost. After that, I kept my eyes open.

Do you find that you intimidate audiences?

Kate Jackson (voice, songs): “I hope so.”

Dorian Cox (guitar, songs): “Not intimidated, but… “

Kate: “I don’t think so. They never fail to come over to us afterwards.”

Dorian: “The intimidated ones scurry off home to write on message boards, ‘The Long Blondes were crap’.”

Screech Louder (drums): “Jealousy, nothing wrong with it. It’s a human emotion.”

Oh blimey fuck. I don’t know. I’m so unused to doing interviews these days. You know how to do interviews. You tell me how to do it.

“Ask us a string of questions about how we formed and what our influences are and all that stuff,” suggests Screech. OK. The Long Blondes formed in Sheffield in 2003 and, after releasing a handful of singles on a variety of cool labels, have been snapped up by Rough Trade. Until recently, Cox worked in admin at Sheffield University (“It was getting embarrassing, the number of students asking me for autographs”), Jackson sold vintage clothes on e-Bay, Louder was briefly at the Home Office and the other two members, Emma Chaplin (keyboards) and Reenie Hollis (bass) worked in a Leeds art library and in the media studies department of a Rotherham college respectively.

Their interests are…oh, wait. I get it. I’m supposed to ask them that.

Do you recognise yourself in the mirror?

Kate: “How do you mean? I don’t know what you’re getting at! At home,…”

I don’t recognise myself in the mirror.

Kate: “I’m very, very used to seeing myself.”

Screech: “I try to avoid looking in mirrors as much as possible.”

Emma: “I’m the same, especially if I’m on a night out. You don’t want to see the sick truth!”

Screech: “Yeah, mirrors and tape recorders.”

Emma: “I don’t like looking at photographs of me at all.”

Kate: “I do. I look at pictures of me a lot, because there are lots of pictures of me all over the place now.”

When you’re singing, do you know what you sound like?

Kate: “When I hear recordings back I do, yeah.”

How do you do that?

Kate: “I’ve got a good voice, mate!”

lonely this christmas

So I was listening to your single ‘Christmas Is Cancelled’ earlier, and my wife pointed out that it sounds exactly like Elvis Costello’s ‘Oliver’s Army’.

“A lot of people have said that,” replies Screech.

“So you know The Vichy Government? They did a cover of it and mixed the lyrics to ‘Oliver’s Army’ in, and it sounded great.”

“I’m quite pleased with that,” says Dorian. “It’s always nice to give Elvis Costello a leg-up. I thought I’d do what I could.”

Context. This is important. Pop said, trust in me and if you’re sweet and calm and wear floral-patterned shirts on Tuesdays and keep taking the piano lessons, maybe I’ll re-introduce you to some decent music every 16 years. Pop said, it’s the Christmas records that are the most special, because they have a head start – they’re already about a special occasion – and the most special ones of all are the ones that mix melancholy with the tinsel, heartache alongside the happiness – and the reason you fell so heavily, headily for The Long Blondes, Sheffield’s finest if we leave aside near neighbours Arctic Monkeys (and we’ll do that for many, many reasons), is because they did all this on their free Christmas download of a couple of years back, a song you placed on play and repeat on iTunes one rainy winter in Seattle. Yet it’s taken you this long to realise its similarity to Costello. And this, after you heard The Long Blondes’ pink vinyl debut single, ‘New Idols’/’Long Blonde’ (SPC) and had them initially tagged as a fine reprise of The Au Pairs’ agonised, political, early Eighties groove (see Albums, Reissues).

Where do you fit in with the current pantheon of music? I’m not clued in on it right. All I listen to is what I like, and anything else I don’t like I don’t listen to.

“Tha’s the best way to be,” nods Screech.
I was watching the Live Forever documentary… “Is that the Britpop one?” the drummer asks. “Yeah,” confirms Dorian. “I’ve seen that. The saving grace is Jarvis – and Liam’s hilarious.” It depressed me.”

Screech: “It’s a bit…”

Dorian: “…self-serving…”

“I’m guessing you don’t relate to Blur…”

“No,” exclaims Screech, horrified. “No,” he repeats. “We’re very much not Blur. I can think of a few bands around that are Blur. We’re not.”

So what is the context you exist within? What about these almost mythical labels like the Sheffield Phonographic Corporation and the Angular Recording Company you’ve released singles on, with their anachronistic artwork and fond regard for vinyl? These people are stars in my world: the abrasive mix of teen punk and jagged refrains they keep releasing, scouring the UK for like minds. I’m talking the minimalist art school frenzy of Champion Kickboxer, those crafty magpies Smokers Die Younger, the very excellent Motherfuckers, the even more excellent Fucks, the Virginian chicken farmer Charles E Cullen. I’m talking The Violets’ Gothic screech, the Arctic Monkeys, the way a wrist is flicked downward, a yelped backing vocal, resonance and pure, clear female voices dipping and soaring and rising gracefully upward, and yeah, just etc.

“The Long Blondes,” someone whispers, “are the ultimate fantasy pop group: Jean Harlow, Mae West, Nico, Nancy Sinatra and Barbara Windsor.”

A weekend? Man, these kids know how to make a man feel insignificant. I wish I’d paid more attention to The Go-Betweens. They’d have taught me how to wear eyeliner.

What is your favourite item of clothing?

Screech: “This Adam And The Ants T-shirt. It’s an original I was given by a friend. I’ve had it for about a year. It fits me like a dream. It’s a good gig T-shirt. It’s white, so it doesn’t make me too hot.”

Dorian: “Favourite item of clothing? Oh Christ! Suggest one. I’ve got so many.”

Emma: “Your cowboy boots, because you wear them for every gig.”

Dorian: “You make me sound like Jet! They’re supposed to be like Edwyn Collins.”

Yeah, well. I never did understand that side of Edwyn.

Dorian: “It’s meant to be Americana, like the Davy Crockett hat.”

Screech: “Kind of Velvet Underground.”

Is that what it is? See, I never understood The Velvet Underground.

Screech: “Ah well, there you go. They are a band of two halves.”

There was one half I really didn’t like. Dorian: “And the other half I really didn’t like.”

Kate: “It was Antony, from Antony And The Johnsons.”

Dorian: “It was Antony, from Antony And The Johnsons.”

Kate: “It was like the worst five, seven minutes of television I’ve ever seen.”

Screech: “He’s a dull man isn’t he, Reed?”

Dorian: “Very Reed.”

Screech: “That’s well Reed. You could use that as an insult.”

Pop said, place your trust in me and really, there’s little that can go wrong. Pop isn’t a matter of throwing money at a wall, or endless years spent in back rooms ‘paying your dues’, or fitting in, or tracksuit bottoms and one-star sneakers. Pop is craft is pride is joy is the knowledge there is more than one way out of this is filmic splendour is Shangri-Las B-sides is the odd snatch of a whispered refrain caught from a car window is sunlit ferry rides

‘How does it feel to be style icons? It’s fantastic, fan-bloody-tastic, fan-fan bloody-bloody tastic!’

– Kate (voice)
‘You look at Arctic Monkeys and it’s like an Oxfam adver. You can’t help but feel sorry for them’

– Dorian (guitar)

‘The last book I read was After Leaving Mr Mackenzie by Jean Rhys. I couldn’t believe how much like Dorian’s songs it was’

– Emma (keyboards)

Into industrial wastelands is The Royalettes. Pop is tight-fitting skirts, the charm of Rita Tushingham, a dimple, smudged mascara, the knowledge that the illusion you create can be more important than the reality you face because life is all about perception, and nothing matters more than having a nice pair of spectacles. Pop is a three-minute rush of blood, and to my way of thinking, nothing starts that blood rushing faster than hearing a perfectly composed, slightly cruel, femme voice warning unsuitable types away from getting too close.

When I import my promo CD of The Long Blondes’ new single, it shows up in my iTunes folder as ‘Boombastic’ by Shaggy, from the album My Lover Lover.

That’s precisely what I’m talking about.

 Sheffield Sex City

“I’m Kate. I’m the singer in The Long Blondes. My favourite item of clothing is my black patent shoe up for my inspection…yes, they are battered. A rip, the toecap’s come off the heel…[she holds the shoe up for my inspection]…yes, they are battered. I can’t bring myself to buy any new ones. They’re moulded to the shape of my feet and, um, they’re a classic shape, and, um, they go with everything I wear. They were from Langton’s Antique Centre in Sheffield, a bargain at £8.”

“I’m Reenie. I’m going to go for the yellow polka dot headscarf that I’m wearing. Yellow is the colour of the season supposedly, and yeah it’s summer, so it’s time to get out your headscarves.”

“No,” Reenie replies. “Because you don’t want to end up in puce.”

“I’m Emma. My favourite item, I wore it for the last four gigs we did, it’s my customised cat shirt, it’s white with little black spots and little black cats all over it and it goes with everything, all my jeans, all my skirts, it’s a classic and it was £3 in a sale.”

Pop told me this: it’s important, what bands wear. Music is not just sound, it’s context: what you’re drinking (orange squash, thanks), the way your glasses needle your nose, the lack of overbite in the jaw, the hum of an overworked computer, the colour of the walls, the repetition on TV. I imagined The Long Blondes to be my friends, to be dressed in suede and velvet and cheap antique clothing way of blood, and to my way of thinking, nothing starts the illusion you create can be more important than the reality you face because life is all about perception, and nothing matters more than having a nice pair of spectacles. Pop is a three-minute rush of blood, and to my way of thinking, nothing starts that blood rushing faster than hearing a perfectly composed, slightly cruel, femme voice warning unsuitable types away from getting too close.

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That’s precisely what I’m talking about.
where pound signs start to appear in A&R people’s eyes (and boy, do we care for those sparkly, cheery, dimpling A&R people’s eyes). Because. Well I may as well state it. The Long Blondes remind me of Pulp: the same sardonic wink, the same literary liturgy, the same elegant, cheaply-dressed charm, the same fucking city for God’s sake, the same disregard for convention, the same love for Sixties girl pop. No bad thing. Here are some Long Blondes songtitles I like.

appropriation (by any other name)

“Eighty per cent of lovers never forget their first/That significant other whose departure makes it worse.” Man, these lyrics lacerate.

What would you do if I didn’t come back tonight/I’m not always at your beck and call.”

Ever had a love attack? You’re equal but different. This was the quintet’s third single, backed by ‘Lust In The Movies’ and ‘My Heart Is Out Of Bounds’. The song is spiteful and jarring and sassy and smart and boasts a melody line that wouldn’t have been out of place on an early (delete as applicable) Blondie/ABBA/Motown album. There. I’ve given more of the game away. There’s little left now except fascination.

Honestly? I much prefer life on random. Because life is random, as the slogan rightly states.

Do you ever look at press releases? Dorian: “Only our own.” In case you’re wondering, I hate the way artists always get compared to the same 10 groups – Gang Of Four, Joy Division, Nirvana, My Bloody Valentine, Radiohead, Coldplay, R.E.M., Huggy Bear…

Dorian: “When we started, we put on our website that we don’t listen to The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix or The Doors, because they were the bands that anyone who was in a band looked up to. They’re all fine, in moderation – apart from The Doors…”

Murmurs of agreement.


Reenie: “I don’t mind Hendrix. I’ve got a best of somewhere.”

You don’t need it. He’s only got one song.

Reenie: “There’s a new list now.”

Dorian: “We’re from a different generation to you. What have we got to rebel against?”

– Screech (drums)

– Reenie (bass)

a literary bent: books and the blondes

Kate: “I’m reading Iain Sinclair, Lights Out For The Territory at the moment, but I’m not getting very far because I keep getting car sick. It’s a geographic and metaphysical walk around the Hackney area.”

Reenie: “I’m reading the Belle And Sebastian biography. It was a present.”

Screech: “I’m reading JG Ballard, High Rise. It details the story of what is meant to be a high rise utopia where all these people live together, but it all falls apart and everyone begins to hate one another and descend into violence. Driving around Portsmouth today, I could totally see where he was coming from; all these luxury apartments being built, ‘designed for city living’. It’s another way of creating divisions between people.”

Dorian: “I’m reading One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest by Ken Kesey. It’s one of those books that everyone reads when they’re 16 but I never got round to it, and it’s so good to discover a book like that again. Just that mentality of being on the inside, but having an edge over everyone else because you can see the bigger picture. But I read that Tom Wolfe book about him and he came across awfully. First up, he’s a hippie. I guess it just goes to prove that everyone’s got one good book in them, even a hippie.”

Emma: “Last one I read was After Leaving Mr Mackenzie by Jean Rhys, and I couldn’t believe how much like one of Dorian’s songs it was.”
I was thinking as much.

“Dorian writes from a female perspective and I write the more masculine songs like ‘Darts’ [fine, short, punky song about countless student afternoons spent watching daytime TV] and ‘Separated By Motorways’,” the singer explains.

“I write about sitting in pubs.”

I’m interested to know your definitions of masculine and feminine here.

“There’s a certain ballsiness, for want of a better word, about ‘Separated By Motorways’,” says Screech, “whereas ‘Giddy Stratospheres’ or ‘Weekend Without Makeup’ have a vulnerability that people associate more with femininity.”

“I wouldn’t ever write myself into a vulnerable position,” states Kate.

“Kate’s got a very self-assured character,” Dorian comments, “whereas I don’t, and that comes out in our lyrics. And the twist is in the way she interprets them.”

“I sing them quite aggressively,” Kate explains.

Do you like the way she interprets them?

“Yeah, absolutely,” the guitarist enthuses, “especially now I know what suits Kate’s voice. It all stems from Motown and the Sixties writers that wrote for singers like Dusty Springfield and Scott Walker. The reason they were such great singers was because they could interpret other people’s lyrics and make them their own. They took a step back from that earnest Lennon and McCartney approach, ‘We write and sing all our own lyrics’. So what? That’s just a means to an end.”

“But just because you write it and sing it yourself it,” comments Screech, “doesn’t necessarily make it a good song.”

lust in the movies

“I just want to be a sweetheart (x3).” Stalking, talking, the finest song based around a love of old film this side of The Go-Betweens’ ‘Lee Remick’, boils away with barely concealed passion, wait there’s more: “So never, ever, ever tell me it’s a pleasure being alone/All I have with me are the books and records that I own/Nag, nag, nag’ (x4) …maybe I can relate! The song references The White Stripes and Rough Trade electronica pioneers, Cabaret Voltaire…and God alone knows, I do that every other day.

swallow tattoo

Now I’ve started thinking, Sleeper. And I never want to do that.

Giddy stratospheres

The second single, no wait, this is the Au Pairs one. Live, it soars; Kate singing at least an octave higher and with such an engorged tune you want to snuggle it up in your arms and tell it never to run away again, hang on tight if need be, but please — no more Koala Bear noises late at night, they’re so damn scary. There’s some killer call-and-response from the other ladies, too. And the B-sides (‘Polly’, ‘Darts’) are even finer…shorter and finer.

I tell Screech he drums like a girl.

“He nods, complimented: “My favourite drummers are girl drummers.”

Me too.

“Do you like Wet Dog?” he asks.

That’s exactly what I’m talking about!

That’s the guitarist in Wet Dog also drums for Country Teasers and The Rebel, “Screech continues. “We did some gigs with them up in Scotland. She is the best drummer, she doesn’t use a kick drum, she stands up and she’s absolutely amazing.”

Once and never again

“Nineteen, you’re only 19 for God’s sake! You don’t need a boyfriend.” A song of empowerment for teenage girls, Kate’s voice cooing and gentle and knowing and swooning through the chord changes, backed up by some frantic keyboards and seemingly random segments of guitar: great break in the middle too, “You know I’m not so young/I spend an hour getting ready every day”...

Once again, one suspects a lyric of Dorian’s, not Kate’s.

“We exist in our own little bubble,” says Screech. “This single is like a doorway into that bubble, and if you get it you’re allowed to go through the door, and if you don’t, then you can fuck off.”

Separated by motorways

This is where we came in. The fourth single. Elastica is the preferred band of comparison for four out of five music critics. Why not just say Wire, and be done with it?

Kate: “It has a matter-of-fact tone you might associate with…”

I thought it was sad, a comment on the way nasty modern-day life keeps people apart with its reliance on all these soulless byways for roaring monsters of metal and steel, rushing past continually, no room for human contact…little children running across motorways…

Kate: “No.”
I had to cross the A12 to get to my school when I was a kid.
Screech: “My school was on two sides of a busy main road.”

Earlier, at Portsmouth’s Pyramid Leisure Centre, as Kate was pouting and preening and sashaying in her pencil-sharp skirt in front of squealing 14-year-olds on the latest NME tour, I was accosted by a couple of new acquaintances, dance guru and street performer types.

“She’s good, isn’t she?” they asked rhetorically.

“Got a bit of a No Doubt thing going on…”

I stumbled, perplexed, into a toilet cubicle. The Long Blondes remind me of many things – overnight trips to Edinburgh, when the bus has broken down and we while away the small hours by seeing how close we can run to the passing 80mph traffic; a quayside in Manhattan with helicopters whirring in the distance; boot fairs and the ridiculous delight to be had in finding Bow Wow Wow, The Muppets and Rachel Sweet singles for 50p, even though you own them already three times over; tuning into a late night dial, all crackly and hissing before Blondie’s ‘Denis’ breaks through the static; crushes on girls wearing berets and neckerchiefs and stripy tops in the late Seventies: arguing late into the night as to whether Philip K Dick’s work should be entirely discounted simply because too many hippies like him; keyboards and cold churches and warm chocolate – but not ska.

But, y’know. First time I saw them, in some scummy London industry pit, Plan B Albums Editor Daniel Trilling took me aside, and said, “They look like they all used to be in ska bands when they were younger…” and you just knew he wasn’t being complimentary, wasn’t talking about The Specials, Desmond Dekker and Dave & Ansell Collins, but something more insidious, more Nineties… but fuck it.

Listen up, Trilling. I’ve spoken to these Long Blondes kids and they’re products of the Britpop bedsit generation, swooning in teen tandem as Brett Anderson flicked his hips and Jarvis lasciviously licked a lollipop… but wait. Now I think on it, maybe Anderson was a ska-head in a previous incarnation. Seems the sort. Did big Ian all come down in Texas to save our skins? It’s a moot point.

mind your own business
So what’s your motivation for being in a band?

Screech: “When I was at uni, I had these hideous friends who were serious musos and they were like, ‘Let’s sit round all day in a house’. They had a three-bedroom house, and there were two of them, and they’d turned the other room into a music room where they’d sit all day and watch bootleg videos of The Beatles and The Jam. I was like, ‘Well, I can play keyboards in your band’, and they were like, ‘You’re not good enough’. Fuck you. It doesn’t matter whether I’m good enough or not. That’s nothing to do with it.”

Reenie: “Music as a consumer is a really unsatisfying hobby. It’s so awful. You pay your money and you get your album and you don’t like most of the songs on it, and you go to gigs and you get treated like shit. I thought that if I’m going to be interested in music I need to be a bit more active.”

Kate: “You’re constantly told that you only have two options in life, either get a career and be a good citizen – or be a dropout, a loser. Being in a band is my third way. You can make your own choices and be true to who you are, but still be good at what you do and be successful at it.”

“I got my third way before Tony Blair!” says Kate defensively. “Scrap that, I’m in it for the money.”

“We’re all in this band out of sheer boredom, a way of manifesting our escapist fantasies,” explains Dorian. “We all worked, we did all the normal stuff you do until you’re 21. We decided that if we pushed ourselves we could do something else – which, in my opinion, is how bands are supposed to start. They’re not supposed to start by advertising in the back of a music paper, or in a guitar shop saying, ‘Bass player wanted’.”

“And it’s always Red Hot Chilli Peppers on those adverts!” Screech groans.

“The more you get into the music industry, the more the veil is lifted,” muses Emma.

“In the same way that life has a set of formulas, record companies seem to think there’s a set of rules to making a band successful and you don’t have to even have talent,” continues Kate. “Some of these bands emerge out of nowhere, all over MTV, with shitloads of money pumped into them and no one knows who they are.”

It’s like that guy says in Dig! Record companies actually expect 90 per cent of their acts to fail commercially. No other industry in the world would countenance a 90 per cent failure rate.

Screech: ‘He’s a dull man isn’t he, Lou Reed?’
Dorian: ‘Very Reed’
Screech: ‘That’s well Reed. You could use that as an insult’
The Pipettes skip onstage with their waistcoat-clad backing boys, as the venue bubbles with vibrant colour. “Move closer, snog someone you don’t know – because it’s not love, but it’s still a feeling…” glints Gwenno, her feline eyeliner curling upwards in a pretty, catty smile while Rose tosses her chestnut hair around her painted face, humming and doo-wopping: dusky, husky, pearlescent. Stage left, Becki’s twirling theatrics trace heart-shaped dances across the floor. Clasping hands, they make waves with their arms; peeking out from beneath glossy, soft fringes and Alice bands, their diamanté eyes blink and wink.

They’re frills, pom-poms and ponytails. Liquorice, sherbert and carnivals. But if you’re thinking Brighton’s Pipettes are just sugar, spice and all things nice, think again.

“There’s three girls in short dresses on stage – that’s gonna cause a lot of people to immediately say, ‘Well, they obviously don’t know anything, because they haven’t got a guitar on them,’” says Rose, when asked if she worries they’ll be construed as bubblegum for quick consumption. “But I’d like to think that gradually people will realise this is actually quite a big idea; it’s all thought through.”

“We are a concept band,” agrees Becki. “Everything we do is for ‘The Pipettes’ as an idea and we don’t see anything wrong with that. It is all about drawing people into this notion of there being a machine – and we’ve had all this, ‘Ooh yes but y’know, these girls, they’re not really very good, because they obviously just roll out of bed and turn up’ and we’re thinking, ‘Well, actually, you’re just the kind of people that we’re fooling.’”

“We take our songwriting as seriously as any band, but we don’t have to go on about it all the time,” Rose says, adamantly. “It is for immediate effect; there are polka dots, there’s dancing and it’s very simple,” Gwenno states. “Then you elaborate on that. And everything that goes on behind that, nobody’s supposed to know about,” smiles Becki, triumphantly. “It’s like, Who does write everything, who comes up with the chorus, who does this or that and so on? Well, The Pipettes do.”

So, there they are, writhing with beauty queen goodness, suspended inside a ballroom-shaped, kaleidoscopic blast of rainbow audio: at once approachable and unattainable, huggable and aloof. Out come the hand jives, the hip swings. The mouths of cynics purse into half-smirks of distaste and condescension, while the irises of everyone else illuminate from the inside out like dilating jewels. Hands are tentatively raised and brought together in a clapping fashion. Swaying is experimented with. Then, BOOM! A flurry of abandon explodes. Dainty Dorothy shoes click their heels, and voices glitter upwards into the neon summer air.

But this is London; this is Brixton! We’re supposed to be emotionally pained, mentally deranged, physically adorned with trilby. Not tonight – and not for much longer.

“The band was formed as a direct reaction to the fact that there are so many boring guitar bands,” says Gwenno. “It is very much about having a good time. I think people want that. When they go to a gig they want to be entertained, whether they’ll
Ditch the guitars, switch off the angst and turn up the Dansette: **The Pipettes** will dance away your heartache with hand jives, doo-wops and polka-dot frocks.
admit it or not,” nods Rose, “not stroking their chins, wondering whether it’s ‘good’ or not. We do, hopefully, cut through that quite a bit, just because it’s such upbeat music and there’s a huge amount of energy in what we’re doing. It stops you from having to think.

“People have this problem with even calling us ‘pop’ music,” she continues, “which is a real shame, because pop is meant to bring everyone together, it’s not meant to be exclusive, which is why we don’t belong to any kind of ‘scene’, particularly. Maybe we do come across as a bit of an anomaly in this context – tonight, they support Kaiser Chiefs, and their mums are here to witness the sheer madness of it all – but that’s a good thing, because we don’t want to attach ourselves to the hip of some skinny young boy.”

we’re the prettiest girls you ever met

Take note, all you girls in yer faux pearls, tired of slotting into some narcotics-spiked world of debauchery and lines of coke; all you boys in yer airforce jackets, your youthful, yellowing fingers nipping the soggy, sad end of a roll-up, your skeletal frames jerking about to the latest skag’n’bone racket to greet your iTunes – I KNOW WHAT YOU WANT.

Your already cancerous hearts are screaming for a bit of wholesome, flirty fun. Fancy a skip through fields of daffodils with fairies at your feet? A spin under a discoball in a yellow T-shirt and, hell, sandals? A naive, longing kiss with the quiet, cute one from the back of Geography? Sure you do. Maybe – no, definitely – The Pipettes are for you (and everyone else).

Because The Pipettes replace the gritty bits of life that make you want to curl up and cry with a cuddle, a twist and a fruit cocktail. They create Songs. Which, in case some of us had forgotten, are things that can make you feel…healed.

“I personally use this band as a form of therapy!” giggles Becki. “I get onstage, go mental for half an hour and afterwards I feel great.”

“It’s very empowering,” enforces Gwenno, “because it gives you that opportunity where no one has any control over what you’re gonna do – I feel like we can be the people we’d like to be onstage. That sounds wanky as fuck, doesn’t it? But…”

“…it does exist,” completes Becki. “And it is something that takes a long, long time – I’ve only in the last few months gone ‘Fuck it, I don’t care what anyone thinks.’ And it’s about developing an appeal that’s ultimately your alter ego. You just get up there and become ‘Riot Becki’ or ‘Rosé’ and it’s almost you, but not quite. Then you’re back to being you again. That’s a really nice thing.”

“All this ‘Ooh, I’m playing an instrument and I’m really serious and I’m a genius and tortured…’” sighs Gwenno. “I mean, the guy behind The Shangri-Las [George ‘Shadow’ Morton], he was incredibly tortured – but that’s not what he gave to people in his music. Although he put a lot of it into those songs, it’s very hidden. Instead, it was about lifting people’s spirits, which I think is forgotten about now.”

“All the classic bands took really serious issues but turned them into something much more accessible, so that if you want to just enjoy the music then that’s fine; but if you want to dive into subtext and meaning then there’s a whole load you can draw out of it,” concludes Becki. “That’s something we definitely want to aim for. I mean, someone like ABBA...it’s a huge ideal to hope to be able to write songs like that!” she laughs, incredulously. “But it’s something that you do aspire to. Throwaway, novelty pop isn’t what we’re about.”

gotta dance to keep from crying

So, what of all these endless comparisons to the ladies of the Sixties, who were generally just vocal vehicles and attractive faces for behind-the-scenes songwriters? The Pipettes – well, they’ve a bit more control, and a truckload more sass. Their sugary strings, crystal complexions and cheeky chirrups about boys in uniform might seem unadulterated and harmless: not the case. Take ‘Judy’, the barbed ditty about a high school gal who earns herself a smidgen of a reputation (read also: STD). Or the bittersweet harmonies of ‘Why Did You Stay?’, gently brushing off an adoring admirer. Is being lumped in with the Phil Spector bunch denying them a chance to make their own mark?

“We do reference those bands,” comments Gwenno. “If you’ve seen our website there’s those manifestos about how we go back to an
era before The Beatles came along and standardised pop music, and I think it is important that you always have a sense of history, however forward-thinking you’re being. Our lyrics and songs are about being a woman now, though. It’s not as if we’re trying to create a retro feel; it’s just the disciplines and sentiments of that era, those bands and what pop music was about at that time, that have been forgotten about. That’s what we’re very interested in.”

And so an impeccable, manicured balance is struck; between the past and present, the real and the cartoon: under the cherry-red magazine lips and Broadway glamour, there’s a girl next door. So scrap the unclean, unstrung, defaced, debilitated body of culturally ‘cool’ music as it is today. Let it snort its chemicals into tainted bloodstreams and wallow in murky pools of fuzz. Then whack a splurge gun in its face, let your imaginations run rampant with quirky tales of growing up and bounce about instinctually, hormonally – driven, determined and fuelled with feistiness – because even hurt deserves a tune.

Beam from blushed cheek to teardrop earring, step in front of the mirror and hold your head up high. ‘Cause The Pipettes just made you happy.

classic noughties girl group sounds

2) The Pipettes Judy (2005)
4) The Organ Brother (2006)
7) Stereo Total Do The Bambi (2005)
8) Ronnie Spector Hey Sah Lo Ney (2006)
10) The Detroit Cobras Laughing At You (2001)

Everett True

“Serena-Maneesh draw from the greatest protagonists of both rock and post-rock to construct something that is undoubtedly theirs”
Drowned in Sound, 9/10

Eponymous album released 26th June 2006.
Available on CD, download and as a double pack Long Player.

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‘We go a lot more free now’
I hear rumours. Of course they may be just that. But on this occasion it’s something about Park Attack and Sonic Youth in France, and it’s Dep in Monorail that’s telling it, so… Why not ask the band?

“Yes, it was in Paris,” drummer Lorna tells me in the darkened, secluded spot that is Stereo come a Sunday afternoon. “We’re on the label Textile, which is based in Paris. And Magik Markers have just put out a record on Textile as well, and they’ve toured with Sonic Youth before. The guy Benoît who runs our record label sent Thurston Moore our record. And he sent him an email back saying he liked it, and what was the story about us – have we got other records out and stuff. So Benoît said that we were playing with Magik Markers, and did he want to come along for a drink that night. So Thurston Moore sent an email back saying he quite fancied doing a noise piece with John Moloney from Sunburned Hand Of The Man.

“Not exactly sure what happened, but I think John Moloney got a flight back to England or something. So he couldn’t do it. So Thurston Moore was going to do this noise thing on his own. But then Sonic Youth had been playing in Paris the night before and they decided on the day that they all just wanted to sleep.

“So they came to see us play.”

It’s all delivered with casual awe, wide-eyed expectation broken down by the fact that as personal histories go, this is the least Park Attack should expect.

“This is the third time I’ve interviewed them, but the first where we’ve hooked up in person. At the time their debut EP, ‘Last Drop At Hideout’, came to my attention I was still living in London. That was back in 2004, and not only has their brilliantly makeshift Mars-torturing-DNA turn grown into something they can truly call their own, but the core of the band itself has changed. Lorna Gilfedder and Rob Churn (on guitar) remain, while Tom has left, leaving long term-collaborator Jamie Grier (on “bass, noises and stuff”) to make up the three-piece.

Halfpast Human, their sullied, brutal beast of an album, is what all the fuss in Paris was about.

**Rip It Up**

So what have you been up to besides almost cavorting with Sonic Youth?

“Well, Jamie’s been playing with us for a year and a half,” Lorna tells me. “The sound’s really evolved into something darker – because Tom’s not in the band anymore.”

The influences are certainly harder to pin down this time around, but it’s obviously a case of a band stepping into their own orbit as opposed to denying what they were in the first place.

“I think the songs are a lot more sophisticated than on the EP,” she continues. “The EP was just like total raw spazzing out. Whereas on the album there are structures to the songs, but there was also that free element.”

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How did you start with music?

“Well, first, when I was a kid, I wanted to be Prince.”

“Exactly. Then, when I was 15, I decided I wanted to devote my life to being a revolutionary activist.”

That’s young.

“Not really – people have to make all kinds of life-changing decisions at that age. Rich white people can wait until they’re 30–35 and it’s perfectly acceptable for them to not have a career yet. If a poor black person hasn’t decided what they’re doing with their life by the age of 18 or 19, then they’re automatically labelled a waster.”

Can you remember any particular incidents that prompted your decision?

“Yeah. One day, I must have been 13 or 14, I was planning to spend the day at home. This guy came by with van full of girls, asking if I wanted to join them and come along to a demo. I thought about it for a minute and said, ‘Hell, yeah’.”

Sometimes, to get to the bottom of what makes an artist brilliant, you need to look at their one true stinker of a recording. Until recently, I never thought that Oakland rap crew The Coup had made one. To find it, you’d have to go back. Way, way, back. As far back as 1991 and ‘Economics 101’, the third track on the crew’s first, three-track tape, EP.

Boots Riley sounds young, naive, idealistic. Nothing at all like what he does now — none of the suave, disguised analysis. Some elements of the formula are already in place — his timbre is there, combining the rich scholastics of Rakim with a dash of Snoop Dogg’s loveable silky pervert. But beyond that, it’s a funk-free, a cappella, dud. “When you’re that young,” he says in his own defence, “you think the revolution’s going to happen some time next week.”

Fortunately, the rest of their five-album, 15-year career could be seen as an extended apology for that moment. In some ways, it’s like they’ve grown down, taking first a few tentative steps forwards, and then diving right into, a new, more approachable menu of bawdy humour, cut with a captivating, bleak eye for docudrama.

The move is striking and deliberate. “I went from rapping stuff that was basically a pamphlet set to music, to telling stories that people can relate to,” says Riley. “I’m very into the craft of songwriting. That’s what it started out as. It’s something I love to do – tell stories and paint pictures, make soundscapes. I’ve spent time honing my skills.”

On the new album, Pick A Bigger Weapon, these stories and soundscapes range from the bawdy Marxist singalong ‘Head (Of State)’, with its squeaky chorus, “Bush and Hussein together in bed, giving aitch-ee-ay-dee-head”’, to the affecting tale of ‘Tiffany Hall’, a girl Riley and the guys used to tease at school about having a fat ass, who was later killed by liposuction gone wrong.

“IJustWannaLayAroundAllDayInBedWithYou’ and ‘BabyLet’sHaveABabyBeforeBushDoSomethingCrazy’, elsewhere explore a bedside manner that’s more Isaac Hayes than Millie Jackson or R Kelly.

“’BabyLet’sHaveABaby….’ came from a direct quote from my girl.”

I found it a confusing sentiment – I’ve heard the exact opposite argued.

“That there are too many people on earth?”

“No – more that given the way the world is at the moment, it’s probably better not to bring children into it.”

“If we thought that way, there would be nothing to fight for. Most of the baby boomers wouldn’t exist. People have babies out of an affirmation of life. That song is about hope in a time of despair. That’s what my music is about — hope and change.”

The Coup started in 1991 as a three-piece, with Riley joined by DJO (replaced by DJ Pam The Funstress by the time the first LP was made), and since-departed second MC E-Roc.

“The music was slower back then,” says Riley. “That was down to how we listened to music then. People would blast tapes out of their cars when they were ghost-riding them. You heard that phrase? It’s called when you ‘ghost-ride the whip’. They would walk alongside, real slow, with the car driving itself at about five miles per hour. There’s a big outcry over it now, but amazingly, over all these years, only three people have died…”

“And that had an effect on the tempo of the music.”

Even before the humour, although the tempos are slower, the elemental funk is already there, even on debut album Kill My Landlord (1993). It’s in the slouched lo-fi Califunkadelicisms of ‘I Know You’, and the Large Professor-esque swagger of ‘Dig It’ and ‘Funk’. And it’s there in the nasal vibes of E-Roc.
playing counterpoint, trading lines, more often than verses, with Riley.

“There was a track on that album called ‘The Liberation Of Lonzo Williams’, which was key,” says Riley. “That was one of the first proper stories. The whole of the next record was my attempt to take that and make it work over a whole album.” Indeed, the second LP, Genocide & Juice (1994), the title a pun on Snoop’s ‘Gin & Juice’, represented a major leap in both imagination and wit, pioneering a new and resonant welfare/DSS poeticism. Such as the opening verse of the album’s almost-a-hit lead single, ‘Fat Cats, Bigga Fish’:

“The street light reflects off the piss on the ground, Which reflects off the hamburger sign that turns round, Which reflects off the chrome of the BMW, Which reflects off the fact that I’m broke, Now what the fuck is new?”

It was also notable for being the album where The Coup got funny. His is the kind of unpredictably sharp humour Eminem edged towards when he was young and hungry. In later years, this would develop into sequences like the one on third LP Steal This Album (1998), where a dissertation from Riley on sneaking into a cinema for free somehow ends with him in Washington DC pissing on the grave of George Washington.

And, on Pick A Bigger Weapon, a series of skits sees Riley, under the influence of a miracle drug called “ass-breath killers”, first tell his boss, “I’m supposed to be dragging my foot out of your motherfucking ass”, and then launches into a spirited singalong in praise of shoplifters (“I Love Boosters”).

Like most good concepts, their threads usually fray and break after a few songs, but while they cohere, they’re rousingly vulgar and funny. Perhaps still none more so than the extended satire on Genocide & Juice that runs from a flirtatious blag for free hamburgers, through Riley posing as David Rockefeller bragging of how he’s “running shit” and how his genealogy is, “Straight Anglo-Saxon, when my family got they sex on” to E-Roc’s perfectly inflected Too Short impersonation as Jean Paul Getty, “Lay you out like linoleum floors, I’m getting rich off petroleum wars”.

If the concept’s prescience was remarkable, a decade before Victoria Aitken’s abortive rap career, it’s striking to dig further and discover it’s only one example in a career littered with such foresights. They famously, accidentally, forecast the World Trade Center attacks of September 2001 with the cover of their fourth album Party Music, from earlier that year. Way before Kanye West spotted that the president of the USA doesn’t care for black people, Riley rapped, on 1993’s ‘Not Yet Free’, about how, “From the day I was shitting in diapers, it was evident the president didn’t like us”.

“I think that it’s good that Kanye West said that,” says Riley. “I think it’s great that people are feeling more comfortable coming out with things like that.”

He’s cautiously optimistic that the changed atmosphere will help them find at least slightly more receptive ears this time round. “There’s no bandwagon to jump on right now. But I think that people are ready for something like this.”

Maybe what has changed for The Coup over their career isn’t to do with them at all. Beyond internal issues, musical or otherwise; beyond the increasingly impressive dimensions of Riley’s afro, the most crucial changes are external.

Who are you making music for?

“When I make my music, I speak primarily to the black community, because that’s who I talk to in my daily life. But the music is for the whole working class in general because these struggles are universal, even if they happen in different ways.”

When you talk about revolution, you’re talking about it in a very immediate sense.

“There is no definite beginning or definite end to revolution. Even after the people take power, there’s still going to be battles. I think that people are ready for change but don’t see that they have any power to do it. So I think that maybe our children right now will see that.

“Do I think that in 10, 20 years the US will be a socialist state? No [laughing]. But do I think that the movement will be so strong that there will be all sorts of concessions happening all over the place? Yes.”

Do you think that it’s possible for people to take that kind of power without being corrupted?

“Who knows? You can’t go much wronger than now. Maybe. But it’s kind of like not going to a movie because the movie might be bad. You’ve got to try.

“I have faith in humanity. I have faith that, as we go, we’ll work things out.”

‘When you’re young, you think the revolution’s gonna happen some time next week’
Meet Rahzel, Amon Tobin, Merzbow, John Zorn, Dillinger Escape Plan, worlds of rock and avant-garde music (Melvins, Faith No More, Patton has co-founded a record label) of beloved cheese'n'ham merchants. Musician Mike Patton grew up in a California town called Eureka. OK, so that famed exclamation attributed to Archimedes may translate as 'I am in the state of having found it!' and refer to the discovery of a method of calculating the volume of an object, but because people are generally pretty lazy and superficial and Stephen Hawking has yet to bless us with an equally snappy catchphrase (“Just keep talking” doesn’t cut it) the word has come to be associated with smart stuff, cleverness, ideas and all that good shit.

Mike Patton, more than most rock-affiliated musicians, is bursting with ideas. What’s more, he can definitely do pop. But what is pop to Mike Patton? And what is Mike Patton to pop?

pop psychology
"It’s been in me and it’s seeped out," says Mike, sprawling in a hotel room chair. "I even think you can hear it in some of the extreme shit I do. Peeping Tom is me taking that kind of stimulus and running with it, seeing how far I could go within those boundaries. ‘OK, let’s take some of these things that we’ve been playing with over the years and harness them into roughly three to four-minute pieces that don’t stray too far from the path, that don’t have too much information in them; just enough to be interesting. Verse, chorus, bridge, verse, chorus, get out.’ That may sound easy or boring, but it’s not for me. It’s a difficult thing. I respect song form and great songwriters, and if I were to put pop in a box, it’s a big fuckin’ box, and that’s why I do a record like this. To play with all of that stuff, as linear as it is in my world, there’s still an experiment as anything else you’ve done? “Well, yeah. I see it as on-the-job training, learning by doing. The weak links were mostly in the beat department. I realised it was probably not such a good approach to hire a band this time, but work with some guys who can do this with their eyes shut.” Did you find that having recorded the album, you got all this pop out of your system, or is it something you’d like to revisit at some point?

“There’s…there’s more. One of the good things about the amount of time that it took and not focusing on it was that I kept writing shit, so now I’ve got a stockpile. I would say three quarters of the next album is done. That’s the good part of it. The bad part is you have to fuckin’ wait. And there’s a certain amount of, ‘Yes, I’m glad! I’m fuckin’ done with it!’ But realistically, it’s fuckin’ just starting.”

patton comes alive
The night before this interview, Patton played a show (and it really was a show) with the Fantomas-Melvins Big Band at London’s Forum. It was, as my gig companion put it, fantastic to watch a band using their formidable expertise to make music that is essentially very wrong. The Big Band, comprised of Patton on vocals and electronics alongside drummers Dave Lombardo and Dale Crover, guitarists Buzz Osborne and David John Stone and bassist Trevor Dunn, were as well-drilled as James Brown’s Furious Flames, as devastatingly precise as Duke Ellington’s orchestra and as tight as Nelson Riddle’s...um, arsehole. Oh, and yes, they ‘rocked’ too. It was hard to take your eyes off Patton, a whirling, screaming, squealing ball of catalytic energy at the centre of a brilliantly choreographed storm of sound. This was what rock could be, we thought, something to be honed and harnessed, sharpened to a fine point and jabbed into the throats of the pitifully undemanding Arrocker generation, the kind of people who think, “Avant-garde is French for shit, huh huh huh”. Fuckin’ idiots. Are you going to tour the new material? “Think so. Yeah, yeah.” There’s no way you’re going to be able to get Doseone, Norah Jones, Kool Keith and Bebel Gilberito to all commit to a tour. How are you going to fill in for the missing guests? “Hire different guests! Hehehehe! More affordable guests! We’ll see. I think maybe two singers, two vocalists, a trio or quartet of organic players, couple programmer guys, maybe a DJ.” You should get The Roots (Philadelphia’s live hip-hop supergroup). “Good idea. In fact we’ve heard from them. They wanted Tomahawk to play with them, which I thought was really strange. Guess they’re fans or something.”

Well, you’ve already worked with (Roots beatboxer) Rahzel. “Yup, he’s gonna be in there. We’re doing The Conan O’Brien Show at the end of May and he’s gonna be in that. Pretty funny...!”


Is that something you’re not looking forward to?

“Should be fun. But it’s a fuckin’ TV show, y’know? And I’m putting a band together really for one song, so… it’s what it is.”

Mike Patton first appeared on the Conan show back in the late Nineties, promoting the final Faith No More record, Album Of The Year, an aggressively bittersweet behemoth that belly-flopped on release. That’s my favourite FNM album, I tell Mike.

“Oh,” he smiles, wryly. “Took the title to heart, huh?”

through the keyhole

So, Mike. What’s the Peeping Tom concept? What’s the story behind the name? Sounds kinda kinky.

“Abhhhh… it’s a good name! Evocative, a bit ambiguous, a bit creepy. I also wanted to accentuate the lighter side of it because this is a fun record, it’s not a dark, disturbing, perverted record. I don’t know if you’ve seen the final packaging, but it’s pretty juicy. I just saw that we sold out in two days ago and I’m still kinda buzzin’ off it.”

Did you design it?

“Oh, yeah. I really can’t stress how important I think the artwork is, especially with some of the more difficult stuff like Fantomas or Malodor’s 1999 collaboration with Merzbow. If you don’t have a seductive cover that actually is a part of the story, it’s that much closer to being meaningless.”

The most recent Fantomas album, 2005’s Suspended Animation, came packaged as a desktop calendar illustrated by Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara. The artist was credited on the cover of the album, above the band’s name, rather than in small print on the reverse.

“That was a great one,” nods Patton.

“And y’know, without that, let’s just say that was a cardboard cover… sure, you’ll figure it out, but would it be the same experience? No way.”

Do you think this is a problem with a lot of experimental music? That the packaging is almost an afterthought?

“It’s definitely the case with music in general,” agrees Mike. “You have a blank sheet, y’know? Use it. But I think, especially with difficult music, it needs to draw the listener in a little bit, make it a little bit less abstract. A visual reference. Sometimes it’s a sensual thing. I’m a bit of a fetishist but I’m hoping other people enjoy that shit as much as I do. I think they do. There are enough nuts out there.”

Then there’s the issue of downloading. Is that a concern?

“Ummm... no. I was into it before this craze, you know? It’s a part of the story, it’s that much closer to making it happen.”

glossolalaland

Mike Patton has one of the most imitated voices in rock music, but almost every attempt to emulate his style has proven to be a complete and utter waste of oxygen. Imitators always miss the point, finding themselves unable to adequately simulate Patton’s morbid wit or the diverse range of musical inputs that inform his vocal experiments. Few vocalists have ever been able to ricochet between hardcore scream, r’n’b melisma, jazz croon and death grunt with quite the same degree of success.

“I ask Mike, at what point did you first realise you could use your vocal cords for something other than, say, asking for a biscuit? When did you realise you first had a voice?

“Mmmmm… I dunno. I’d been singing a long time before I started realising that I could play with it. Before that, I didn’t really think, “Gee, I’m a singer!” I never took it that seriously. I’m really untrained, I just kind of did what I thought the music needed. It was usually something really straight up and boring, you know? Just kind of singing.”

That was with Mr Bungle, right? Your first band.

“Yes. But you know, the way we started, I was just screaming my head off. I guess that’s a funny place to start, but I went into singing from there, oddly enough. Just by goofing around and having the willingness to fall on my face and record in front of people. If you do that long enough, you’ll try anything! Also looking up with John Zorn, and him encouraging me to play improv gigs. In those contexts, a melody and lyrics are kinda meaningless. You gotta do other things, and when you’re forced to do that on the spot, at the moment of the moment, you sink or swim. It’s a total immersion, y’know? It’s like learning a new language. You dive in, say ‘Don’t fuckin’ speak English to me’ and you know what? You figure it out.”

Just the initial playback and then onto the next thing?

“Sometimes if I get a finished thing I’ll put it in, just to make sure the mastering’s OK, check the titles, but that’s more just kind of mechanical. Sitting down with a glass of wine, y’know, in my underwear, looking into the sunset, listening to my record? Doesn’t really float my boat!”

I was wondering about Norah Jones’ part on the Peeping Tom album, her vocal on ‘Sucker’. Did you need much persuading to say “motherfucker”?

“She loved it. When I described the concept to her, I just said I wanted her to be a real bloodsucking man-killer. She said, ‘I can do that!’ It was really easy, a painless experience that could have been a total nightmare. She had a lot of people muttering under their breath, or behind her back, or even to her face, ‘What the fuck are you doing with this guy? There’s no money in it! She’s made, she’s paid, she doesn’t need me for fuckin’ shit! But she loved the music and wanted to do it. Not only that, she made it happen.”

‘I don’t fuckin’ understand Doseone! “Gblalalbalabol...”

With that in mind, how much of a hassle is it to write lyrics?

“I’ve never felt that I was very good at writing lyrics. Sometimes I’ll have fun and laugh, ‘Oh, that’s pretty good!’ But it’s always a chore for me. It’s always a pot of coffee, the night before a session. It seems like the more I do it the worse I get, hahahaha! I don’t know. The learning curve has not improved.”

He pauses for a second, thinking deeply.

“Well, that’s definitely the case. And that’s not to say that the lyrics aren’t important but the sound of the lyrics is the most important thing. The way I write lyrics mostly is that I will figure it out, but it to write lyrics?

“Sometimes if I get a finished thing I’ll put it in, just to make sure the mastering’s OK, check the titles, but that’s more just kind of mechanical. Sitting down with a glass of wine, y’know, in my underwear, looking into the sunset, listening to my record? Doesn’t really float my boat!”

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Do you think you stop caring so much about lyrics as you get older? I rarely listen to the words anymore. The vocals just become a sound. You’re obviously more interested in pure sonics.

“Well, that’s definitely the case. And that’s not to say that the lyrics aren’t important but the sound of the lyrics is the most important thing. The way I write lyrics mostly is that I will do a babtalk version of a song, either singing or even yelling or whatever. From that, I figure

out what I’m gonna do. I record it, listen to it a few times, ‘Oh, I’m gonna change that,’ and then I find lyrics or words or phrases to match those sounds or cadences. So in a way, the words are really the last thing on my mind. Literally! With Fantomas, I just left it at that stage. I didn’t bother to put words over it because I didn’t feel like it needed any. I left it in the oven, hahahahaha!”

But it wasn’t burnt.

“No, no, no. It’s good in there.”

international lover

You’re known for being a busy guy, Mike. What have you got coming up in the immediate future?

He makes a flabbergasted, jet-engine sound with this lips.

“Buncha crap, yeah. The next month and a half are crazy. I gotta go to Italy for this classical thing with a choir for a week. Ew! Kang, interesting composer. He wrote a piece for choir and two soloists, and I’m one of the soloists. Then New York to play with the X-ecutioners, do something with Zorn, rehearse the Peeping Tom band, two more gigs with Eye from Boredoms and Makigami Koichi. It’s like a vocal summit, hehehe! Then I go to Canada, do a bunch of shit there at a jazz festival, three projects, I think, in three days! Then I go back to New York to do the TV show.

“Then,” he says, finally, “Home.”

Mike Patton, ladies and gentlemen. The hardest-working man in showbusiness.

mike patton

plan b | 63
Embrace the darkness with **Black Lips**: garage-punk perverts and true Southern gents
Black Lips are total white trash. Pissing onstage, singing songs with titles such as ‘Everybody Loves A Cock sucker’ – they’re sure to offend even the most liberal supporters of the arts. At the same time, Black Lips are complete gentlemen, all charm and good looks like kings these days. But still, the hallmarks of paradoxes, contradictions and sheer unexplainables, which make rock music exciting, dangerous, unpredictable – and all those things it has always promised which it could.

Cole is a dead ringer for Paul McCartney on the telepathic-but-remote Robert Plant. He has a push-broom mustache and an enduring dark helmet of hair. Onstage, he’s like a child imitating Jimi Hendrix. He has mastered all the parlour tricks: playing with his teeth; pushing the microphone stand forward with his feet; bending at the knees; and extending the guitar like an oversized phallus as it screams out fuzz from the urethra of its pick-ups.

Jared is the cutest of the bunch (they all have those faces you just wanna make out with). Bred from a long line of prominent Southern preachers – Tammy Faye Baker used to babysit him – he was the main objector to the working title for Let It Bloom, which was to be the appropriation of Lester Bangs’ claim to be “the last of the white niggers”. Giving the album that title pretty much meant he would never be able to talk to his family again. They were big supporters of the Civil Rights movement in the American South – if you’re adventurous, search out recordings by The Svelly Family, a country/gospel-style act they attended in the Sixties and Seventies that Jared describes as “not half bad”.

Ian is the missing link. As the band’s fourth guitarist, it’s clear he’s the one who should have been there all along. He’s the Brian Jones in the rock solid Mick/Keith-style line-up of Cole and Jared. He’s arguably also the most skilled musician of the bunch (arguably, because Joe is a classically trained pianist, but I get the feeling he likes to stay behind the drums just for the challenge).

Ian joined the band the day before the start of a tour they spent opening for Sky Saxon and The Seeds. Cole taught him most of the songs in the back of the van. “This song is E, D, A,” Cole would say. And then: “This song is a little different – it’s E, A, D.” All Ian could say to himself was: “These guys are fucking brilliant.”

Ian is also known for the removable gold caps (or ‘grill’) he puts over his teeth. It’s such a confusing metal object in Southern garage rock and screwed Southern hip hop that I can’t help but be enamored by the audacity and absurdity of it. Oh yeah – and he supposedly bought the grill with aid money he received after Hurricane Katrina.

But, before Ian can get up in arms, I hear one of the Lips’ latest compositions, ‘Katrina’, the entire lyrical of which are as follows: “Oh, Katrina, why you gotta be mean?/You stole my heart way down in ole hillbilly country, à la Buck Owens, or an obscure Carl Perkins B-side on Sun. And on a disarmingly brilliant cover of the Jacques Dutronc song ‘Hippie Hippie Hooray’, the decidedly austerely arrangement proves that these degenerates can transform a song and turn it into their own. And don’t forget the crowd favourite ‘Dirty Hands’, a Spector-ish romp that apes The Beatles and asks – in a tone bordering on sheer dumbfounded – “Do you really want to hold my dirty hands?”

**mak out city**

Their most recent tour ends with an unexpected spot opening for Yeah Yeah Yeahs in the suburban of Royal Oak. The Lips boys are beyond excited, and Cole’s take on the situation is simply: “I’m viewing this show purely as a publicity stunt.”

Black Lips hop onstage half an hour after the doors open and are facing a fairly empty room (the capacity is roughly 4,500) of a couple of hundred Day-Glo clad suburban Karen O wannabes squished up to the front barrier, plaintively waiting for Yeahs. It is still the biggest crowd they’ve ever faced.

What those hipster teenagers get is 20 minutes of pure distilled brilliance.

The Lips cut any deadweight from the set. Surprisingly, all three of the YYYs are sitting stage right and fully taking in the spectacle. Ending the set with the quintessential Black Lips song, ‘Freakout’, Ian lights a pack of Black Cats as they dangle from his mouth, to looks of pure horror from the unexpecting teens. He spits up some blood and then crosses the stage to lock tongues with Cole.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Cole made the mistake of covering his dick with Gak – part Silly Putty, part calf liver**

This homophobe-baiting seems to draw the most ire from the crowd. And, like that, the show is over. In a show of irony, self-deprecation, giving the finger, or whatever you want call it, the Lips boys venture out back onstage with white towels around their necks, holding one another’s hands. And they bow. The classic arena rock goodbye.

YYWs are blown away, dispensing hugs and praise. But their tour manager and assorted higher-ups from the venue are none too pleased. Black Lips are immediately kicked out of the club, their gear loaded outside by the union grunts. The tour manager lectures the guys (“What made you think you could do this? You ever ask permission? Heard of ‘consent’?”), to which they just shrug their shoulders in a Dennis The Menace ‘sorry, mister’ sort of way. But they mean no apology.

The band sneak back into the club (by lying to security and saying they were Blood On The Wall, the other opening band), and are able to witness Karen O wearing a Black Lips sticker on her chest during the entire YYYs performance. These boys are content; everything was worthwhile.

So Black Lips again found themselves in front of a room of teenagers, but their performance was the complete polar opposite of the one before, in the San Francisco apartment. And yet it worked; Black Lips made sense. In their world, this is something to behold. Black Lips have learned both to transcend and to embrace their contradictions. It is now time for everyone else to transcend their own reservations and embrace Black Lips.
hush little baby

Words: Gracelette
Photography: Grant Peden

Jana Hunter
Zo Caffe, Bologna

Jana Hunter is this little Texan woman with mousy brown hair. She’s wearing unhip nerdy glasses, a pink cardigan, baggy trousers, and wielding a bigass, lowslung electric guitar. She looks like the kind of girl who’d hang out with you on dusty kerbs, who’d never feel obligated by crap ideas of femininity to scream at spiders, and who’d never play dumb so the boys would like her. Proper. Dude. She’s probably in her twenties, like me, but I still want to ask her to be my mum. Somebody’s mum. She looks dead capable, like she’d make a good mum if she’s not one already.

She steps up to the mic, starts to sing. Her voice is lowdown and jazzy and gutsy and direct. She’s got a thick Southern accent and, call it folk, country, or blues, she’s hailing from a genre in which strong women with hidden vulnerabilities deal with whatever gutpunches life throws at ’em then sing the pain away. It’s hard to make out any distinct words as she lingers over the syllables, drawing them out with summertime laziness before lurching up to the next note. But I don’t need to know what words she’s singing, just like I didn’t need to know, way back before I could talk, that my mum was singing about scarlet ribbons and the white cliffs of Dover. And I find myself thinking not just of my mum, but mums and babies in general and what exactly was going on when they sang to us.

Because lullabies are meant to soothe you to sleep, but there’s something terrifying and disorientating about being forced to remember the vulnerability of being too young to understand the words. It’s this vulnerability that Jana pushes onto us by singing as though she’s the only one in this crowded room capable of understanding the lyrics, allowing her voice to lurch and list through the words like an unmanned ship, distorting their sense. Maybe it felt scary for my mum too when she sang to me, unable to communicate verbally with the crying thing in her arms.

But Jana doesn’t sound scared, she sounds strong as she sings “my pain is fantastic” (the lyrics sheet says it’s really her ‘aim’). The strength, too, is equal parts comforting and disturbing. There’s the comfort of the lullaby, the way that singing voices reassured us in our earliest moments. But there’s darkness too. There’s a lack of sentimentality in Jana’s voice. Even as I want her voice to hold me, I can hear, in its strength and simplicity, the other side of motherness, the kind of flat-eared pragmatism that eats its young. She doesn’t try to hide it. Why would she? That pragmatism is the unspoken threat at the heart of every lullaby: what might happen if you don’t go to sleep?

At times, she reminds me of Tracy Chapman in ‘Behind The Wall’, singing about hearing a neighbour getting beaten up by her husband and the silence that follows. The lyrics sheet suggests she wouldn’t stand for such things (“I’ll carry your backbone round in my pants”), but her voice is filled with similarly domestic kinds of emotion, whether mourning a family death, or crying after violence, or laughing with your friends around the kitchen table because what else can you do? And what’s really disturbing is quite how close to these things a lullaby can sound. So maybe that’s why she sings: “This cradle is a tomb, an everlasting sense of doom. My mamma’s in her room. She’s dead; she died too soon.”

But then there are the crescendos. They’re great stonking things of defiant enjoyment, selfish and unrestrained, that perfectly balance the lullaby moments by reminding you that even mums have a right to a life outside of looking after you. She deploys noise and silence with such grace. Not since Low live in 2004 and High On Fire on Blessed Black Wings in 2006 have I heard musicians listening this hard to themselves and throwing that experience back on their audience. And, sure, I’ll compare a Texan singer songwriter, whose Blank Unstaring Heirs Of Doom album will be the first release on Devendra Banhart’s new label, to a lo-fi indie rock trio and the best metal band I’ve ever heard in recent years because that understanding of noise and silence transcends genre.

Yet Jana is of her genre, and it’s shot through with domesticity. As she dances with awkward jerky movements, handicaps her way through an unaccompanied refrain about laughing and crying being the same thing, then crouches down low on the ground, she seems to perform without awareness of an audience, setting her music firmly within the context of the home.

So when Jana crescendos, voice rising and falling, guitar building to a full-on vamping noise before dropping away, leaving only the hum of conversation from the café next door, she doesn’t sound like somebody’s mother or wife or daughter. She just sounds like those moments when you’re singing alone in your bedroom, then you pause, hear only the neighbour’s TV set through the walls, and realise just how loud you’ve been singing, before smiling inside and starting back up to drown them out again.
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Fire, the resultant attendees get dubbed
Despite the venue’s fervent advertising that
plan
A musical semaphore
to the stars

you’ve got a glow
Words: Nicola Meighan
Photography: Bryony McIntyre
Maher Shalal Hash Baz/Kama Aina/Tenniscoats/Kazumi Nikaidoh/Bill Wells
Tolbooth Jail, Stirling
She sings just like trumpets and birdsong and
stars. She skips like a rabbit, she yodels, she laughs.
She uses her voice-box to tune her guitar. She twirls
her arms into the sky like a halo. She’s Kazumi
Nikaidoh, and soon we will love her.
“I image Scotland,” opens the Japanese folk
pop gem in broken English, killer-cute: “road,
You understand?”
And like Björk, Bob Marley, Scout Niblett, a
brass band, she comes alive; oversized guitar in
hand; allures in the universal language of ‘lah-lahs’:
sings like a squeaking wheel, dives like a bird of
prey; flushes the world in wide-eyed awe.
Later, when local hero and show curator
Bill Wells leads an all-star adventure through
cuckoos and hiccups and fireworks and cries,
Nikaidoh unravels astral jazz through her arms –
a musical semaphore to the stars. We understand.
We too comprehend that r’n’b is best expressed
on a banjo – thanks to tropical one-man band
Kama Aina (alias Takaji Aoyagi). His whistling
calypso and Hawaiian jazz-pop and wiggled-out
banjo blues are embellished with heartfelt kazoo.
Joined on percussion by a shambling angel and a
moody Eskimo (it’s suspected Tenniscoats
may be snuggled within), Aoyagi untangles his charms.
Said Tenniscoats soon shrug out of their parkas
and into a delicate, spellbinding showpiece: Saya
in pinafore, stark by a piano, keeps the beat with
her bare feet, her voice like gauze. Takashi Ueno
tickles a silvery guitar, and together they sculpture
barren, psychedelic psalms. Wells and his sonic
companions side up to join in under big, heroic piano
washes. They play bottles of water, cups of tea,
dinner bells. Nikaidoh circles, plummets and flies:
- wired to the music, wired to the sky.
The collaborative spirit further thrives as
Japanese folk-punks Maher Shalal Hash Baz
commandeer centre stage: they’re unexpectedly
austere tonight; and they’re all the more potent,
and imposing, for it. Reiko Kudo’s vocals are
exquisite – as keen and as glimmering as a new pin
while partner Tori’s exuberant prowess on every
instrument known to man is formidable: theirs is
a mercurial musical hoopla. Katrina Pastel enrolls
for percussive duties; various Mahers, Tenniscoats
and others pull out harmoniums, oboes, and
bongos. The Kudos’ son Namio joins in also,
grinning as he slowly rolls a giant beach-ball drum
with furry pompoms. Reiko pulls on a melodica –
as if for breath – the music a lifetime. We live it.

“Man! Lion! Bull! Eagle! Love! Justice! Power!
Wisdom!” Tori spits and commands, before
regaling us with ‘The Last Ornette’, and some
typically, brilliantly, unvarnished banter: “Ornette
Coleman is nearly 80 years old. He came to Japan.
I saw him.” Nikaidoh indulges in a nifty bit of
mimicry with a trumpet: her confounding vocals
a cut glass mirror for its every squeak, and
scrape, and peal.

And everyone winds up on stage together,
and the room is a farmyard, a playpen, a film-set.
Chords whirl around toy snares, tom-toms, raga;
dumping bongos and pumpkin banjos;
Appalachian dulcimers and day-glo saxophones.
They fall into a finale of sublime lullabies, and
cinematic serenades, and a refrain that echoes
‘Michael, Row the Boat Ashore’. Hallelujah.

Bell Orchestre
The Magic Bag, Ferndale
Despite the venue’s fervent advertising that
Bell Orchestre features members of Arcade Fire, the resultant attendees get dubbed
by the Montreal quintet as the “smallest
crowd we’ve had in six years.” That’s
Detroit for you, not wishing to cross the
8 Mile divide and relinquish the dark for
the halfway swanky atmosphere of The
Magic Bag. The band performs decked out
in immaculate matching white uniforms,
housing two randomly placed points of
light underneath. Beyond this superfluous
otherworldly intimation, the group
humanises their nearly vocal-free set through
the aesthetic that everything has percussive
potential – upright bass, violin, even
the French horn beats a tribal rhythm
that’s from nowhere but the terra firma –
while undercutting post-rock pretension.
It’s easy to revel in the short-lived dwelling
glockenspiel interlude, the theatricality of
typewriter percussion and the brass section’s
unamplified call-and-response stroll through the
crowd. Even the final bow in union
manages a genuine affection towards the
audience not found in most instrumental
music’s more cerebral continuance. It’s all
the more fitting then that, with 12 points of
light between them, the group chooses
to centre them primarily around the
hearth, staying far south of the mind.
Aaron Shaul

Bellowhead
Blackheath Halls, London
Some jobsworth tells us we can’t enter
“because the concert has started and the hall
is full.” As my companion tries to reason with
her, I dash for the other entrance and duck in,
losing myself in the crowd, which is only a
few people, standing awkwardly by the door
while most sit politely round tables like a
dinner theatre. Now this is weird.
I grew up going to folk festivals with my
father, and they were raucous, rambunctious
affairs. People pounded on tables, stomped
their feet, sung harmony along with the
choruses. Not like this lot, staring at the band
like a museum piece preserved in aspic.
There’s a reason there’s been such a revival
of folk recently. It’s not just because people in
to a transient society want to reconnect with
their roots, looking for tradition in a world
where families, communities flutter
in the wind of progress. It’s because folk
music is utterly participatory, a shared and
egalitarian experience in a world where our
songs, our stories, our heroes and villains are
manufactured and owned by corporations.
Bellowhead are something of an English folk
group, a 11-strong throng of
fiddlers and pipers and even tuba players,
fronted by the impressively charismatic John
Spiers and Jon Boden, playing traditional
music in untraditional arrangements. It’s
heady stuff, stories of gin riots, rambling
sailors and dodging the hangman – proper
folk music has a higher body count than gangster rap. (Note to any fair maidens: if you find yourself in a Bellowhead song, DO NOT venture out upon the very first morning of May, or BAD THINGS will happen.)

We push our way to the front and stomp a mad jig around the reverently cleared dancefloor. The spell is broken; people dance and shout and sing. Folk was the music of dancefloor. The spell is broken; people dance a mad jig around the reverently cleared place called the Bongo Club, in a Scotland that’s far, far away from David Berman’s dear Tennessee. Instead I watch long-limbed Berman and his band burst into loud, noisy, b-b-beautiful country rock. “In 1984,” he drawls, “I was hospitalised for approaching perfection.”

We hoot and we holler; the band booms and it shines; Berman grins like a man who’s just figured out how to skateboard. Hair blooms from his face like a garden finally healthy. And all about us: the clang clang clang of life.

Whodathunkit? Who would have expected this band, a band of poetry, dust and depression, to be so clean and so dazzling? While there’s a muddiness to ‘Pet Politics’ and ‘Dallas’, elsewhere his words leap from page and mouth, zigzagging distortion and a microphone in hand. “Sometimes a pony gets depressed!” he yells. Our organs jump in our bodies. They play a Walt Whitman poem turned into song – “Oh heart! heart! heart!”

And he does look at Cassie, he does, but then he turns back to us and a smile again catches the corner of his mouth, and we cheer, and even when I don’t know the words, there are magnolias blooming in the shadows and guitar-guitar-guitar-keeps-bass-drums in my ears. There is life pouring from everywhere.

But it’s not an ecstasy. We’re not losing ourselves in the crowd – eyes rolling back in our heads as we cheer. No. I watch the earring on Berman’s ear, like a tattoo brought back from sea. I watch the way Cassie looks at David, sometimes, when he doesn’t look back. I watch the way he glares at his monitor or stumbles over a lyric.

And I feel a mortal kind of joy – the stuff of human beings and human lives. The sterling wonder of a gift that’s made by fallible human hands, by creatures with hearts more silver than gold.

fiona fletcher

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When David Berman comes on stage for what is perhaps his group’s 18th ever live performance, something sparkles on the skin around his eyes. His wife chased him to his dealer’s, to an upscale hotel, and then finally brought him to hospital. And the second, well that’s a smaller, bigger story, it’s about the love between David and Cassie.

A dear friend told me of a recent Silver Jews performance she had seen, Berman singing with his love and beside his love and looking over to his love for reassurance. Their love: that’s the second story I heard.

But tonight I try not to think of these stories. I try not to impart too much subtext to a gig in a place called the Bongo Club, in a Scotland that’s far, far away from David Berman’s dear Tennessee. Instead I watch long-limbed Berman and his band burst into loud, noisy, b-b-beautiful country rock.

I’ve been hearing stories about the Silver Jews. Two, really. The first concerns Berman’s attempted suicide, three years ago. That he left a scrap of a goodbye note, put on his wedding suit, then medicated and medicated and medicated as he took a shower and made his bed. That Cassie, with a bass guitar taller than I am. She figures out how to skateboard. Hair blooms over a lyric.

Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy

The recent flurry of activity in the Will Oldham camp (live album, guest spots with Sage Francis and Björk, a partnership with Matt Sweeney) reveals the emergence of a social butterfly from a solipsistic cocoon. Tonight he is here with a full Scottish folk band, merging New World and Old – a geographical ping-pong game between Appalachian country and tavern-born highland dance music. Oldham’s voice drips sweet warm honey, the hall swarms, and, with a thrust of the hips and a stomp of the boot, we’re off. Already showing a talent for reinterpretation on Sings Greatest Palace Music, Oldham takes some of his best-known music and arranges it in awesome Celtic splendour.

Cannanes

I don’t know any fabulously charming novelists, but I know Frances Gibson and tonight she owns the stage with her divine presence, her jokes and the way she locks eyes with everyone in attendance. The Cannanes dole out a masterful, horn-kissed psychic rhythm. The melancholy yet uplifting tremor in Fran’s voice, the pale hues from Stephen’s fading guitar chord, and the life-affirming toot of Penny’s horn. The beer here is served flat, in contrast to the Cannanes’ set, which is bubbly, and buoyed by drummer Bon’s jazzbo beats and jangling guitars. A tambourine appears in my hand, at which point I leap on stage like an errant spark from everywhere.

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live

A gruesome mouth stretched open by twin microphones

The Fiery Furnaces
Concorde 2, Brighton

I went to the beach before the gig, all last of evening sun, sea-glitter and gull-squawk. It made me think. I guess it was my misfortune to see a band I prize so highly for their freestylin' whimsicality during a tour in which the gimmick is: no gimmicks. Garage Prog. The New York duo’s musicianship and intensity is relentlessly waspish, but it makes me wish for one of their detours, or just some respite – all their kisses have been sharpened, unsentimentally brief. Already the ringing in the ears has begun.

Hototogisu are unlikely to soothe those ears. Their pitted wall of (mostly) trebly ringing, produced by guitars either mammaged with fists or wriggled with bottleneck slides, is not an easy listening affair. These guitars, humming and juddering with everything Matt Bower (forceful, almost brutish) and Marcia Bassett (spleenetic, bottleneck) inflict on them, make a truly horrifying sound. It’s a great, horrible sound. It feels like sheet lightning.

Zurich-based duo Runzelstirn & Gurgelstock follow. A gruesome creature, its mouth stretched open by twin microphones wedged right in there, creeps on stage in a black dress-cum-smock. You can hear every breath, every grunt from this thing’s mouth. At the end of each arm is a long cord. A pig-faced humanoid strolls up, a small Roland amp on its shoulder. It wanders into the audience, presses a button. The onstage creature presses one of the buttons on either arm, and an awful burst of very sudden, very ghastly sound rips through the room. This continues, the pig singling out members of the audience for its attention and the creature onstage responding, setting off another flurry of binaural shrieking. Or barking. Or something equally painful-sounding. This exercise in tension, full of pregnant pauses, is very simple but totally unsettling.

So, Smegma. A merry band of frankly weird-looking old dudes and a dudette from Portland, Oregon set up behind a bunch of odd-looking equipment. One guy is playing an elastic band which sounds, in his hands, like a squealing tenor sax. In the middle a big bearded, looking old dudes and a dudette from Portland, Oregon set up behind a bunch of odd-looking equipment. One guy is playing an elastic band which sounds, in his hands, like a squealing tenor sax. In the middle – he seems pensive, listening. It ends quickly, uneventfully.

Word to the Furnaces: sometimes I live in a town with a metaphorical beach, you get me? I had a good time, I do still love you. Just – don’t go normal on me, OK?

kicking_k

Foreign Beggars
Beach Club, Brighton

Foreign Beggars are in town to celebrate the completion of second album Stray Point. A chance to play a few new things, a few classics, some favourite routines (Schlomo’s beatboxed Big Pimpin’), right? Well, yeah, but it’s also a chance to indulge their pent-up heavy rock fantasies. Thus it ends, with Orifice, in the air, jumping around like an agitated kangaroo to old Rage Against The Machine records.

It starts in much the same way, minus RATM. Orifice, Metropolis and No Names run on, Orifice pausing to put down his bottle of Jack Daniels before unleashing Phase One of the battle plan: an adrenalinised performance of favourites from a relentless ‘Frosted Perspecks’ to a disturbingly hysterical scream through ‘Glacial (Motorhead Remix)’, sick invalids and all. But where the standards devastate with fresh steroidal bulge, the more recent tunes barely need enhancements: they’re built to rock. It’s after "Slow Broiled Ilk", which collapses into Dead Prez, which collapses into shout-outs for Sepultura, Pantera and Napalm Death, that we get the evening’s key admission. Gasping for breath, Orifice tells the crowd ‘this isn’t hip hop anymore’ and though you know he’s kidding himself, there’s a grain of truth in there.

Ringo P Stacey

Golgotha shakin’ going on
Words: Dan Bolger
Photography: Joe Blanchard

Smegma/Runzelstirn & Gurgelstock/Hototogisu/Deepkiss 720 Bardsen Boudoir, London

Some people like to go out on Mondays, particularly for an event as special as, say, a live show from Smegma. “Smegma?” you say? Well, for the sort of people who like to go out on Mondays, Smegma are very special indeed.

First, though, Brighton’s Jason Williams, playing as Deepkiss 720, is attending to a tall, one-stringed homemade instrument (the string fairly flaps from side to side as it feeds back) and a whirring handheld toy on a sound-reactive surface. He then introduces a guitarist equipped with effects pedals. The dudette is reading record labels, making burbling noises. There’s a rigid-fisted drummer, occasionally switching to trombone or effects pedals. The dudette is reading record labels with a torch (she’s wearing sunglasses) and playing stuck grooves on the deck in front of her.

Occasionally she squeezes a skull-shaped dog toy into the mic. Finally, a charming-looking wastoid is ring-modulating a bugle and slide guitar. Together they create a joyous, lol-cacophony of whistles and chirrups until the guitarist morphs into King Riff and the band launch into a strange lurching beast of rock, permeated still by bubbles and burps and boings. Then they swing back into a treacly wall of sound. At the end they are joined by Runzelstirn & Gurgelstock (now dressed down as real humans) for the encore, a staccato burst of full-throttle Smegma punctuated by the call “Happy Holidays!” It’s fun. People laugh.

There really aren’t any other bands that are as inventive and funny, bands that will really lift a Monday evening like this one.

The New York duo’s musicianship and intensity is relentlessly waspish, but it makes me wish for one of their detours, or just some respite – all their kisses have been sharpened, unsentimentally brief. Already the ringing in the ears has begun.

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Beach Club, Brighton

Foreign Beggars are in town to celebrate the completion of second album Stray Point. A chance to play a few new things, a few classics, some favourite routines (Schlomo’s beatboxed Big Pimpin’), right? Well, yeah, but it’s also a chance to indulge their pent-up heavy rock fantasies. Thus it ends, with Orifice, in the air, jumping around like an agitated kangaroo to old Rage Against The Machine records.

It starts in much the same way, minus RATM. Orifice, Metropolis and No Names run on, Orifice pausing to put down his bottle of Jack Daniels before unleashing Phase One of the battle plan: an adrenalinised performance of favourites from a relentless ‘Frosted Perspecks’ to a disturbingly hysterical scream through ‘Glacial (Motorhead Remix)’, sick invalids and all.

But where the standards devastate with fresh steroidal bulge, the more recent tunes barely need enhancements: they’re built to rock. It’s after ‘Slow Broiled Ilk’, which collapses into Dead Prez, which collapses into shout-outs for Sepultura, Pantera and Napalm Death, that we get the evening’s key admission. Gasping for breath, Orifice tells the crowd ‘this isn’t hip hop anymore’ and though you know he’s kidding himself, there’s a grain of truth in there.

Ringo P Stacey
felt tip fragments

Words: Miranda l ossifidis
Photography: Simon Fernandez

Magik Markers
The Luminaire, London
“...You know when you’re with a guy and you’re all excited and then it’s like... oh. It’s OK... It happens to everyone.”

The Magik Markers didn’t get to soundcheck, and now things aren’t working: leads are broken, guitars are broken, they are broken. They start and then they stop. It’s not intentional and it teases us and it catches us. It’s uncomfortable to watch: Elisa furiously tugging at cables, Leah gesturing beyond the crowd, Pete’s laptop precariously nestled on the edge of his tom. Elisa wanders around the stage carrying her borrowed guitar like a satchel in which she’s lost an important pen.

“You know some shows are good and others are bummer? This is going to be a bummer.”

Prove it. I didn’t say that, someone else did, someone at the back. I heckle with my retinas: “You know when you’re with a guy and you’re all excited and then it’s like... oh. It’s OK... It happens to everyone.”

“I first move. They’ve been best friends since they were nine; we’ve been best friends since we were 11. We talked about productivity. An hour later on the stage they transformed: Elisa’s eyes wildly roaming the room, an echoing guitar on her shoulder poised for attack, screaming: “Get off the Internet!’

Today it was different. I ask about that night - turns out we’d missed the second part of the dare: “Say it to my face.” An anonymous online self-publisher referred to the girls as pube twirlers so they named a tour after it. This fragment of a story was my version of them, and maybe I didn’t need to know the details. They never tell the same stories twice, and I believe them. When they share some of their other stories: pious nuns haunting bad girls and sailors drowning, I think of architect Cecil Balmond’s advice to those who build: I am the thread propelling a story.

Hearing these themes worded is akin to the act of being mesmerised by Elisa’s tangled hair: they are the silent, fetishised, aesthetic qualities of this Connecticut trio. It’s easy to slip into and focus on these states because they are so familiar, but without a distinct form the narrative wouldn’t work. Building layers of improvised noise implores narrative, but the sounds themselves are still more important. When they are onstage tonight, a toy shark becomes a plectrum. The bars lining the stage become a slide. A harmonica and max/msp experiments temper the drumbeats and a rhythmic drone forms a thick cloud, immersing the proceedings. We are locked in.

Elisa says before the show that they need their “pinkies looped together” behind their backs, otherwise it doesn’t work. This whole thing wouldn’t work if they weren’t so tightly bound. It’s volatile and messy and I won’t ever know the story: I’m only hearing the wails. But it is always as honest as it is open as it is compelling.

The Noisettes
Joseph’s Well, Leeds
With wild hair and war paint, the withing misfits before us are mesmerising: a drummer that looks like he was given hair instead of human DNA, a singer whose fluorescent forehead falls to cloud her piercing grin and a laconic bluesman on guitar. Singer Shingai Shoniwa batters and discards guitars with an abandon and disregard that doubles the drool descending from the lips of the 30-something voyeurs pressing their groins against the stage. The melodrama of songs like ‘Malice In Wonderland’, all cascading harmonies and teasing guitar, are not lost in this black box of a venue.

Hayley Avron
The Echo, Los Angeles

Los Angeles is cheek full of celebrities, spray-on tans and apparently, gabillions of drunken teenage Gravy Train!!! fans. What’s not to love? Girls are barfing in the parking lot by 5pm and getting kicked out of the line to get in for mooning busses loads of full people. I walk to the bar to get a drink and see fans for first time in a while. It’s aggressive in four minutes. Three hundred flashes are going off for the entire duration of our performance. Is it BEATLEMANIA or GRAVYMANIA?? During our last song, 50 kids jump on stage and get so psychotic that security have to escort Chunx OFF the stage! I pull a jacket over my head to hide like I am Michael Jackson dodging paprazzi. After the show someone peppersprays the venue and even though everyone is choking, the kids are still trying to buy things.

Hunx

Chop Suey, Seattle

The last time we were in Seattle two years ago, no one came to our show because the paper listed the wrong time and declared that there was some “rap battle” between us and FannyPack and that they were the “winners”. WELL GUESS WHAT SEATTLE? We returned, we proved you wrong and we turned you OUT!

We gracered our stage wearing matching gold satin jackets. We held a walk-off between audience members and gave prizes to the hams that could do the best Kurt Cobain and Jesus impersonations. But most importantly, we ensured that we are forever blacklisted from the venue by allegedly showing the entire length of a microphone up our collective shitty ass! The club contacted us early the next morning requesting payment for a replacement null a.jacket was big, but not that big! Speaking of Junx, the after-show frenzy caused us to forget who had the money. Just when we were getting paranoid, who comes running up to the van, straight from a back-alley quickie, stumbling and pulling up his pants? Why, it’s Junx! And like magic, he pulls our payment (but alas, not the missing microphone), from somewhere deep in his underwear. Funx sprayed it with a little disinfectant and we were good to go!

Chunx


The Cockpit, Leeds

A trumpet plays like we’re watching the bodies of soldiers being unloaded from a DC10, draped in the colours of their country. A mandolin shivers, a bass pulses. There’s smoke in the air, black threads around wrists, odd slogans on T-shirts. What light there is catches on thick-rimmed black glasses, and the 70 bodies in a half-empty hall stare up at the six on stage. You wouldn’t look twice at these Austin musicians if they were down here. Singer Will Sheff murmurs, “Some nights I thirst for real bloodfor real knives/for real cries.”

And then guitars crash, and bounce, and, in the space of a single line, Sheff is howling

Ockervil River

The Luminaire, London

What do you look for in your noise? Catharsis? Transcendence? An excuse to toss a beer? I’m not a bad man – promise – but I want aggression, and tonight, Prurient brings my neck. Back to the audience, the leather-clad fist clamped round microphone, Dominic Fernow flails at the speaker, once, twice, three times; body reeling in a sound tunnel of shrill tinnitus scree.

It’s aggressive music, but this Wisconsin-based musician plays victim, not aggressor, engaged in a public ritual of self-sacrifice.

“The Bright Eyes of noise”, perhaps – but I like him more than that.

Ben Hoyle

Prurient/Consumer Electronics

What is the magic of Daniel Johnston means something different to everyone. For 20 or so years in the countercultural consciousness, his songs (and his art) are, like all good pop, ciphers, conduits, vehicles: things way bigger than themselves.

And this is where the magic is all his, behind a piano and angry-voiced. The song’s called ‘Without You’; its subject is unnamed, but Johnston sees them off: “Without you,” he states, “I’ll be all right.” Go Daniel! And then – leaning into the mic – he shrieks “And now I’m free – to watch you DIE!” It is both the best moment of the evening, and the worst. Because the hatred in the song is all out of joint, and the fear is all too much, and the jaunty, slyly piano is all he’s got to defend himself with, and what are we going to do about it, except watch, listen, and maybe buy something later?

I wonder how it feels to have a tribute to you while you’re still alive. Does it make you feel dead, like when Johnston posed with a fake gravestone on 2004’s album of cover versions of his songs. Does it make you feel more alive, more loved, or more alone? “Thank you… Sorry…” he says, and strides off with the same too-fast, too-focused walk with which he arrived.

Frances May Morgan

Daniel Johnston

The Barbican, London

“THE H-BOMB WAS REALLY DANIEL JOHNSTON!” says the felt-tip pen caption on the projector screen. Jason Pierce sits below the screen. He has his eyes shut. He sings of Jeeee-sus and the devil. Three gospel singers and a string quartet consider his tastefully pained voice and acoustic guitar. Poor Jason. He has suffered, like Jesus, and like Daniel Johnston. But his vulnerability is seductive and self-absorbed, prettified and passionless; the kind that knows its power to attract sympathy and intimacy. It is not the kind that – chainsmoking and overweight and tracksuited and high-prettified and passionless; the kind that knows its power to

It’s aggressive music, but this Wisconsin-based musician plays victim, not aggressor, engaged in a public ritual of self-sacrifice.

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NOTHING MORE TO SAY
Matmos
The Rose Has Teeth In The Mouth
Of A Beast (Matador)

Burning flesh, semen and a cow’s vagina aren’t commonly used as musical instruments. Nor is it a regular occurrence for dried roses, false teeth, manure, cows and geese to be employed as a backing to Björk (among others) reciting excerpts from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations. But Matmos, who in more ways than one are a pop theorist’s wet dream, are as conceptual as they come, and their latest album interprets the lives of 10 of the duo’s favourite historical personae through characteristically unlikely sound collage.

So, for example, NY house hero Larry Levan is represented by a rump-shaking house track brimful with the noises of steam and sequins; excerpts from Andy Warhol’s would-be assassin Valerie Solanas’ The SCUM Manifesto are read over an abrasive mix of booty bass featuring knives, scissors, bovine genitalia and a rape alarm; King Ludwig II of Bavaria is given a suitably decadent, jubilant and mad-sounding soundtrack; while, for suspense writer Patricia Highsmith’s tribute (a moody masterpiece), lasers connected to her favourite animals: snails.

Some of the tracks are clever evocations of their subjects (as with the creepy surfadelica of ‘Solo Buttons For Joe Meek’); others are deliberately twisted snapshots of barely significant moments from their lives; but all of them sound like they were fun to make (apart from the burning flesh part, obviously – Matmos have an extreme tendency to involve their own bodies in the sound-making process, and on ‘Germs Burn For Darby Crash’, a tribute to the self-destructive singer of LA punk band The Germs, Drew Daniel apparently had The Germs’ Don Bolles stub a cigarette out on his – Drew’s – skin).

MC Schmidt and Drew Daniel make much of the incongruity between the sounds and their sources, between what you hear and what it was produced by; this makes for entertaining reading after you’ve listened to the record, and leads to some incredulous reactions. For example, could the gloriously demented, distorted lounge music of ‘Public Sex For Boyd McDonald’ really contain "recordings of anonymous sex acts made surreptitiously at Blow Buddies in San Francisco during International Bear Weekend"? I can’t hear them. And how do you provoke semen to make a noise, anyway?

But in the past, this sound/source dichotomy has also been Matmos’ undoing – if full appreciation of the record lies in examining the liner notes, and the CD on its own sounds like a dated post-glitchcore laptop yawmation, why bother even listening to it? Conceptual music without aural appeal is like Alphabetti Spaghetti drained of its tomato sauce.

Which makes it a blessed relief that the music on The Rose…is actually very good. Not groundbreaking. But very likeable, in a curiously easy-listening kind of way. ‘Semen Song For James Bidgood’, dedicated to the cult filmmaker and photographer, sets cut-up murmurings from Antony out of the Jonathons against a string quartet playing great suspense-film fare to sumptuous effect. ‘Germs Burn For Darby Crash’ distorts recordings of self-harm and pain into abrasive beats and comes off sounding like a weightless, transcendent techno rave on board Concorde.

But the highlight is doubtless ‘Rag For William S Burroughs’, a 14-minute tour de force that starts with hallucinatory, ambient, ragtime piano, curtailed by a drawn-out gunshot, after which the insistent, malevolent hammering of typewriters gradually builds into full-on psychedelic, hypnotic, tribal trance music.

It’s all very satisfying…unless, that is, you listen to it late at night, in the dark, at which point the harmless little samples that make up these well-thought-out audio mini-ographies somehow amplify themselves tenfold and sound like the scariest, most unsettling noises you’ve ever encountered, and the record as a whole seems to conspire to remove any hope of getting to sleep.
life through a lens
Words: Frances May Morgan
Illustration: Lindsay Wright

Walker remains the master cinematographer of fate, loneliness and death

Scott Walker
The Drift (4AD)
It has become such a cliché to call a record ‘cinematic’ or like ‘a soundtrack to an imaginary film’ that most writers have, thankfully, stopped doing it. The description came to mean anything with a swooping, string-led, Nor-lish melancholy; with even the vaguest echoes of Morricone or Bernard Hermann. It allowed no distinction for records that really did apply a filmmaker’s vocabulary to their construction, and prompted no discussion of what it was that differentiated the truly cinematic record from the synergic potential carried in all music.

Scott Walker – whose most recent recording before this was in fact a soundtrack for a film, Pola X – has made music-as-cinema since the mid-Sixties. He has done so in ever-darkening spirals: from the picaresque characters, eyelinered existentialism and lonely lost loves of his first two solo albums, to the political/symbolic flourishes (and even lonelier lost loves) of the next two, and so on, deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper... If you still accept Walker’s notion of coherence, as long as you accept Walker’s notion of coherence – as long as you hear it, which I’d argue that you can.

For one thing, The Drift is anchored by a Walker speciality: a beautifully arranged string section. Credits are given to screaming children, donkeys, punched meat and feet on stairs; the drums on opener ‘Cossacks Are’ cantor like Liars; and closer ‘A Lover Loves’ relies on just a four-note acoustic guitar pattern. But the strings are the waves on which the abstractions of songs like ‘Cue’ rest like weird-shaped craft, and they provide the album’s overall oceanic, nightmarish texture.

For another, the placing of every sound is so considered, so storyboarded, that you feel the album’s premise as a whole even if you can’t articulate what that whole is. You can bask in its immediate musical effect without diving into Walker’s wordplay. Subject matter is as diverse, dark and gothic as ever, hymning war, death, ghosts, birds, blood, bones, donkeys, shells, teeth, torture, sex, god – but it’s as woven into the timbre of his fatalistic, detached voice as it’s articulated in lyrics.

That said, I still find myself returning to the most literal track. ‘Clara’ is about Mussolini’s mistress, Claretta Petacci, who was executed alongside him in 1945. Walker casts her as yet another of his fallen women, romanticises a Fascist love affair and gory death – but he does so with such an eye and an ear for the human heart of a historical event. The song is both lush and warlike; buzzing strings hover and wail like fighter planes and air-raid sirens, then swell into voluptuous, doomed chords. But cutting through the mise-en-scène is Walker’s voice (and that of a female singer, ‘playing’ Claretta, who sings over the literal track). The song is both lush and warlike; buzzing strings hover and wail like fighter planes and air-raid sirens, then swell into voluptuous, doomed chords. But cutting through the mise-en-scène is Walker’s voice (and that of a female singer, ‘playing’ Claretta, who sings over the sound of meat being punched and slapped), intoning a stark, minimal tune, coolly photographing the characters with an eye both horrified and sympathetic.

Even at his most elliptical, Walker remains the master cinematographer of fate, loneliness and death. On The Drift, as always, he continues to frame that which we’d do anything to avoid within the most unlikely, baroque tableaux, knowing that we’ll be compelled to look it full in the face.

Acid Mothers Temple & The Cosmic Inferno
Starless And Bible Black Sabbath (Alien8)
Starless and Bible... takes the start of Black Sabbath and heretically summons the dark spirit that haunted the spaces between lommi’s cursed, shredded fingertips and Ozzy’s blank, bleating throat. It doesn’t take a note of Sabbath’s actual music, but steals all of its black soul.

Side one just takes a fragment of a riff, a slowed-down metal-on-metal cog-grid, and revolves it for 35 minutes while Makoto’s flailing electric witch of a Stratocaster rains starfire down on everything. In all the pantheism of Bad Sabbath vocalists – Gillen, Dio, Glenn Hughes, etc. – it never occurred to lommi to fill Ozzy’s void with the squalling spectre of Hendrix’s forever-flaming guitar.

This album banishes Sabbath into space; a place with no stars, just intermittent flashes of colour, spiderwebs and tunnels.

David McNamee

Alias & Tarsier
Brookland/Oaklyn (Anticon)
Horizontal wipe-cuts push back and forth against the screen in perpetuity, moments blurred at capture. Languid sounds drift, float, melt. The voice is one of beauty, not unlike a calm, thoughtful Björk. At first glance it’s all very nice. Early Massive Attack, Mo’ Wax circa 1996 and the aforementioned dancer in the dark are the most obvious points of reference on a surface level. It’s not that if you dig beneath you’ll discover untold riches, but Anticon continue to stretch their considerable charms and ideas in directions that could hardly be expected. So, reactionary trip hop? Hardly. Just good, smoky music for times when you really miss that sort of thing.

Stewart Gardiner

Anti-Flag
For Blood & Empire (Columbia)
Once upon a time, an emo-boy peed all over my punk bonfire with his heartbroken Incubus-driven lyrics. Said boy also opened my ears to these Pennsylvanian punks. Our band might have never made it past the town hall, but this one’s now on a major label, rallying their politico-angst like never before. ‘This is the sound of a dropping bomb...’ go the screams-riot calls. The music is secondary to the lyrics, apart from that the fast thrash of drums pushes their anti-propaganda propaganda forward more raucously than the quiet protest of folk tambourine could. But oh, how a folk tambourine would be so much kinder on the ears. Now, I can’t listen to this at all.

Hannah Gregory

The Big Eyes Family Players Band
Do The Musking (Picked Egg)
As Big Eyes, the Leeds group have been melting their hearts into a slightly syrupy, slightly too-poiltie Dirty Three-lite for the past few years. The Big Eyes Family Players Band sees them extend their line-up – and, to a lesser degree, their musical remit – with the inclusion of like-minded souls, the most recognised (if underused) of which is Fence Collective-acolyte James Yorkston.

As a group, Big Eyes emphasise a love for organic and antique sounds that are slightly obvious but always very pretty. They’re in

80 | plan b
love with simplicity and the way a scrape of violin or cello against a brush of acoustic guitar can evoke flashes of woodland, or how a soft, undulating drone can rain on you by a pitter-patter of percussion denotes sky and safety. It’s comforting, warm, wooly jumper music.

Do The Musiking

Frank McNamee

Fast Man/Raider Man (Cooking Vinyl)

Black Francis is the banshee-voiced and fiery-hearted Pixie, while after ego Frank Black has shown a liking for country-tinged pop that slides and swills via Lou Reed and weary vignettes. On this double album – recorded, in part, in a 24-hour whirl of emotion – these personas collide, veer and flail through 27 tracks that range from spaced-out lippy (‘Dog Sleep’), to primocountry (‘Fare Thee Well’). As a result, we’ve been granted an insight into where Charles Michael Kitteridge Thompson IV’s own heart lies. Perhaps.

Joe Shooman

The Black Angels

Passover (Light In The Attic)

Jesus fuck. I know I don’t listen to as much fuzz-laden psych-funk freak out as before, but this album is mighty. Relentless. Singing. Repetitive. Billoving. Layers of guitar layered upon layers of guitar layered upon a primitive beat courtesy of Stephanie Bailey. Voices, deadened and hopeless. Guitars that long ceased referencing any music since 1968. In places, reminiscent of the Velvets (and of course Spacemen 3), shorn of all artifice and given foot-lok fringes to peer from gloomily. Two girls, four boys, all from Austin, Texas – and a debut album that is perfect for late night immersion, immolation, inspiration.

Everett True

The Black Keys

Chulahoma (Fat Possum)

Taking six songs by the late Mississippi bluesman, Junior Kimbrough, The Black Keys paint their blues colours to the mast. Opening track ‘Keep Your Hands Off Her’ drifts on Dan Auerbach’s bare enunciation and woozy guitar. However, at times it’s hard not to feel for drummer Patrick Carney who sounds as though he’s at the improvised whim of his bandmate: on ‘Work Me’, Auerbach sounds as though he’s happy to eke out bulkier bends rather than melodies. When a hook finally arrives in the form of ‘Meet Me In The City’ and ‘My Mind Is A Talisman’ it dawns that Chulahoma is a zonda fiddle tribute their journey to the Deep South is slightly mired by heartbreak.

Lianne Steinberg

Boxcutter

Oneric (Planet Mu)

This record doesn’t quite succeed at being dubstep, nor straight IDM, but features the weakest components of each genre in amalgam. After watered good music down with layer upon layer of irritating DSP and digital edits the music gets hopelessly lost, but it becomes a tedious venture into swaggering boredom. Nice try, but see Vex’d and Eight Frozen Modules on the same label for better renditions of the same idea.

Ralph Cowling

ridicule is nothing to be scared of

Words: Frances May Morgan
Illustration: Iain Paxon

There’s a perverse, tasteless, ostentatious, joyful and self-sabotaging part of my character that manifests itself in enjoying the Wrong, I can’t help it. It’s like a survival instinct. Ironic? Nah. Contraire? Possibly. Musical? Most definitely. See, when you love music so much it has blown your mind, and then you wake up every day to a bunch of press releases telling you here’s another suicidal fantasia on the twilight of the planet. I’d love to do a whole new album of Dave Soldier’s Kropotkins project, having heard one song on WFMU, which I listened to about three times before deciding I could not possibly decide if it was good or shit. What I did decide was that it was Wrong, and as such it was fucking brilliant. Basically a mid-nineties New York project of maverick composer and violinist Soldier, Kropotkins (Koch) slaps the laconic Southern vocals of Lorelle Velvette over a whimsical folksy klezmer bluegrass funk backing and manages to be precious, orangeworthy and utterly, utterly ace. Laurie Anderson at a Cajun ceilidh. Cabaret Beelzebub. It shouldn’t work, but it does. I can get this record for about three quid off Amazon, and you so should.

Next up, in heavy rotation, has been Tom Zé’s new album/operetta on the subject of sexual politics, Estudando O Pagode. ‘Learning To Party’, it means, according to my Brazilian consultant, but it’s also a nod to his classic Estudando O Samba, as Pagode is a kind of modern urban samba derivative. The songs seem to use this form to switch voices and viewpoints and vignettes, commenting on jealousy and misogyny – beyond that, my understanding is purely on the sonic level. And that’s plenty. Estudando O Pagode finds Zé mashing up tradition and pop-tradition to mirror societal confusion with painfully distorted or lushly massed vocals, a dizzying array of odd digitised cues and saucy strings, crisp beats and donkey noises. It’s funky as fuck, too, and it is wonderfully, awesomely Wrong, and it is quite unapar. Like Rita Lee says, it’s time to learn Portuguese, although I’m guessing it wouldn’t help much here; the clues are in Zé’s elliptical, irresistible musical language as much as in his lyrics, and are deliciously cryptic ones too.

I was hoping Faun Fables would join the mighty caravan of Wrong, but it appears they still have about 45 years to go before they are as batshit and awesome as Tom Zé. But they’re getting there! The poor sods got erroneously lumped in with the first wave of nu-psych folk in 2004, and no one took much notice, or they got confused, because Faun Fables are essentially a vaudeville cabaret performance-art band – a kind of Angela Carter backing group, if you will – and they’re also the band that Dredge Dolls fans should be listening to once they get over themselves. Family Album was a little too rites-of-passage for me, but The Transit Rider (Dray City) is a haunting piece of Americana, a neat traveleer that veers between camp and genuinely inspired as it chunters across the state line in a boxcar, stars in its eyes, Dawn McCarthy and Nils Frykdahl sing zealously, often in unnervingly close harmony, and often so intently that the Right/Wrong state line is tentatively breached, and that’s good. The Transit Rider is best when it takes both musical and emotional risks; the musical risks are as yet a little subdued, but I see them becoming more eccentric as time passes and look forward to their next one, if only to see the confusion on people’s faces when I play it to them, as if to say, Why exactly are you listening to this, Frances?

I tell them, well, it’s the difference between Converse from Office and delphinium-coloured dance shoes from eBay (£4.95), and then I put on the new Roedelius Best Of (Grönland), which just confuses the fuck out of them because it’s about two parts sublime late-Krautrock heaven to one part gloopy ambient swimming-pool water, and that tends to shut them up.
Voice as instrument is one of Jean Smith’s several talents

Mecca Normal
The Observer (Kill Rock Stars)

“He’s a jerk, he’s a jerk, he’s such a jerk…” sings Jean Smith, mournfully, while David Lester strums an understated guitar lick. A croaky vocal drone announces itself among the lifting. “Krrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr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This is how music could be

or the role of rhythm in freely improvised music. Rather than just laying down a tempo-less mass of sound and leaving the listener to find their own groove, he happily provides joyful examples of rhythm. For Reid, every rhythm is just another aspect of the One True Rhythm — just as every human is just one subjective manifestation of the Godhead, a snapshot of the infinite in finite form. Galaxies bump bright and fade away, civilisations grow from nothing and crumble, people are born, play out their lives, die, and decompose. The matter never disappears, the energy doesn’t die — it’s all just a question of the coming together.

“Noémie” is a hundred million years later. Heat-haze forming in the early morning bazaar, shimmering light and the pipes of shepherds coming in off the hills. A babel of whistles, chimes, cymbals and bells, building up to a clamorous midday cacophony. There are splits in time, incongruities. Robots in the side-streets. The warrior clarion and the gleaming chromatic of terrible machines behind curtains. This story starts off like the dawn of a religion and ends up as alien abduction: a brand new Sunday school explanation for your children. And the result? “We Dream Free”, all jazzy rim shots, skittering ride cymbal and gasping hi-hat; an atomic-bass, turbo-rumble cyber-blues with a lurking funk; a perfect synthesis where rhythm and electricity is the animating spark of existence, then it doesn’t even matter who’s doing what.

This is how music could be, if we can just hold the matter and the energy together long enough.
Ralph Cowling
tear it up
Words: Stewart Gardiner
Illustration: Anke Weckmann
Sonic Youth
Rather Ripped (Geffen)
"Do you believe in a sweet sensation/Do you believe in a second chance?"
"Do You Believe In Rapture?"

I was more than a little disappointed come the summer of 2004. After having lived off Sonic Nurse for a couple of months before its release, I was absolutely convinced that it was going to blow the lid off the stale state of affairs that saw everyone and their hipster grandmother write off Sonic Youth as a spent force, coasting where they used to whiplash about. It wasn’t that the band hadn’t produced anything magical in recent times — a brief immersion in the sensuous Murray Street puts pay to any notions of mediocrity — but perhaps their quality had remained too consistent. They weren’t young and dangerous enough (you want scary, dive into Lee Ranaldo’s film compositions with Christian Marclay and Alan Licht, but with songs this good, why should that matter?...Rather Ripped effortlessly continues the journey of the last two records, forming a trilogy of sorts, each setting up and challenging the next, before...

Experimentation is not always visible on the surface

a necessary stripping away occurs, at which point the moth bursts out of its cocoon. If Sonic Nurse upped the Seventies classic rock ante out of the icy pastoral glazes of Murray Street, then Rather Ripped pulls down, back and soars out minus the sometime No Wave stabs and electronic crackle (Jim O’Rourke is notably absent). This is Sonic Youth in full-blown summer rock mode, and it’s a joyous ride.

So open and free is ‘Incinerate’ that you wonder at how it could be played anywhere but from an open-roofed car in deepest America. However, none of this is in any way MOR, AOR or any other acronym, infused as it is with that Sonic Youth sensibility: the metal fetishist clarion call searing under every guitar line. ‘Do You Believe In Rapture?’ is one of the most poignant, melodic moments of their career, and ‘Rats’ sees Ranaldo boil down the fuzz of primal, exploded post-punk into a thing of ephemeral, tangible beauty.

There’s a real sense of continuity throughout, of a band completely at ease with who they are (expected) and where they are going (not so; no one else seems to, especially at the 25 year mark). Sonic Youth are unafraid of developing into something, whatever that may mean at any particular time. You may ask if you can forgive them for a lack of experimentation, but you’d be plain wrong, because the funny thing about experimentation is that it’s not always visible on the surface.

Tim Exile
Nuisance Gabbaret Lounge (Planet Mu)

Yes! Get it! Finally, Tim Exile cuts to the chase and releases a live album.

For the uninitiated, Tim has one of the most innovative musical set-ups that still incorporates a laptop. Taking Native Instruments’ Reaktor patches about as far as anyone has been able, Tim does all the stuff that most junglists and drumfunk people are doing, but manages to do it live, which makes it about four million times as interesting as watching your common IDM-backpack DJ loooming over an apple logo at four am. Donning a Madonna-mic and keeping a running commentary of terrible jokes throughout while laying it on thick with increasingly heavy beats (from Britney to gabb) instantly propels any listener to a sonically good place.

Ralph Cowling
Final Fantasy
He Poos Clouds (Tomlab)

I keep imagining that these little signposts of activity—Carlou; the Dirty Projectors; this here Final Fantasy record—indicate a contemplative trend, when the truth is probably grimmer: one needs must fiddle while Rome burns lest all that screaming harsh one’s mellow. Still, hope springs eternal. He Poos Clouds, whose title proves once and for all that there is no God, is an utterly beautiful album that’s either, “A set of songs that attempt to modernise each of the eight D&D schools of magic” (the press kit) or something rather more elusive than that. Three cheers for red herrings! What this sounds like to me—besides early Seventies John Cale solo albums (no slight praise) is a rich, melodic, occasionally pained wrangling with some hard questions. Friends, or no friends? Stay home tonight and entertain yourself, or go out and risk all? That sort of thing. The orchestration and arrangements are lush; the performances are jaw-dropping; there aren’t as many great hooks as there are lush; the performances are jaw-dropping; there aren’t as many great hooks as there are lush; the performances are jaw-dropping; there aren’t as many great hooks (Jim O’Rourke is notably absent). This is Sonic Youth in full-blown summer rock mode, and it’s a joyous ride.

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Terence Fixmer
Silence Control (Gigolo)

Remember how exhilarating bumper cars were when you were six? So delightfully scary was each body-buckling thump, as your big brother bashed you both about on a rainy Saturday afternoon. Now, replace the fairground music with helicopter techno, your big brother with Robocop, the perpetual rain with... Wait, there’s still perpetual rain, and the bumper cars with hoverpods (or more helicopters) and you’ve just about set the scene for Fixmer’s similarly delightful Silence Control. You’d better hurry to
Leafcutter John
The Forest And The Sea (Staubgold)
Bravery has always been a difficult term to define musically. Accordingly one rarely finds a record with so much brave beauty as Leafcutter John’s second album, The Forest And The Sea. Brave for its transgression, both musically and historically. Mixing acoustic instruments and electronic sounds has always settled uneasily, whether it becomes an unsatisfying, intertextual descent into audio drivel, one sound slithering away having recently been brutalised by the other, or runs the risk of pushing one into paramount display, the other forced to be the ugly backing. Yet in attempting to put something personal into an otherwise very impersonal musical scene, John Burton has produced a courageous record that demands attention where others fail in their lack of vision.

Why am I fumbling around with the semantics of bravery, and attempting to apply it to a record? Because of the closeness that is instantly recognisable in the music, which shuns the usual clever ideas, rendered in Max/MSP, stripping away beats and overbearing sonic attacks in favour of voice and guitar. But the spellbinding experience that this combination creates is helped by the thoughtful build of moodier sounds; ethereal, distant and often unsettling. John determinedly renders a fantastical adventure of journeying through a forest and out to the sea. But the record is special because of its creator’s ability to just make things work. The Forest And The Sea will leave songwriters and producers reeling with jealousy, for the songs know harmony, and the music knows feeling, together forming what is often cruelly termed ‘passion’ and idly slapped onto records that address sublime parts of meta-thought.

Seeing John (along with Simon Bookish and Alice Grant) play this material at a recent Staubgold night at the Spitz reaffirmed his capacity for interesting musical performances. He moved from children’s accoutrements to guitar to chiming bells, whilst all the time steadily keeping his eye on his computer for direction. The music ebbed and flowed, and gradually overwhelmed. This record is all the best cadences of folk combined with all the best parts of sampling and processing – together they render a whole new form.

The songs know harmony and the music knows feeling.

Hawny Troof
Dollar And Deed (Southern)
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The songs know harmony and the music knows feeling.
albums

A hot, summery mess of urban Americana

James William Hindle

Joshong (Early Winter)

A little like Devendra’s ‘Oh Me Oh My…, this half-hour mini-album of 11 tracks – all but one of them between one and three minutes long – has the feel of a diary filled tentatively with fragments, sketches, notes-to-self, recorded at home, with the curtains drawn, complete with the whir of tape-heads and the click of the on-off button. With acoustic guitar, banjo, harp, accordion and chimes, Hindle produces a hushed, bedroom-folk, recalling tiny, self-contained worlds of bucolic finger-picking, melancholic micro-ballads and bluegrass Bagpuss banjo. Best of all, though, is the eight-minute instrumental ‘Joshong Pt 2’, which sounds like a drone version of The Doors’ ‘The End’ with John Fahey sitting in for Jim Morrison.

Daniel Spicer

Home

Sixteen (Brah)

Blame The Flaming Lips. I’m not denying the ‘Kings of Space Rock’ (© every crap publication ever) are a more interesting template for two-track and four-track home studio buffs than – Jesus! – Coldplay or The White Stripes, but still. Psychedelia doesn’t need to begin or end with giant rolling bubbles or rabbit costumes. But still. Home aren’t half-bad, not least because they too dig the skewed purple haze that first inspired Wayne and company, the beguiling idiosyncratic melodies to be found lurking at the heart of pomp rock and ancient Disney movies. Sixteen is a concept album about fucking that sounds like a seahorse, and recalls label bosses Oneida’s stoner Brooklyn groove and label-mates Aspera’s star-twinkling beauty more than any lachery A&R-man’s late night drinking session.

Everett True

Hot Chip

The Warning (DFA/EMI)

“Hot Chip will break your legs/Snap off your head,” insists Hot Chip vocalist Alexis Taylor and Joe Goddard on the title track of ‘The Warning’. Such bold threats from a group offering up such open-ended, accessible electro-pop are not to be taken lightly. Rolling with more of an early evening vibe than on their strictly-afterparty debut ‘Coming On Strong’, the ghosts of freestyle and charmed, laddish New Romantic harmonies pinball around in some significant machine funk. Moreover, Hot Chip prove that their sense of humour and reliance on gimmicks and the markings of a novelty act. There’s a confidence here that reinforces the material, now in collaboration with the DFA (who also have not missed a beat in their young career as a production team).

Doug Mosurock

Howlin’ Rain

Howlin’ Rain (Birdman)

Comets On Fire’s Ethan Miller and Sunburned Hand Of TeTe Man’s John Moloney in a van, heading into the desert with six cases of beer, four bottles of bourbon, a couple lidds of grass, FM radio playing loud, trying to make Barstow by nightfall. It’s all going dandy till Miller realises someone’s dosed the Jim Beam; he’s turning into Chris Robinson from The Black Crowes and his guitar’s melting. He hears himself on the radio singing something about “Poured myself a wine and blew another line”, wonders if it’s gonna be a bummer.

“IT’s OK, dude,” says Moloney. “Ain’t no one to see. Let’s be Lynyrd Skynyrd.”

Daniel Spicer

Islands

Return To The Sea (Rough Trade)

Fresh from the ashes of The Unicorns, comes Islands. The Unicorns were Nick Diamonds, Alden Gingerard and Jamie Tambour; now Diamonds and Tambour expand their sound with more musicians and instruments. It’s a supersmooth, supersmooth slit, and they’re in danger of sounding too much like fellow Montrealers Arcade Fire. But Islands and Tambour are better. Like The Unicorns, Islands write upbeat dance songs about death. ‘Bucky Little Wing’ is a piano-based song about the death of a childhood friend that could be a metaphor for the breakup of the Unicorns. Bigger is not better but sometimes it’s pretty good.

Jack Lewis

sticky fingers

Words: Daniel Trilling Illustration: Till Thomas

J Dilla

Donuts (Stones Throw)

I’ll admit it. I’d have probably ignored this album were it not for the sad story behind it. Maybe I’ve been to one too many rap shows and watched a few too many men with nothing to say crowding round the mic like failed sperm around an egg, or maybe I’ve seen too much corpse-shagging references to the glory days masking a total lack of new ideas, but I didn’t think hip hop had anything left to offer me. I’m an idiot though, and you are too if you ignore this album.

J Dilla, aka Jay Dee, the genius producer behind Detroit group Slum Village (and Common, D’Angelo, Q-Tip and Erykah Badu, to name a few) made this album from his hospital bed shortly before his death in February this year. Donuts consists of 31 instrumental hop tracks, none of which are more than a couple of minutes long. Essentially they’re sketches, intended to be fleshed out into fuller songs. Hearing them in this context, though, is like a series of tantalising glimpses at something wonderful, and Donuts is all the stronger for it.

The overall effect is dreamlike. A hot, summery mess of urban Americana: soul, Sixties idealism, television blaring out advert jingles for products that no longer exist, lolling breakbeats echoing off brick walls and guitar loops shimmering in the heat haze. Donuts is an album of possibilities, of murmured phrases and half-finished ideas, just waiting for you to fill in the gaps.

As a producer, Dilla has neither the arch coolness of fellow crate-digger Madlib, nor a desire for futuristic new forms. He is simply adding the latest square to hip hop’s patchwork quilt – one that spans generations and continents. Rather than trying to impose himself on the music, Dilla lets the choice of samples speak for itself: disembodied voices battle with space-age klaxons above layers of breaths, beats and melody.

In an ideal world, these tracks would be backing the year’s finest rap and soul songs, and a few of them are – check Doug Mosurock’s ‘Ghostface review’ – but mostly they’re not. For that reason, the beauty of this album lies in the ears of the listener; in the realisation that you’ll never be the omnipotent God-producer, that the most you can hope for is to add your own, imperfect, unfinished mark to the stain of humanity.

In this, you’ll hear your own mortality.
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VE TIVER
'To Find Me Gone'
[FATCD43 / FATLP43] - 05/06
Breathtakingly lush second LP. Moving away from the folk references, this is a freer, more mature album. Confirming Andy Cabic as one of the finest songwriters of his generation. Other players here include Devendra Banhart, Otto Hauser, Alissa Anderson and Kevin Barker.

OUR BROTHER THE NATIVE
'Tooth & Claw'
[FAT-SP12] - 19/06
A stunning new find, OBTN are 3 young kids (aged 16-18). Like Animal Collective / Godfavn’s kid brothers, their debut LP offers a thrillingly jumbled rush of ideas and emotions, balancing pretty songs and melodies with cracked electronic noise.

THE MUTTS
'I Us We You'
[12FAT054 / CDFA054] - 22/05
Simultaneously evolving and refining their trademark celebrative rock and roll, this 8-track mini-album serves up the Mutts' strongest, most focused, and fully realised set of recordings to date. Delivering garage menace and classic rock riffs, with a looser, more instinctive stance

BLOOD ON THE WALL
'Awesomer'
[FATCD48 / FATLP48] - 17/07
Brooklyn-based indie rock trio who write killer songs in a classic, 90s vein. Recalling The Pixies, Sonic Youth, Spacebarren, 3 Cramps, Marychain, etc. Raw, infectious, unpretentious music, with big hooks and attitude.

THE RANK DELUXE
'Doll Queue'
[7FAT21] - out now
"A sonic picture of council estate youth", this SE London band's TRD cite influences from reggae, ska, punk, and rock n' roll. Confident, pop savvy and full of uncompromising attitude. The first release of their 7".

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ANIMAL COLLECTIVE - 'Grass' CD/DVD
GIDDY MOTORS - 'Do Easy' CD
NINJA NASTASIA CD
ENSEMBLE - 'Ensemble' CD
AMANDINE - 'Waiting For The Light... ' CD
MAX RICHTER - 'Songs From Before' CD

130701
www.fatcat.co.uk
info@fatcat.co.uk
Scritti Politti
White Bread Black Beer (Rough Trade)

Forget the early obsession with Jacques Derrida and opportunistic reissues of the scratchy post-punk scribblings. This is POP and what matters much more is that Green Gartside has a voice to be rolled over and over in the ear, a candy-sweet aural confection with just enough flexibility and bite to prevent it from being sickly. What also makes Scritti is Green’s knack for giving that voice sparkingly imaginative and complex melodies to negotiate, resulting in a dream-pop beyond the capabilities of pretty much every contemporary singer-songwriter, except perhaps Liam ‘Plush’ Hayes and Eric Matthews. Gartside reputedly recorded this album alone in his home studio in Hackney. No shit. White Bread… is a fucking lonely album, its protagonist alternately berating and comforting himself through bleak times. Sound-wise, it’s a weird mixture of spit and polish, homemade plastic pop-saloon and musical box fragility. Melodies stick out of songs at odd angles, stacked harmonies cast merciless light on scenes of disarray like early morning sun on an unmade bed, and the words a self-essay a double-take to the boundlessly confident boy-wonder of Gartside’s Eighties incarnation: “There are no fine lines/more than I can draw.” Troubled and disconsolate, White Bread… teeters on the edge of not-working, and that’s what makes it compelling.

Where once Green would have raised a very eyebrow at pop’s lexicon of love, now he seems to understand the compulsive nature of romantic cliché, the fact that certain words mean everything in the very worst of circumstances. “Snow In Sun” is the obvious example, a tale of everyday guilt and failure punctuated by promises that might not be kept, that she’s heard a million times before, but which still ring true: “Should we be best with troub’lull will never let you come to harm.” Hmm. Perhaps we should feel sorry for loverboy after all.

Joe Stannard

Izu
Going Salamander (Highpoint Lowlife)

Going Salamander explores the speakers like a DSP cluster bomb. One set of heavy beats sequentially offsets and breaks another. Though this is not enough for most listeners – it doesn’t matter how good your beats are, if there’s nothing else added on to it. Once you have established an interesting beat, it must develop into something new, fantastic and interesting; otherwise the original excitement of that beat exists only in a paralysed state that eventually implores upon itself. A music without music then: that exists in order to congratulate the original conception made manifest, yet knows not what to do with itself after its initial impact.

Ralph Cowling

Daniel Johnston
Lost And Found (Sketchbook)

The Daniel Johnston Lost And Found Variety Show is complete with routines for all the family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. Dad grabs his belt loops and lurches to big booted clomp-rock. Mum takes her family. 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albums

Celtic Frost
Monotheist (Century)
Yeah, we’ve been here before. Celtic Frost have made comebacks before. Everyone in metal tips the hat to these Swiss-American gods of goth-grind (to hear why, check out ‘85’s To Mega Therion and ‘87’s Into the Pandemonium). But absurdly, it’s perhaps better, and certainly more helpful to your enjoyment of Monotheist to hear this as a debut salvo. The last time I spoke to Tom Gabriel Fischer (CF’s mainman and co-founder alongside bassist Martin Eric Ain) was in 2000 and he tantalisingly hinted that Celtic Frost were gonna record again but he was debating whether to release it under the Celtic Frost moniker, “Cos it feels so fucking new”.

Six years on, he’s clearly twinged that such boundary-busting innovation is precisely what Celtic Frost exist for, and Monotheist finally seeps out with a retooled CF ready to roll stagewards worldwide till the end of 2007. And fuck me, I don’t want them to play any of the old stuff. Cos Monotheist is so damn good.

Understand – there have been so many rip-offs of CF’s elemental sound (epic doom riffola, swathes of orchestral beauty, sudden ambient ruptures of synth) you’d expect them to be backed into a position of repeating not just themselves but the rest of metal’s current cutting edge. But what’s so great about Monotheist is that it never really feels like a retread, always seems to be emerging from a brand new, even more richly cinematic vein Fischer’s Gypsum Strings (Brah).

Oakley Hall
Gypsum Strings (Brah)
It’s entirely understandable that hipsters, after a Devendra-inspired journey through folk music’s dusty catalogue should emerge at the southern cross of roots rock clutching a copy of Fleetwood Mac’s ‘Foghat’ and looking like Eagles roadies circa 1978. But no one should accuse Oakley Hall of being hipsters. Their love of MOR rock is too authentic. And though their songs stretch out like roads disappearing into the desert, it’s in the air-conditioned comfort of a fast German car that Oakley Hall travel. “Lazy Susan” is particularly successful in this respect, moulding male/female folk harmonies with some guitar-driven motorik trance.

Unfortunately, though this alchemy offers promise, Oakley Hall never venture quite far enough into experimentalism. Consequently, while these songs threaten to take flight, spanning on the edge of greatness, Gypsum Strings remains frustratingly earthbound.

Merek Cooper

The Paper Chase
Gypsum Strings (Brah)
No words from non-murderous mortals can quite encapsulate this, the fourth LP from Texan sickos The Paper Chase, quite like the wild-eyed intermission title ‘Delivered In A Firm Unyielding Way Lingerin For Just A Bit Too Long To Communicate The Message "I Own You."’ featured within.

Sentence-length smart-assery doesn’t make a throat-slittingly brilliant album alone; however; for that, John Congleton and wonderfully deranged backing family coax blood-chilling gallows admission of ‘Charlie Manson recite. The themes may echo previous outings – a fact even knowingly nodded to on ‘…And All The Candy You Can Eat” – but the lurching results remain gruesomely satisfying. Come join us. Adam Anonymous

Dudley Perkins

The Paper Chase
New Year Are One Of Us (Southern) project, and this time it’s just not right. Oh, it’s very pleasant and all, mellifluous, perky, smooth and wacky in tasteful measures, but it ain’t the Technicolor mindfuck of his last, utterly splendiferous 2003 LP A Lil’ Light. See, back then our Dudders was on some wackoid shit. He sounded fried, the words dribbling out his mouth like some ecstatic anal prolapse – and I mean everything – else. Sit down.

Dudley Perkins

Planningtorock
Floor It All (Chicks On Speed) Imagine a grand theatre in a bad area. A spotlight on a red curtain. Hundreds of empty seats. Very late or very early. Music from unseen musicians, perhaps a machine. The approximation of strings was achieved with drums set something in motion, a distempered clockwork shuffle, and a sudden panic of multi-tracked fiddles keen like wolves raised by humans. “Ich bin ein Bolton Wanderer,” croons a woman who blinks into existence in the centre of the stage. She has a Pierrot face and a glammy catsuit. She is Janine Rostron, Planningtorock. From Bolton via Berlin, performance art operatics and self-made surrealist films. Think Outsider Music: The Musical.

This is parallel universe 21st Century cabaret for people who’ve tried everything – and I mean everything – else. Sit down. She’s just about to start. kicking_k

Don’t call it a comeback
Words: Neil Kulkarni
Illustration: French

Can’t see metal getting any better than this in 2006

songwriting, informed by the degradations of age and with its intimations of mortality brought even closer up now we’re all so much older. The opening triumvirate of ‘Progeny’, ‘Ground’ and ‘A Dying God Coming Into Human Flesh’ take in the most sublime fantasies of romantic Europa, the most aggravated impulses of industrial decay and the bluesiest, folkiest black depths of doom in that order and play them better than anyone else out there. And by seemingly perfecting and surpassing both themselves and the generation of copyists in their wake, Frost are then free to go wherever the hell they like.

‘Drown In Ashes’ is aggressively camp suicide-balladry for the police to find playing next to the corpse/open window that ends on a lovely caesura of drone, warping into the clanging apocalypse of ‘O’s Abysm! Vel Daath!’ wherein Fischer and co out-Sab the mighty Sab’s, slap on Diamanda Galas-style b-vox, pull doom/death’s preoccupation with evil and holy war into the very body politic itself and then unleash Armageddon in your bummeg. Awesome awesome shit. Check out the closing ‘Triptych’ for 22 minutes of epic widescreen heroic bloodshed that takes in Goblin, Skinny Puppy, Godflesh and Ligeti without ever deviating once from the feeling that Celtic Frost are looming over your town, writ across the sky, hovering over your house dropping lightning bolts, skittering around your ceiling, watching you sleep and licking their lips.

Can’t see metal getting any better than this in 2006. Don’t miss.
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We like our paranoia served hot

It's a hot day. The sun is shining and the air is thick with the scent of summertime. We're sitting on the beach, feet in the sand, listening to music and feeling the warmth of the sun on our backs. The waves crash against the shore, carrying with them the sound of the ocean. We're lost in our own world, feeling the beat of the music as it washes over us.

And then, we hear it. A voice, clear and distinct, coming from the distance. It's a voice we recognize, a voice that's been with us through thick and thin, through good times and bad. It's a voice that's been our constant companion, always there when we need it. It's a voice that's been with us through all the ups and downs, all the peaks and valleys, all the highs and lows. It's a voice that's been our guide, our compass, our rock in the storm. It's a voice that's been our一切, our everything. It's a voice that's been our

...
Dickon Edwards

post traumatic stress
Words: Daniel Trilling
Illustration: Laura Hughes

My postman hates me. My housemates hate me. My neighbours hate me. From my bedroom to the front door lies a trail of promotional CDs, some ripped in a frenzy from their envelopes, others gathering dust in a corner, unloved and uncared for.

Walk into my room and you are blinded by the rainbow-tinted reflections from small silvery discs of plastic. I can’t put a foot out of bed in the morning without treading on Adam Green’s face (that feels good, let me tell you), and the last thing I see before I go to sleep at night is the gaping maw of a jewel case, ready to consume my entire being, or at least leave those annoying bits of plastic that always break off the round thing in the middle in between my sheets so they scratch my legs and give me dreams of being attacked by a thousand little record label ants until I wake up screaming, “No, no, sorry, we had to cut the review for space, please, sorry, fuck no, please, not the facenothefaceohgodno…”

But that’s all gonna change. Listen up, losers, it’s time to get tidy. First, I need some motivational music. I stretch out my hand and grab the nearest object. Apple core, no. Tissue, no. Ah yes – a CD.

It’s Psychic Secession by Yellow Swans, a noise duo on Load Records. Another couple of hardcore kids have decided that it’s much more fun to make electronic drone scree than rip off Black Flag, and the result is decidedly pleasant, if a little scary. Listening to the pulsating bass and mangled vocals is a bit like staring at the ink-blot cover art: pretty patterns that no doubt would reveal themselves to be some sort of Oedipal nightmare if you look too closely. But this is far too all over the place to help me tidy.

So is Pregnant Babies. Pregnant Babies, by Fat Worm Of Error (also on Load), which makes me want to set fire to things. It begins with the clatter of pots and pans and quickly descends into a cacophonous, chittering mess of children’s voices and distorted wailing – it’s as if someone has let the Chuckle Brothers loose on Wolf Eyes’ equipment.

Time for something completely different. Loene Carmen is an Australian singer and multi-instrumentalist, whose album

I can’t put a foot out of bed without treading on Adam Green’s face

Slight Delay (Reverberation) is laidback, bluesy, and features Dirty Three’s Warren Ellis on violin. This is more like it – Loene’s dreamy, echoing vocals are the perfect accompaniment to dusting down my fossil collection. But I’m getting lazy now. Any more relaxed and I’m going to steal some of Chris Houghton’s aromatherapy kit and run a nice hot bubble bath. I need something to perk me up – I’ve still got to alphabetise my socks, for chrissakes!

Trust Simon Bookish to come up with the goods. Unfair/Funfair (Use Your Teeth) is a dark, insistent album of electro-pop that takes you to a bizarre world of medieval kings and Fantastic Fiss Experiments. There’s a slightly deranged edge to Simon’s voice as he intones spoken word poetry and I don’t know whether to dance or cry.

Sod this tidying, I’m off down the disco.
**Ok-Oyot System (Thrill Jockey)**  
Extra Golden  
Quite ecstatic in a strange way.

**Breath Of Fire (K)**  
Arrington De Dionyso  
Double CD. Is exactly what it says on the tin.

– lovelorn and true.

**Collection of Nineties recordings from Kath Bloom**  
– a duo from Philadelphia, Josh provides the Location (Automation)  
Abiku

brief notes

**Abiku**  
**Locusts (Automation)**  
Nasty, shouty, full-frontal electronic assault — a duo from Philadelphia, Josh provides the animal brutality, Jane provides the operatic, Boredom-esque screaming.

**Kath Bloom**  
**Finally (Chapter)**  
Collection of Nineties recordings from obscure, Richard Linklater-championed, 50-year-old folk singer: quite beautiful — lovelorn and true.

**The Delgados**  
**The Complete BBC Peel Sessions (Chemikal Underground)**  
Double CD. Is exactly what it says on the tin.

**Arrington De Dionyso**  
**Breath Of Fire (K)**  
Died from Old Time Religion blows down a bass clarinet, throat-sings and twangs a Jew’s harp — and blows, and growls, and twangs, and blows and twangs and growls. Quite ecstatic in a strange way.

**Extra Golden**  
**Ok-Oyot System (Thrill Jockey)**  
Thrill Jockey types team up with Kenyan musicians to make music that alternates between the sublime and the ridiculous.

**The Fever**  
**The City Of Sleep (Kemado)**  
The singer spells his name ‘Geremy’ and this album is pitched somewhere between 1974 Bowie, The Paper Chase and the ubiquitous Dresden Dolls.

**GNAC**  
**Twelve Sidelong Glances (LTM)**  
Beautiful, haunting, instrumental, imaginary Miss Marple murder mystery music from a Montogoker Brother.

**The Knights Of The New Crusade**  
**A Challenge To The Cowards Of Christendom (Alternative Tentacles)**  
Jello Biafra decides to take on 2,000 years of oppression — caustic lyrics, genius packaging, and a musical mishmash that comes off halfway twist Dead Kennedys and The Make Up. Yup, that good.

**Like A Stuntman**  
**Stanislaw A: Poland (High Local Point)**  
Electronic indie rock from Highland–of the off-kilter Pavement-y sort.

**Alex Lukashesky**  
**ConneXions (North East Indie)**  
Nicely strummed and plucked and mumbled folk.

**Man Man**  
**Six Demon Bag (Ace Fu)**  
Like Dresden Dolls, only demented — and, erm, nothing like Dresden Dolls. More like Danielion Famile, now we think about it.

**Mexico City**  
**Black Comedy (Reverberation)**  
Classy rock’n’roll, of the Afghan Whigs variety.

**Mr Tube And The Flying Objects**  
**Listen Up (Sweet Nothing)**  
How warped would you like your blues?Pl-planet-stomping music for embittered pigeons.

**The Ohsees**  
**The Cool Death Of Island Raiders (Narmanck)**  
Formerly OCS, also a Coachwhip; disturbing in a dusty loft adventure/ Danielion way.

**Pan For Punks**  
**A Steelpan Tribute To The Ramones**  
(Mark Wren)

**Polaris**  
**Polaris (Gringo)**  
Gringo sorts do what Gringo sorts do best: heavy, harmonious and angular.

**Ponies In The Surf**  
**Ponies On Fire (Asaurus)**  
Gentle, sweet, bedroom melodies from Cambridge, MA duo — very much Alastair Fitchett territory. Expect to see a three-inch CD+ release on Unpopular shortly, if there hasn’t been one already.

**Pumice**  
**Yesnahvienna (Soft Abuse)**  
Delicate New Zealand guitar pop à la Flying Nun records.

**Sinner DC**  
**Mount Age (Al)**  
Swissstronic: sounds a bit like Isolée and candyfloss and high-speed trains.

Various

**Still Unravished – A Tribute To The June Brides (Yesboyicecream)**  
Unfairly overlooked mid-Eighties South London indie pop band receive due kudos: features Manic Street Preachers, TV Personalities (crap as ever when it comes to covers), Jeffrey Lewis, The Tyde and The Legend!
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albums reissues

I understand the need for tribes

**Various**
*Rip It Up And Start Again – Postpunk 1978-1984 (V2)*
The title is an Orange Juice reference. Orange Juice started life as a punk band in Glasgow, 1977. Early shows were shambolic, singer Edwin Collins and cohorts falling around laughing as they found themselves unable to start a song for the fourth time, voices frequently cracking and breaking as they strained to reach upward. The song that the title references was one of the OJ’s biggest hits, early Eighties, came about after Edwin turned his back momentarily on The Velvet Underground and the art school boys, and embraced the New Pop that was being so thoroughly championed in the British music press by writers such as Paul Morley and Ian Penman.

New Pop basically included any artist that attempted to incorporate the fluid dance rhythms of black disco into the oddly asexual post-No Wave template, and that had also been motivated by the immediate fallout of punk rock ’76. It was a broad term, a meaningless one - it included artists as disparate as Duran Duran, Simple Minds, The Redskins, Pigbag, U2, The Human League – but it was beloved by the critics of the day, and their impressionable readership. Some folk still hold onto it, 26 years later, as proof that the music of their youth – and no other – was among the most invigorating, ground-breaking musical escapades in pop. Well, they would say that.

I have no beef with Simon Reynolds. He’s a talented, tricky, enthusiastic, sometimes too self-important writer who has never lost sight of the fan at his core. If he wants to put together a collection of some of his favourite sounds from between 1978 and 1984 and attempt to justify their juxtaposition to one another by extrapolating a common link between them – post-punk, post-punk, post-punk – then that’s fine by me. I grew up on this music, too: I’m also a fan of edgy, politically-charged, jagged music: he and I share a common regard for the meticulous, soulful melodies of The Raincoats, the teasing funk of Pulsallama, Honey Bane’s precocious and chilling dissection of street reality on ‘Violence Grows’, The Specials’ bleak Wurzelizer visions on ‘Friday Night, Saturday Morning’, Young Marble Giants’ spoaked beauty, bang fuckbang bang the mighty Fall, The B-52s, Cabaret Voltaire, Josef K, The Slits...

I understand the need for tribes. I don’t necessarily hold much truck with them these days, but, Jesus fuck! You think I lasted this long as a music critic without kowtowing to society? Anyway, this compilation (a companion piece to the book of the same name) is intended as an introduction to a much broader world – as Reynolds explains in typically sardonic sleevenotes – and a link to the present-day where every other group seems to reference the term ‘post-punk’. (You may care to check out Rough Trade Shop’s incredible 2003 comp *Post Punk Vol 1* first – more comprehensive, nicer packaging, and the link between past and present is seamless.) The only quibble I have with Mr Reynolds on this otherwise impeccable travell is in his inclusion of a handful of tracks from the aforementioned New Pop bands (a pointless Thomas Leer doodle, the overrated Associates, Heaven 17, Scritti Politti)…because I really do think this is the one place where his love for a well-reasoned argument has overridden his fanboy lust. There again, Simon may just have different taste. Orange Juice aren’t represented here. Neither are Essential Logic. Nor are (fill in your own names). Otherwise, recommended.

**Antena**
*Caminho Del Sol (LTM)*
Will I be forever fated to like things that sound a bit like bloody Stereolab, I wonder? Will I always have a bit of my brain that goes ‘ba-la-la-loo-fing things?’ It seems so. However, I’m not complaining when that thing is Antena, the French electro-space-boss trio whose 1982 debut has now been agreeably re-presented (with tons of extra tracks) to a more understanding listenership. Because Antena – Pascale Moirou, Sylvain Faussy and Isabelle POWaga – were always a bit of a cult concern. It’s hard to see why. Granted, their odd little indie sambas were vivacious, wispy and possibly out of kilter with the door post punk times. OK, they did blend drum machines with Brazilian percussion, and Kraftwerkian synths with Astrud Gilberto/Francoise Hardy vocals, and perhaps it wasn’t so easy to get Tropicalia records back then so no one saw the obvious parallel. Maybe they seemed kitschy; too happy, too light, too frivolous.

According to the sleevenotes, it’s the UK’s fault. Antena just couldn’t make it over here, possibly because they were singing in French (although there are so many la-la-las and ay-ay-ays that it shouldn’t have been a problem). More likely, they didn’t quite fit in anywhere: too lush and feathery for the indie scene, they also eschewed the big production of the Eighties in favour of a lovely retro studio sound, minimal, sparse, delicate and – as demonstrated by a very sugary cover of ‘Les Demoiselles De Rochefort’ from the Jacques Demy musical – influenced by both yé-yé girls and classic film music.

Whatever, Antena would have been perfect in the early to mid-Nineties, around the time of St Etienne and the ‘Lab. But they’re also perfect right now: a reminder that the early Eighties weren’t all about yelping and ‘angular’ riffs. Standout tracks include ‘Spiral Staircase’, with a frantic motorik and cheap drumrolls framing a breathless, detached vocal and a twinking synth straight off Gary Numan; and ‘Achilles’, a brilliant, sinister, synergistic masterpiece that sounds like it’s doing ‘Shown Dummies’ in a São Paulo jazz club, with Alison from Young Marble Giants and Os Mutantes on vocals.

**Frances May Morgan**
*A Witness*
*I Am John’s Pancreas (Euphonium)*
This is bloody brilliant. An album recorded on an eight-track studio in 1986 for under £1,000 – one side went missing for 12 years before being discovered in a former drummer’s attic. It’s so bloody Northern, so gritty and full of deadpan humour. It’s so bloody English, circa John Peel early to mid-Eighties, every song a miniature sardonic masterpiece, tongues competing with guitars for laceration value, a drum machine band with attitude, from Manchester. Articulate, passionate, angry and very, very danceable. A Witness appeared on the NME’s pivotal C 86 compilation cassette – pivotal inasmuch as none of the bands ever went onto sell anywhere near as many as they deserved – and occupied the exact same souffly corner of their mud-churned football field as Bogshed, Big Flame, The Nightingales, The Membranes and Pig Bros. My heart still leaps when I hear this. The Legend!
Hawkwind
Live 74 (EMI)
Undisputed overlords of psychedelic space rock and perhaps the first British group to really get a handle on what the Germans (and The Velvet Underground) were doing with the motorik, Hawkwind also adopted the levitational chanting and escapist philosophy of Sun Ra’s Arkestra to create an audio-visual experience that could only feasibly be completed by the gyrations of a large-breasted naked dancer named Stacia.

This CD captures the Hawklords in fine, filthy form, their apocalyptic boogie festooned with analogue swoops and gurgles from the colon of the cosmos. Despite what some idiots think, Hawkwind were never prog, and this is brutally direct music: at the end of ‘Master Of The Universe’, bass destroyer Lemmy declares “You’ve been experiencing the imagination of Hawkwind”, and it’s like a playground bully explaining why your face hurts.

Joe Stannard

Isis
Sgnl05 (Neurot)
This EP brings us back to the isis of 2001, before the release of Oceanic. At this point they owed more to Neurosis than Fousaft, and these five tracks hint at the other landscapes and tools that they would later include in their sonic vocabulary. It is nevertheless a refined document of mapping one enclosed space.

At points it is stifling; their version of desperation is underpinned by a foreboding repetition, cyclical patternings that tighten and encircle the untangible. It is a spatially constructed response, an exploded view where the detailing of the weave slackens and expands with finesse.

The final track, a remix of ‘Celestial’ by Godflesh, is worth it. Electronically stripping bloated walls of guitar and vocals into a more delicately considered form, it proffers a glimpse into Isis’ current position.

Miranda Llosifidis

Edu Lobo
Sergio Mendes Presents Lobo (Rev-Ola)
Although Edu Lobo is one of the central figures of Sertões and Seventies post-bossa Brazilian pop, he rarely receives the respect accorded to compatriots Caetano Veloso or Gilberto Gil. Far from the brickbat to the head of Tropicalia’s more riotous moments, Lobo favours a subdued avant-gardism. His voice is leather-light and slightly droll, the better to keep his maze-like melodies understated.

Accompanied by members of Sergio Mendes’ Brazil 66, who filter these spectral songs through diffusé light, Lobo is on winning form through Sergio Mendes Presents: Hermeto Pascall’s cissingsg flute traverses the arrangements as though he is following the logic of balloons skimming across the skies, with Lobo’s 12-string guitar unravelling spooling melodies before breaking the surface with sudden strikes of discordance.

You could probably survive without hearing the stately closing version of ‘Hey Jude’, but this 1970 album is a classic example of the other face of Brazilian pop music.

Jon Dale

the real thing
Words: Stevie Chick
Illustration: Phil Elliott

The Pretenders
Pirate Radio 1979 – 2005 (Rhino)
Chrissie Hynde has the kind of voice radio waves were invented to carry. She washed up on these shores a refugee from deadsville Akron, Ohio, floating on a raft fashioned from Stogees and Velvets vinyl, to find London on the cusp of punk. She wrote for NME, almost married a Sex Pistol for an immigration visa, then hooked up with some rockers from Hereford to form The Pretenders.

For the punk/new-wave era, The Pretenders were anachronistically classicist, James Honeyman-Scott’s guitar a chameleon of Spector-esque sugar, rockabilly venom and a chiming 12-string sound he lifted from the Byrds and made his own. But it was Hynde’s voice that vaulted The Pretenders’ records from affectionate pastiche to pop classics in their own right; her sonorous vibrato escaped transformed the kohl-eyed, razor-thin Hynde into a one-woman Wall Of Sound. The group’s faultless brace of early singles spliced together crashing, exultant moment of pop gold with a magpie-eye for detail: ‘Stop Your Sobbing’ recasting a Kinks album track as girl-group glitter, multi-tracked Hyndes harmonising over the jangle like tremelo sires, ‘Kid’ weaving an amiable embrace from Chrissie’s long, drawn-out sighs, ‘Brass In Pocket’ rewriting ‘Uptown Top Ranking’ for

chicks in leather jackets banishing their insecurities with the same swagger that Chrissie invests her feline yowls… There’s an abiding darkness that underscores The Pretenders’ perfect pop: ‘Thin Line Between Love And Hate’ wrung every painful poignancy from The Persuaders’ deep-soul domestic violence ballad, its litany of tragedies borne aloft by Hynde’s heroic, subtle vocal. Tragedy stalked the group itself: Honeyman-Scott died fatally overdosing eight months later.

But The Pretenders survived this, and survived the more risible production trends of the Eighties, this exhaustive box (and it isn’t faint praise to say this is all The Pretenders you’ll need) finds that voice still intact on such late-period gems as the stadium-jangle of ‘My Baby’, or the deliciously playful ‘Don’t Get Me Wrong’, or the still-resonant ‘Hymn To Her’, while her vocal for 1994’s ‘I’ll Stand By You’, particularly on the keening choruses, was a career peak.

There’s a case to be made for Chrissie’s iconic status as a Woman In Rock. Like Hynde herself, this box mostly sidesteps the issue in favour of celebrating that voice, and the affectionate pop-literacy that makes the lion’s share of these gracious compositions map the land reconfigured on staves and scores. The further you walk into First Thought Best Thought, out along the cornfield plains of the mid-west, the more you jettison the structuring of the self – or rhythm, tangled melody, full band arrangements – and dissolve into the intimacy of the wide open sheath of grain, dirt and sky.

Listening to First Thought Best Thought is like unpeeling an onion, the compositions sloughing off layers of skin to reach the tarty gorgeous core. Ultimately, though, it is sweet, benign music: the most striking thing is its effortlessness, balanced between joy and melancholy. A salve for the sadness of reality.

Jon Dale

Arthur Russell
First Thought Best Thought (Rough Trade)
Modern composers often express a desire to ‘go pop’ or use its forms and ideas, but they lack the commitment required to make the final leap. Arthur Russell’s great achievement was the collapsing of those petty boundaries, treating pop, classical, disco, folk and improvisation as hints on a treasure map. First Thought Best Thought documents Russell’s instrumental pieces, culled mainly from two rare albums released on Les Disques Du Crepuscule and Philip Glass’ Chatham Square label. As with Russell’s other music, it is breezy and benign, liberated by his natural gift for circuitous melody, wistful and inquisitive by turns, and full of light-hearted humour.

Steve Knutson’s liner notes observe that Russell’s music is geographically rooted, evocative of the surrounds of Russell’s Midwest America birthplace in Oskaloosa, Iowa. “What is even more powerful about First Thought Best Thought is its suggestive capabilities, the way the weave and thread of these graciously composed pieces map previously unseen or unimagined topography before your eyes. Perhaps the great pleasure in Russell’s compositions is their translation of exterior space to interior dialogue, the traversing of the land reconfigured on staves and scores. The further you walk into First Thought Best Thought, out along the cornfield plains of the mid-west, the more you jettison the structuring of the self – or rhythm, tangled melody, full band arrangements – and dissolve into the intimacy of the wide open sheath of grain, dirt and sky.”

Joel Pott

Ear-candy rarely came so delicious

Words: Stevie Chick
Illustration: Phil Elliott

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Jon Dale
It's So Hard To Tell Who's Going To Love You The Best (Megaphone)

It's so hard to tell who's going to love you the best. No one ever tells you how much harder it gets, either. It's like you get one thing sorted, and another thing slides. Anyone who tells you otherwise, who tells you there's peace to be had without compromise, who swears that there is happiness without holes in it, they're a fucking liar and they've probably never listened to Karen Dalton.

I was given her album (one of only two that she made, recorded in 1969 after a decade of playing live) before its most recent re-release. I think the man who gave it to me knew we’d need it’s So Hard To Tell... its songs were resigned, slip-sliding, bittersweet: in awe of beauty and accepting of pain and desire in a way that would maybe come to help smooth ours out. More prosaically, I guess he also knew I loved blues, and women who'd survived all kinds of shit and acted the way they oughtn't and went off into the mountains with three of their bottom front teeth missing and played a Gibson 12-string with metal fingerpicks, like you see in the DVD that comes with this reissue.

Karen Dalton

It will break your heart, and then mend it again by morning

I don’t think either of us were prepared for it’s So Hard To Tell… though, with its sense of gravity and space, and its loose, absolute musicianship. I’d read up on Dalton, the half-Irish half-Cherokee country girl who turned up in early-Sixties Greenwich Village aged 22, with a five-year-old daughter and a banjo and the aforementioned 12-string and a nascent drink problem, and I expected flaky, vulnerable trad. arr music, strung-out and outsiderish. I expected a high voice, and some of the mannered feyness of that period’s folk revival. Instead, here was a dusty brown autumn leaf of a voice, curling in on itself then opening out with delicate clarity on the higher notes, placing each word naturally as conversation, but carefully, slowly, too; delighting in melody before tailing off into tiny tuneless tremors like barely heard birds. Here was the blues – “I’ll never get out of this blues alive” – as raw as it’s ever been, but re-interpreted to represent the toil of the inner world in a way that slays and heals in equal measure.

Yet, however devastatingly straight and simple the initial impact of the songs (by Fred Neil, Tim Hardin, Jelly Roll Morton – none ‘by Dalton herself), their arrangements are mesmerising and idiosyncratic. The instrumentation is minimal but oddly jazz: acoustic bass, occasional percussion. Dalton switches from loose, tentative blues to jingling folk, her guitar ostensively changes style but never loses its voice – and its voice is both as labyrinthine and as achingly direct as her singing one. It’s So Hard To Tell... is an album you fall into like an infatuation, but that turns out to be as complex and messy as any collision of two grown humans ever was. It will break your heart, and then mend it again by morning.

Various

Music From The Films Of Orson Welles

Volume One (éli)

I know I shouldn’t, but every time I hear that delightfully playful zither Harry Lime theme
that underpins the dark foreboding of Welles’ post-Second World War vision of Vienna in *The Third Man*, I’m reminded of the comedic genius of Jacques Tati’s *Monsieur Hulot*, on vacation away from, and hopelessly at odds with, society. There’s the same deadpan expression of emotion, the same slight knowing glance at the ridiculousness of café life. It doesn’t lessen either film for me: indeed, it increases my enjoyment, knowing that two such incredible visions are linked, however tentatively.

Three pieces from the film, performed by Anton Karas, are present here, alongside Bernard Hermann’s stirring orchestral strings from *Citizen Kane* and *Jane Eyre* and a handful of other delights. The other delights are all fine: moody and brash and suitably loveswept, voices raising and falling in a clamour of political indignation, but it’s the zither I’ll be returning for. It’s the zither that gets me every time.

**Everett True**

**Various**

**Som Imaginario (Rev-Ola)**

This slice of psychedelia comes from Brazil and a ’70 where the ruling dictatorship and persecution of fellow tropicalistas was probably more serious than the impending doom of Messrs Lennon & McCartney. Formed to back Milton Nascimento, ‘Imaginary Sound’ nevertheless carve a typically Beatleesque niche. As you’d expect, there is also more than a touch of bossa, batucada and gente samba and there’s a surprisingly country Byrds feel about the whole thing.

This is fine stuff indeed and, especially on ‘Hey, Man’, the reassuringly spaced time.

**LJ Oddman**

**Virus Syndicate**

The *Work Related Illness (Planet Mu)* second time out for Virus Syndicate’s debut album and there are, perhaps, concessions to maturity, but it’s still enormous fun. OK, so we’ve lost the cartoon cover, in favour of a more Guardian-friendly black & silver sci-fi shot of the band with spiky eyes, but the gleeful juvenilia of recklessly hedonistic anthems such as ‘Girls’ and ‘Wasted’ remains intact.

A trio of new darker tunes tip the balance and make this an altogether more extreme, danceable music this side of the extreme, danceable music this side of *Dungeons And Dragons* wherein fearsome sax-wielding creatures called Uncle Ted popped up unexpectedly, spouting scary gibberish, dancing an obsessive/compulsive dance – always covering the same three slabs of concrete. Don’t put your nephew in the microwave. There’s no way out of this spiral: when I walk along the street I can only hear a low motoron hum, a flexing of society’s muscles.

I liked to dance, y’know. Uncle Ted was based on the former anarchic puppeteer and twisted, demented, gurning, intense frontman of Blurt. See? The same three groups. Blurt, This Heat... oh, you get it. His minimal, devilish, dry humping, confrontational three-piece has been blowing shards of discontent and No Wave rhythmic splendour since 1980: as *The Best Of Blurt Volume 2 – The Body That They Built To Fit The Car* (Salamander) proves. Imagine being Ted Milton for 26 years! Jesus, fuck! Imagine being Everett True for 16. It really doesn’t work. None of the ‘hits’ are present. This is some of the most extreme, danceable music this side of the good Captain (Beefheart), this side of ESG, of the past three decades.

Here’s a cliché. OK. Got over it yet? Let’s discuss my past. Dancing. Not fucking. Not snogging. Scared of most anything concerned with adult life. (What’s changed?) My impressionable self looking for leads, for causes, for mentors. Let’s switch cities; Birmingham, late 1978. Ferment and provocation; the jagged yet irresistible white funk of James Chance, Gang Of Four, the DIY ethos of Mekons, the politics of the three-day week, rats crawling through garbage in city centres, the inner secession of rock’n’roll. Along come the *Au Pairs*, righteous and filled with a desire to help change society at whatever level they encounter it. Fifteen years before the equally inspirational Bikini Kill created a furor within the male-centric music press by pointing out the gender imbalance at gigs. The Au Pairs were actively confronting it — at a time when violence and boneheaded skins were endemic. The fact their music — a heady rush of blood to the head, a searing, forceful dissemination of gender politics, a brittle, angular, guitar-based rock music led by the intimidating figure of Lesley Woods — was so incredible, easily the equal to more feted post-punk groups like Delta 5 and (yes) Essential Logic was some fucking bonus. There’s a kick-ass double CD compilation out, covering both albums and various singles, absolutely all you need to know — from the caustic ‘We’re So Cool’ to the bluesy, full-throttle live cover of ‘Piece Of My Heart’ to the deadpan cool first single ‘You’ — called *Stepping Out Of Line* (Sanctuary). It’s not This Heat. Little is.

Music isn’t all sexually frustrated astringency, though. Every day, it seems, another five or six intriguing, oddball and downright delightful CDs from Rev-ola drop onto my doormat, there to beexcitedly pored over and examined. *Fats Domino*’s goodtime swing piano. *Ruth Brown* and *Lavern Baker*’s bluesy belters. *John Jacob Niles*’ Appalachian folk. *Ravi Shankar. Don And The Goodtimes*’ Beach Boys-esque Seattle pop. Man, they’re so cool. They sooth my fevered brow — and this without recourse to either sax or rudimentary dance electronica — and none more so than Julie London’s peerless *Julie Is Her Name* 1955 debut, the album that invented torch singing; just a whisper of instrumentation and breezy enunciation. It’s more than enough. Eerily seductive and consummately sexual, especially the timeless reading, never bthered, of Arthur Hamilton’s ‘Cry Me A River’ — this is pure gold. The *Hi-Lo’s* first album, 1954’s seamless melding of doo-wop, pop and jazz *Listen*! (they) predated Pet Sounds by a decade, but squint a little and it will sound so familiar, so redolent, like you’re living in a fifties ad salesman’s dreamworld of the perfect American post-war home... who didn’t have crush on Samantha from *Bewitched* anyway? It’s easy listening, but Muzak? No way.

And finally, a brief mention for the captivating prog-rock of *Rita Lee*, a member of the spaced-out and weirdly awesome Sixties Brazilian psych group Os Mutantes. (Think of Acid Mothers Temple’s more spontaneous moments. You’ll be some way there.) Her second solo album, 1972’s tripicky *Hojo E O Primeiro Dia Do Resto Sua Vida* (Rev-ola) is as confusing and skewwhiff and fucked-up as you’d expect: some Zappa-esque absurdity here, a little bossa nova there, a touch of ‘The White Album’, a smidgeon of funk... a whole load to explore.

**the true report**

**Words:** Everett True  
**Illustration:** Nick White

Age doesn’t increase knowledge. I eat home-baked pizza and listen to the same three records from the past, eternally stuck on repeat. Essential Logic. This Heat. Blurt. Essential Logic. *This Heat*. Blurt. I grew up believing a saxophone to be more revolutionary (sonically) than a phalanx of guitars, that within its capricious confines and slinky metallic curves it was possible to blow up a storm of revolution, jarring, grating and eerie. My hands hit the wrong keyboard. I have no control over fate. My contact with the outside world extended as far as games of *Dungeons And Dragons* wherein fearsome sax-wielding creatures called Uncle Ted popped up unexpectedly, spouting scary gibberish, dancing an obsessive/compulsive dance — always covering the same three slabs of concrete. Don’t put your nephew in the microwave. Don’t put your hand in the blender. There’s no way out of this spiral: when I walk along the street I can only hear a low motoron hum, a flexing of society’s muscles.

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The website tells me that at 11.15 on Thursday morning we were both listening to ‘A Little Longing Goes Away’ by The Books. Does she miss me? Is she thinking what I’m thinking? Friday night, I’m at home in my bed. It’s three am, I check Last.fm again. I know she – Jane – went to a dance-music club that night. I know she went with a girl who likes to wear hats with veils and shoes with Louis heels, a girl whose nail-varnish probably never chips; the kind of girl I’ll never be. How do I know? It’s written all over her space.

3.30 am. I guess they just got back. She’s put a record on. It’s Final Fantasy. Jane likes to make out while she’s listening to it, I should know. Are they making out right now; on the red vinyl sofa from the Sally Army thrift store? Did the other girl take off her shoes? Is Jane running her hands up the long seam on the back of the other girl’s stockings?

On Sunday the weekly charts are updated. I’ve played the album ‘Infinite Love Songs’ by Maximillian Hecker 23 times that week, and listened to ‘You Were Always The One’ by The Cribs 148 times. I look at my tags: ‘Breakup’. No shit, Sherlock.

Yeah, that’s right. The broken-hearted and online have a new weapon in their stalking/self-torture armoury: Last.fm. ‘A man without a MySpace is like a man without a shadow,’ a friend once said: now.Last.fm joins Flickr and MySpace in helping create a digital footprint, a portrait of one’s real life activities in the liminal realms of cyberspace. Want to see what your ex is up to? Simply check through their MySpace comments, read their blogs, see if they’ve changed their ‘in a relationship’ status yet. Fancy torturing yourself with pictures of your ex kissing your replacement on the mouth? Wander over to their Flickr and knock yourself out. And now: soul-divining through music. Does your ex still listen to that CD mixtape you made them, or do they have a new soundtrack these days? Are they swallowing in misery-tunes or kicking out the jams in jubilation? Last.fm will tell you all you need to know.

Last.fm uses a small plug-in, called ‘Audioscrobbler’, which you download and install in your media player. When switched on, it submits the ID3 data for each track to your online music profile. It will then build a page for you – an online representation of your music taste. This page shows your recently played tracks, your weekly top artists, and your overall most listened to artists and tracks. There is also an associated radio player, which will play stream tracks stored in the Last.fm database, so you can listen to playlists based on user tags, or choose a particular user and listen to exactly the music they’ve been listening to.

Like Flickr, Last.fm’s information is user-generated and user-classified – and as such, can tell us a lot about the ways in which people are listening to music. A tag – a piece of data about data – helps categorise large amounts of information on the internet. If you’ve got, say, 2,000 pictures of your friends in Flickr, how will you find that stupid picture of Indie Dave wearing his hat? If you’ve metatagged that particular shot with ‘David’ and ‘hat’, the chances of locating the image are greatly increased. Similarly, you can tag web links on del.icio.us (which collects and categorises your bookmarks) with ‘feminism’ – and then click on the ‘feminism’ tag and see what other links have been classified under the same tag on that particular day. This method is sometimes referred to as a ‘folksonomy’ – a combination of ‘folks’ and ‘taxonomy’, meaning ‘people’s classification system’ – because the tags are generated by users, and are community-driven rather than designated an editorial overlord.

It’s impossible to be into music without getting involved in spats about genres. Can a particular record be considered ‘emo’, when the word now describes music that’s strayed so far from its hardcore roots? Is IDM a relevant term these days? How useful is it to classify this artist as ‘blip-hop’? And so on. Last.fm sidestep this issue by handing classification over entirely to its listeners. “We were wary of introducing genres because we had endless classification over entirely to its listeners. “We were wary of introducing genres because we had endless

genre-ification basically existed so that record stores knew how to stack their shelves. But when you talk to the artists themselves, this has very little to do with the process of creation; and these tags are making explicit just how much mood has to do with the process of selection.”

Of course, user-generated tags aren’t perfect – if I’m listening to a stream of music tagged with the words ‘Arabic’, and then some retard has tagged some reggae with ‘Arabic’, this will disrupt my experience of listening to that stream. Likewise, I might like to listen to The Books or Maximilian Hecker after a break-up, whereas someone else might like to listen to Celine Dion. You can’t encode emotion – so questions arise as to how useful this method of classification actually is. Many journal entries on Last.fm slag off other users for instances of poor tagging, while there are groups called things like ‘Get Your Damn Tags Right’, where exemplary taggers can discuss the worst tags they’ve ever seen, and suggest ways to help others improve their tags.

There’s the thing, you see, that makes Last.fm and other community-driven sites so addictive – the social networking aspect. Last.fm presents users with a list of their ‘neighbours’ – people listening to similar music to your own – and then generates recommendations for you based on stuff they’ve heard that you haven’t played yet. If I’ve been listening to a lot of Kim Hiorthøy, it’s quite possible that I’ll like Finnish computer musician Puola suggests Last.fm – and it’s right. If I check out my neighbour LeightonJ’s profile, I’ll see he’s been listening to a lot of the same shit as me (DFA 1979, Lo-Fi-Fnk, Jackson And His Computer Band, Numbers). I might put on his radio and start listening to his tracks, thereby discovering the klezmer/Balkan brass music of 19-year-old Brooklyn solo artist ‘Beirut’ – and so on.

I’ll also probably develop a bit of a boner for LeightonJ. Who, I wonder, is this 20-year-old UK male with the awesome taste? If he’s linked to his Myspace, maybe I’ll check that out, see what he looks like. His playlist will subtly start to influence mine. I’ve never met or spoken to LeightonJ, even on the internet, but he’s had an affect on my life.

This is what Web 2.0 (a term used to describe second-generation web applications, usually tag-driven and collaborative) is all about: a feeling of closeness with other users of the internet. The days when people hid behind assumed identities and funny-sounding names on the net are receding. Online friends and acquaintances are no longer anonymous users hidden behind a keyboard – we can see the world through their eyes on Flickr, share their social lives on MySpace, listen to their music on Last.fm. And music, of course, is linked to emotional states – so Last.fm users aren’t just sharing info about their favourite bands, they’re providing a picture of their interior worlds and state of mind.

“Nowadays,” says Martin, attempting to sum up the appeal of Last.fm, “everything is available, so the question is how to find what’s relevant to you. This is where Last.fm is useful. New records, new bands, new labels – everything’s based on specific, targeted recommendations. Maybe you want to find someone who listens to a certain combination of music – say, S Club 7 and My Bloody Valentine. There are one or two people who listen to this combination of artists. Last.fm’s not a dating site, of course – but just as you’re more likely to meet someone you get on with at the concert of one of your favourite musicians rather than in the street, so too are you more likely to find like-minded people on Last.fm. Everything that exists in the world of music can be reflected on Last.fm.”
Paul Morrisey takes on Dracula and Frankenstein

Don’t ask me why, but when I was at college I took it upon myself to see every vampire film ever made. Stupid, I know. For 10 days, I trawled my way through a seemingly endless reel of genuinely creepy German Expressionist Nosferatu, hopping blue (!) kung fu bloodsuckers from the Far East, and softcore lesbian euro-vamps from the Seventies. My waking life became a hallucinatory miasma of bared necks, heaving chests and Peter Cushing’s indefatigable stare.

The only film I could not bring myself to watch was Blood For Dracula – Paul Morrisey’s Warhol-produced take on the Dark Prince. This is probably because the only Warhol film footage I’d been previously subjected to were stupefying droll snippets of various glassy-eyed Factory girls wandering around in their pants trying to say outrageous things (which, come to think of it, is quite a good start for any vampire film).

This is something of a shame, because both Morrisey’s take on Dracula and that other Gothic staple – the corpse-juggling mad scientist in Flesh For Frankenstein – are refreshingly stupid fun. Kinky, gory and extremely camp, they are both far more traditional fare – the big creepy castle is there, as is the mad scientist’s laboratory. But the opening credits feature two children disembowelling their teddy-bear before guillotining its head off – and yet again we know that we’re in for something completely different. It’s a treat to see that the gang’s all back, Udo Kier playing Frankenstein and Arno Juerging yet again taking on the role of his mad assistant (now with 10 per cent added eye-bulge).

This time, the terrible twosome are on a mission to find the perfect head for their male creature so they can mate it with their female creature and give birth to a lot of little baby creatures. The head must not only possess a magnificent nasum (!) but must also belong to a man who craves women. It looks like local sexy misogynist peasant Joe D’Allesandro could be in a lot of trouble. Fortunately for Surly Joe, Udo once again screw up royally – instead selecting the head of his secretly gay best friend for involuntary transplant. Naturally, this is accomplished by the not-at-all-scientific method of hedge-clippering the man’s head straight off his shoulders. Yum.

Once more, the plot devolves into a perverse Carry On-style comedy of errors with Surly Joey falling into the clutches of the Baron’s scary sister/wife (Morrisey plays the incest card a little more confusingly here), the male creature deciding he wants nothing to do with the female creature and Frankenstein himself deciding to explore his predilection for dead meat with perhaps the finest line of dialogue ever committed to film: “To know death, you have to fuck life in the gall bladder!”

Paul Morrissey, I worship at your altar.

“Ze blud of seze hoors is keeling me!”

Words: Tom de Ville
There are war films, then there are films about war. The former revel in the myths of war: heroism, firepower, awesome spectacles of destruction; some of them are very good. The latter portray the effects of war on the people and places visited by it. Come And See (Nouveaux Pictures/Russico) falls into this second category and, like its distant cousins Coppola’s Apocalypse Now and Peckinpah’s Cross Of Iron, captures a sense of war’s cruelty, its strangeness and even its beauty.

Elem Klimov’s devastating 1985 film was inspired by his own childhood memories of fleeing a burning Stalingrad (now Volgograd), and by the fears of nuclear annihilation that loomed large over East and West during the mid-Eighties. The name is drawn from the Book of Revelation in which the four horsemen, harbingers of destruction, are made manifest to St John.

It’s 1942. German brigades are advancing through Russia towards Stalingrad, leaving in their wake a trail of appalling brutality and devastation. The Russians put up an intense resistance and by the year’s end succeeded in temporarily driving the Germans back, marking a turning point in the war. But Russia’s losses were horrific. According to Come And See’s closing title card, 628 Belarusian villages were raised to the ground and their inhabitants – men, women and children – slaughtered.

The film follows a fragment of this history through the eyes of F ionya (15-year-old first-timer Alexei Kravchenko), a young teenager who dreams of joining the Russian partisans and protecting his people. Accepted into a makeshift platoon, his hopes are frustrated when its battle-hardened leader Kosach orders him to hold the fort, accompanied by the mischievous young maiden Glosha. But their adolescent, sylvan idyll is obliterated by a German bombing raid, starting F ionya on a journey through a nightmare landscape of war.

From the moment the first shell explodes, it’s clear that this is a film like no other. For one thing, the explosions are real: deciding that regular pyrotechnics didn’t pack enough wallop, the production team used real military munitions for the explosions, and real bullets in the guns. Then, as F ionya and Glosha scrabble and stumble around in the burning earth following the blast, for several minutes the soundtrack is filled only with the hollow, metallic ringing of burst eardrums. Suddenly, we are there with them. And, as horror piles upon horror throughout the film’s two-and-a-half hours, we never, even for one moment, leave.

By the end we understand why Kosach kept F ionya back from the troop. Never has a fiction of war appeared so brutal, harrowing or real. The film regularly achieves a state of such transcendent intensity that the membrane between our world and the film’s is almost permanently breached. Nobody should ever have to witness the things that he sees, but they happen every day in wartime.

Several scenes make for extremely difficult viewing, particularly a horrific German raid on a Russian village. But the storm-clouds do part for occasional moments of unquiet ecstasy and hallucinatory beauty, thanks largely to stunning Steadicam work from Alexei Rodionov and Oleg Yanchenko’s understated yet powerful electronic score.

It took director Klimov eight years to get the go ahead from the authorities to make his masterpiece and, though it was globally lauded on its release, and he was still only in his forties, he never made another film. After watching this, it’s not hard to understand why. Meanwhile, Alexei Kravchenko was given hypnotherapy to protect him from some of his more traumatic memories of the arduous nine-month shoot.

Without doubt one of the most intense films you will ever see in your lifetime – and this is coming from one who has spent a lifetime seeking out intense films – Come And See exposes the majority of war films for what they really are: disingenuous betrayals of war’s countless victims. Watch it, then show it to your friends. Any fool who’s donned Nazi paraphernalia in petulant rage at their cosy suburban existence should be forced to view it down their local goth cave.
micro movies?
The best of American words: boys in their shorts

words: Preti Taneja

The best of American micro movies?

Who are the female directors?

PJ Harvey
On Tour – Please Leave Quietly (Island)

This is impressive. As she matures, Polly Harvey becomes ever more challenging, open to new sounds and techniques and ways of expression. She’s captivating on stage, whether she’s cooing several shades of blue out her guitar, or strutting in stilettos: controlling, cajoling, devastating. This, her first DVD release, is taken from the Uh Huh Her 2004 tour: snippets of mundane backstage banter and movement are interspersed with riveting live performance, the idea being to provide some sort of visual ‘diary’, remove some sheen from the finished presentation. It works, mainly because the songs thus showcased are so fine: one moment Polly is belting out shards of truth on ‘Uh Huh Her’ like Beth Ditto from The Gossip, the next (on ‘Taur’) her guitarists are wrenching and pummelling their instruments like they’re trying out for Sonic Youth.

In between, we see Polly drunk and smiling (no secrets: she’s too experienced an artist for that), stage sets being constructed and dismantled (yawn), soundchecks (double yawn) and the occasional trip through a recording studio. It’s worth it, though: Polly long since transcended her debt to Patti Smith and the Delta blues guitarists, and seeing her like this is truly sublime.

Everett True

Nico

All Tomorrow’s Parties (Cherry Red)

Live, Nico was terrifying. I saw the doomed ex-Velvet Underground chanteuse play a handful of shows in the early Eighties, sometimes accompanied by the remnants of fiery Scots post-punk band Scars, sometimes solo with her whining pump organ providing sombre, spooked atmosphere. I found her clipped, Germanic pronunciation fascinating, loved the funereal tone of the songs, the torpid ennui. But she was so unnerving! She’d long since finished being a ‘Femme Fatale’. Now she was just fatal.

I was drawn to – and simultaneously repulsed by – the aura of death that surrounded her, without knowing why. I had no idea then about her heroin addiction. I had little knowledge of her past. It was her presence, her Gothic grandeur, that thrilled me so, not her history.

This live video – grainy footage of an acoustic show at Manchester’s library theatre in 1983, a concert with full band back-up, a chilling reading of ‘Orly Flight’ at the Haçienda’s birthday party – captures the feeling well. Indeed, the lo-fi, no frills filming adds to the air of hopelessness. ‘Who are the female directors?’ He wanted the best of the best.

Unfortunately,” says Morris, “this (DVD) is a representation of the industry, not just the US. The films just aren’t there. Who are the female directors?” He wanted the best of the best. Miranda July didn’t make it.

But watching this DVD I was overwhelmed by naughty girl thoughts... Chocolates! Yes, this DVD is like a perfect Hershey box selection. Each piece, and even in that, the lady doesn’t speak. The films just aren’t there. Who are the female directors?” He wanted the best of the best.

Miranda July didn’t make it.

In the first layer, I loved a hauntingly moving animation by Adam Parrish King (this year’s Sundance winner). ‘The Wrath Of Cobble Hill’ is a dark chocolate full of a bitter coffee crème, for which read love and loss. Second time around, feeling the kind of guilty sugar rush that means No! No! Don’t stop!, the crisp class comment of DA Pennebaker’s ‘Daybreak Express’ (above) was my toffee crunch – it carried me through the gleaming industrial towers of man’s achievement, shot through with the merest sliver of sky.

My gold wrapper, however, goes to the one film in Morris’ selection that doesn’t take sides or make statements, and doesn’t need to get dirty with the detail of human existence – Standish Lawder’s ‘Necrology’. Nibble on the corner of this film, then settle down and lick it slowly. Let it melt on your fingers and lick them too. This film is the centrepiece of the box and it’s a girl’s perfect selection for one more reason – you can keep on eating, and it won’t run out.

petrol pump, and Todd Solondz’s fat mom weeping at the suicide of her geeky son in ‘Feelings’, Morris’ selection says loud and clear: it’s a man’s world.

As curator, Morris was “conscious of the issue”. Maya Deren’s experimental classic ‘Meshes Of The Afternoon’ is the only female voice in the piece, and even in that, the lady doesn’t speak. “Unfortunately,” says Morris, “this (DVD) is a representation of the industry, not just the US. The films just aren’t there. Who are the female directors?” He wanted the best of the best.

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The first 15 new subscribers also receive an exclusive Rolling Stones CD

Here at Plan B, we aren’t so down with the male rock icons. Fifties calypso stars, yes. Sixties rock dudes, no. But fuck it, if you’re going to tap into that whole rock’n’roll mythology (sunken cheekbones, velvet cuffs, cars in swimming pools), you may as well go back to the originators, The Rolling Stones. And to show we ain’t biased, to coincide with the 40th Anniversary of the release of the Stones’ Aftermath, Plan 8 have got 15 copies of the new, judo-hip, doll-cute, limited edition Japanese ‘paper sleeve’ vinyl-replica reissues of the ABKCO Remasters to give away to subscribers…

To qualify for this offer, please mention PB12 with your cheque, or in the Paypal comments box.

The next issue of Plan B is in independent newsagents, Borders, HMV, Virgin Megastores, and all good record shops the week beginning 7th August, 2006. From the first week of September 2006, Plan B will be monthly. If you have difficulty finding a copy, please enquire at your local record shop. For independent newsagents, you can ask them to order it at the counter, or email andrews@warnersgroup.co.uk

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Check out www.planbmag.com for web-exclusive interviews, reviews, articles and staff weblogs, stockist information, gig guide, secure ordering and discussion forums. Plus, coming soon – archive articles from the first two years of Plan B
A new direction for DIY publishing

DIY publishing: a term redolent of a hands-on, rough-edged, let’s-do-the-show right here approach to the creation of literature, right? You know: a bunch of crusties sitting around in a squat, scribbling manuals on bike maintenance and cranking them out on a stolen lithograph machine. An A-Z guide to looking after your girl parts, from drinking raspberry leaf tea to tone the uterus to inducing a miscarriage with parsley and goldenseal, produced by a Brooklyn feminist collective in 1978 and in (self-)production ever since. A punk kid’s travel writings, all hand-drawn in pencil, fed through a photocopier, and distributed via underground distributors from Merseyside to Montreal. Wacky shit: weird shit, too out there to be considered good enough for a ‘real’ publisher; stuff with deliberately low production values; stuff with a confrontational aesthetic, stuff that is – in the eyes of the mainstream – shitty, shoddy, lame. Right?

Well, yes. And no. While seizing the means of production in order to disseminate all that crazy subversive jive-talk is of course an excellent and time-honoured offshoot of mainstream literature (though somewhat redundant since the popularisation of Old Mama Internet), there’s more to independent publishing than this. There’s the magazine you hold in your hands, for one thing. Sniff those shiny pages – tasty, huh? Stroke it across your cheek. And then there are the beautiful art books put out by Passenger Books, a new pan-European publishing imprint that has its roots firmly in the underground/DIY scenes – though you wouldn’t necessarily guess it from the three beautifully printed and bound books they’ve put out so far.

Passenger Books was founded in 2005 by sisters Corinn and Simone Gerber, and their friend Peter Gorschulte. Each resides in a different European city (Corinn lives in Cologne, Simone in Zurich, and Peter in Dusseldorf) and their books are printed in Istanbul, with production overseen by Linda Herzog, an artist and friend who currently lives out there. So far, so swish. But the people putting out these books aren’t trust-fund babies, rich kids pissing around producing vanity projects to promote themselves and their friends. They’re people like you and me, they had an idea and they made it happen.

“Simone and I were visiting our friend Linda in Istanbul,” explains Corinn, as we sit in her attic apartment surrounded by proofs for the book she’s working on. “She’s an artist, and she was awarded a grant to live out there and work with. She’s an avid photographer as well, and had a huge collection of images from her time spent living in Istanbul, Birmingham and Zurich. At the time, the discussion around the EU was very active, and the images can be seen to be a part of that – all of these cities are in Europe, but only one of them is in the EU; what does it mean to be from Europe in this day and age? In what ways are we united or divided?”

So we decided to publish the photographs as a book (Birmingham, Istanbul, Zurich, Linda Herzog, Passenger Books 2005). We began researching printers in Istanbul straightaway, and I was astonished – the companies out there have very high-tech Heidelberg machines, so they can produce beautiful books; but at the same time they don’t really know how to use them, so you have to be very careful when overseeing the production.

Publishing a hardback book with little experience isn’t the easiest thing in the world, of course. “Production was a bit of a nightmare. I was in Cologne, while Linda, who didn’t speak Turkish at the time, was trying to liaise with the printers. We both didn’t know much publishing lingo – and of course my first language is German…”

But this, she explains, is part of what the whole project is about. “Passenger Books is not just about the object you hold in your hands. It’s about the social aspect – working together despite being based in different countries – and also the method and means of production. It’s important to us that the books are produced in Istanbul. It’s not just about going for the cheapest printers, which is usually the deciding factor… though of course, that was a consideration.”

Ah yes, the money question. As someone who spent a good few years pouring cash into a fanzine which was then given away completely free, I feel entitled to ask. Birmingham, Istanbul, Zurich is a hardcover art book with glossy, thick pages and full-bleed photographs. How do you fund all this?

“The first book was funded through Linda’s grant – but printing costs in Istanbul are very reasonable. We published 1,000 copies and paid a very cheap price for everything, including high-tech scans. The books are sold throughout Europe and I can combine this with my day job as a bookseller. But even so, it’s not so much about numbers of sales – and we can afford that, because we all have full-time jobs as well as running Passenger Books. What’s important to us is the books themselves – the design, how they look, how the reader interacts with the text. We want to make stuff that is special.”

The second book they distributed, a collaboration with Cologne label Tomlab – is certainly that. Called The Empty Sleeve, it’s an album by artist/illustrator David Shrigley, except – well, there’s no album inside. The publication looks like a normal gatefold album sleeve, but then you open it up – to be greeted a couple of bright, impasto paintings spelling out the words ‘UGLY’ and ‘CUNTS’ – and there’s just a songbook, and an empty paper sleeve. The sleeve has a drawing of a record on it with the words “I DIDN’T MAKE A RECORD IT WOULD HAVE BEEN TOO DIFFICULT IT WAS EASIER NOT TO MAKE A RECORD” in distinctive Shrigley handwriting.

“There were 2,000 of these, and they’re all sold out now. This is a song book with song text, and the idea is that you can sing the songs if you want. It’s an art-object, this one – it costs £25 – but we’re thinking of making a soft-cover book, a cheaper one, that everyone can afford. Tomlab are currently getting submissions from various bands who’ve recorded songs with the lyrics Shrigley has written, so this time, the book will include a CD of these songs too.”
songs with the soft-cover version – and maybe a full-sized LP as well."

Passenger Books’ next project – is a collection of the drawings of Ingo Giezendanner, the artist behind GRRRR.net. These are highly detailed black-and-white felt-tipped pictures – reportage of industrial scenes done with such intricacy that it sometimes tips over into eye-wateringly beautiful surrealism. They’ve also just produced a series of limited edition buttons featuring works by Maurizio Cattelan, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, GRRRR.net, Wilhelm Hein, Diango Hernández, Linda Herzog, Jörg Immendorff, Micky3, Jonathan Monk, Linda Neutral, Daniel Roth, Allen Ruppersberg, David Shrigley, and AK Wehrli – “something tiny, that everyone can afford,” explains Corinn.

With Birmingham, Istanbul, Zurich recently awarded Most Beautiful Swiss Book 2005 and selected for the German Photography Book Award 2005, the existence of Passenger Books is testament to the fact that independent publishing, DIY ethics and high production values can make very happy bedfellows indeed.

www.passengerbooks.com

‘We want to make stuff that is special’

**call for submissions: the riot project**
Were you involved in riot grrrl in the UK or Europe? Were you in a band, or did you set up a label, run meetings or picnics, create fanzines? I’m currently researching for a book on riot grrrl and its modern-day legacy, and am seeking interviewees, archive materials, etc: everything from press coverage, zine excerpts, and diary entries to album/tape sleeves and flyer and manifesto designs. Please drop me a line if you can help! ampster@gmail.com.

**Miss AMP**
Brian Wood goes back to his indie roots with two new comics series

In the post-Watchmen rush to establish the graphic novel as a legitimate medium in its own right and the ensuing flood of articles on how comics had ‘grown up’, it seemed that somewhere along the line the simple, visceral thrill of picking up a comic had been forgotten. Just as the music business became increasingly about flogging albums rather than singles, so the comics market eschewed the humble charms of the pamphlet.

Luckily, a band of like-minded professionals is reclaiming the single as the weapon of choice and chief among them is comic writer, artist and graphic designer Brian Wood.

Wood burst onto the scene in the late Nineties with futurist anti-propaganda screed Channel Zero, a hyper-hip and politically opinionated blast of Orwellian prescience. Its success pushed Wood front and centre but, after a brief flirtation with the mainstream, he returned to his indie roots with a number of books, most notably the critically acclaimed mini-series Demo.

“The initial concept of Demo came from some old ideas I had when I was writing [X-Men spin-off] Generation X for Marvel,” he explains, “but I was going about it in an entirely different way, very indie and down to earth, without any of the more fantastical, idealised elements that typically make up a standard Marvel book. I burned through those ideas pretty quickly, and that’s when the themes started to get a little broader. Demo is 12 stories written over 18 months – it seems natural that it would evolve.”

Through a judicious combination of word of mouth and keeping the issues in print, Demo became a sleeper hit. Did Wood expect such a positive response to the book?

“I was surprised. At the time it was peaking, [Demo] was by far the most successful of my indie books. I knew the readers would be able to connect with it, but I wasn’t sure how much the retail community would support it. As it turns out, they embraced it right away.”

Following up Demo was never going to be an easy task, but Wood has risen to the challenge with two new monthly series. DMZ (with Riccardo Burchielli) is a dystopian vision of Bush-era America, boiled over into full-scale civil war.

Following trainee photojournalist Matty, left stranded in the demilitarised zone of downtown Manhattan, it’s a finely balanced book, careful not to take sides. The crux of its appeal is the way Wood ekes out the little personal stories amid the guerrilla war.

“People read it as biased and partisan anyway, so it didn’t seem to have mattered what my intentions were. The point of the book was to create a huge scenario [around] the clashing of two extremes, and focusing on the ‘normal’ people caught in the middle. I’m not deliberately trying to take a middle road for the sake of a broader readership; the story lies in the middle road.”

Local (with Ryan Kelly), meanwhile, is closer to Demo in execution: 12 one-shots, linked by the cross-country travels of lynchpin character Megan. Often, though, Megan is merely a bit player in the stories Wood has to tell, which deal with notions of family or, in a particularly tender issue, the deteriorating friendships in a band long run dry of any common interest.

Both books show a real fondness for location. How important is his environment to Wood creatively?

“I moved from NYC to San Francisco a few years ago and immediately hated it and regretted the decision,” he admits. “Not too surprisingly, it was shortly after that move that the idea for Local came about, as well as DMZ. I moved back to NYC after about a year [but] the experience really got me thinking about how notions of home, hometowns and where you live can shape your identity, and even your actions.”

Key to each book’s success is the strong art team, especially on Demo, where Becky Cloonan’s style flowed effortlessly from the cute and manga-esque to impressionistic thick lines and heavy blacks. But with all these collaborations, doesn’t Wood long to get back to drawing?

“I would love to draw more, but I’m not very fast,” he says. “Writing comics for others to draw is incredibly satisfying in its own way. I feel blessed to be able to collaborate with so many great artists, and they’ve only made the stories better.”

In an industry that for too long has been about the overlong cocaine-fuelled double album, Brian Wood might well be the master of the single – the 22-page Phil Spector.

The collected edition of Demo is out now on AIT/PlanetLar. Monthly instalments of DMZ (DCVertigo) and Local (Oni Press) are available from all good comic shops. www.brianwood.com

‘Writing comics for others to draw is incredibly satisfying in its own way’
Alistair Fitchett owns up to some guilty pleasures and old favourites

I don’t know if it was the unusually elongated chill of winter, the upheaval of a house full of builders or the imminent approach of my 40th birthday, but the past few months feel like they have been ones of guilty pleasures. By that, I mean that my spare time seems to have been filled with culture that makes few demands on my deeper cerebral functions. It’s been music that keeps me warm, moves my feet and brings a smile to my chapped lips, and comics that make me laugh and that thrill my senses, that take me out and away from the harsh realities of life and growing old.

So no tortured autobiographical angst for me. No, instead I’ve been reading lots of Asterix books. As a kid I always wanted to read Asterix but never had the chance. Books were meant to be about words, and I was too clever for picture books. I went along with that. So my friends read Asterix while I read… The Three Investigators and Hardy Boys novels probably. Which is another story entirely.

But Asterix. Fantastic. What’s not to love about Asterix? French dudes drink magic potion, go on adventures, beat up the Italians, come home, eat boar, get drunk. It’s such a great formula; simple and effective, no nonsense. Well, lots of nonsense actually, which is part of the appeal. Asterix is something you either love or loathe, but you’ll rarely find a comic as perfectly paced or as wonderfully drawn. Illustrator Albert Uderzo throws in lots of visual jokes and puns to compliment René Goscinny’s classic stories, and everyone lives happily ever after. Except the Romans of course.

Part of my (re)discovery of Asterix was down to a frame from Philippe Dupuy and Charles Berberian’s Mr. Jean stories. It was just a throwaway reference, but it was enough to make me want to explore, to make me warm even more to the Drawn And Quarterly-published Get A Life collection.

Another treasure from a past that was only tangentially my own was the discovery of Titan Books’ The Steel Claw: Vanishing Man collection. These treats of classic Sixties British comics were originally published in the Valiant weekly, and while the character has surfaced at times in the intervening years (notably reprised by Grant Morrison in his Zenith strip for 2000AD and as a fleeting cameo as The Iron Tallon during the Alan Moore and Alan Davies run with Captain Britain), it’s these collected early tales which really tell the story of both the cultural context of the times, and of the awesome drawing style of Jesus Blasco.

Speaking of Alan Moore, this issue’s essential Moore reference has to be the DC Universe: The Stories Of Alan Moore. It’s a classy collection that superbly showcases Moore’s plotting and story telling skills, not least in the legendary Superman tale Whatever Happened To The Man Of Tomorrow? and the award winning Batman: The Killing Joke. For the dedicated comics’ fan, there will be little here that they haven’t already raved devotedly, but for piqued newcomers and those sceptical of picking up something featuring men in tights, this is a fabulously seductive and convincing collection.

And since we’re on a superhero kick, what about the recently published Batman tome Year One: Ra’s al ghul and The Omac Project? OK, so The Omac Project is perhaps not strictly a Batman book, being part of the Infinite Crisis collection, but it’s a fantastic, gripping read, and has The Blue Beetle featuring strongly, so what more do you want? Since you ask, I could certainly want for more of

Finally, it’s been a case of back to the future with the Eisner award winning The Originals from Watchmen co-creator Dave Gibbons (illustration below). The Originals is basically Quadrophenia with a barely disguised retro-futurist slant. The Mods are The Originals, the Rockers are The Dirt and they all go down to the seaside (the pleasure dome of Drinkwater) for a weekend of music, dancing, pill-popping, sex and fighting. A throwaway and utterly Pop tome that presses all the right buttons, The Originals is a stylish tribute to the original Modernists and to the fabulous folly of youth. The last to one page sees main character Lel standing alone against a wall. “It’s my birthday next week,” he says. “I’ll be 18. Fucking 18.” And then, over the page, in tiny letters, the finale: “Suddenly, I’m Old.” I know the feeling.
Unbuttoning The Notorious Bettie Page

“Finally, and crucially, in an affront to costume drama’s tender sensibilities, the costumes come off.”

So concludes Julianna Pidduck in Contemporary Costume Film (BFI). What we really want to see, she argues, are the modern, naked bodies (proof that people in the past had bodies, too) beneath the layers of petticoats or pantaloons. Elaborate costumes and stuffy historical eras just make the striptease more fun.

Jane Campion and others have undone the costume drama’s tenderness, but the film raises questions of the reproductions – still gets viewers (and censors) off, but the film eschews the rhythm of a striptease, offering Bettie’s first nude shoot early on. After that, it’s less about what she takes off and more about what she puts on. Even in the nude shoot, both Mol and the film seem more attentive to the period-perfect halter bikini than to Bettie’s sense of her own body. Pidduck’s idea (taken from Stella Bruzzi) that these are really dramas of costume fetishism is doubled in the scenes of Bettie’s shoots with Irving and Paula Klaw (Chris Bauer and Lily Taylor), who are closed down for indecency by Senator Estes Kefauver (David Straithairn, reprising his speech patterns and hairstyle from Good Night, And Good Luck, albeit on the other side of censorship).

Boots, cuffs, bodices, blindfolds: these become the stars of the show as Bettie, coached by the wonderfully complex Paula, who claims that her ‘special clients’ are men whose buttoned-down lives give them an interest in restraint, happily accedes to scenes without comment, just as the film literally makes no comment in its elliptical references to Bettie’s abusive husband, gang rape and (possibly) incest.

As Pidduck points out, there are hardly any films about women creative geniuses that aren’t also victimologies: Agnès Merlet’s Artemisia – like Julie Taymor’s far superior Frida and the Virginia Woolf segment of The Hours – focuses on the creative woman as injured victim rather than impassioned artist. Sally Potter’s Orlando ends with the protagonist presenting her manuscript to a publisher in contemporary London, but there’s no point in the film at which we see him/her writing this magnum opus.

As in Bettie Page, the plot of Orlando turns on a moment of nudity, in which Orlando (Tilda Swinton) contemplates the reflection of her (newly-female) body with the same dry wit as she addresses everything else in the film – and proceeding to wrestle with the entrapping hall of mirrors, symbolised by parodically flouncy costumes, imposed on women in the ‘costume drama’ era. Bettie, as legendary photographer Bunny Yeager (Sarah Paulson) notes, is never naked, even with her clothes off, because there’s no sense that she is revealing anything: the only insight that we have into Bettie’s subjectivity is her belief in an alternately benign and vindictive God, whose bondage and domination seem far more unpleasant than Bettie’s work for the Klaws.

The final section of the film begins with Bettie arraying herself for work as a missionary, with the same attention to detail as any of the restaged scenes without comment, just as the film literally makes no comment in its elliptical references to Bettie’s abusive husband, gang rape and (possibly) incest.

The feverish anticipation surrounding the film suggests that women taking off their clothes – or rather, costumes, given the claustrophobic accuracy of the reproductions – still gets viewers (and censors) hot under the collar. Yet the film raises questions about costume drama while not raising the temperature in the theatre one bit. Harron, whose overly precise recreation of (the novel as) nouvelle cuisine sucked the paranoia and political critique from American Psycho, creates a Bettie Page that the viewer cannot find sexy, despite the lush black and white cinematography and Gretchen Mol’s assured performance.

Costumes spend a fair amount of time coming off, but the film eschews the rhythm of a striptease, offering Bettie’s first nude shoot early on. After that, it’s less about what she takes off and more about what she puts on. Even in the nude shoot, both Mol and the film seem more attentive to the period-perfect halter bikini than to Bettie’s sense of her own body. Pidduck’s idea (taken from Stella Bruzzi) that these are really dramas of costume fetishism is doubled in the scenes of Bettie’s shoots with Irving and Paula Klaw (Chris Bauer and Lily Taylor), who are closed down for indecency by Senator Estes Kefauver (David Straithairn, reprising his speech patterns and hairstyle from Good Night, And Good Luck, albeit on the other side of censorship).

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The final section of the film begins with Bettie arraying herself for work as a missionary, with the same attention to detail as any of the restaged shoots. As a man who recognises her as she is reading from the Bible in Central Park tells her, Bettie will never be free of her photographed body. Its ‘tender sensibilities’ are the costume that she is trying to take off, like Queen Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett) at the end of Elizabeth, disguising her body’s naked history – as we watch these films eager to recover exactly that.
get me away from here, i’m dying
Words: SF Said

Christi Puiu on comedy, tragedy and The Death Of Mr Lazarescu

OK, be warned: this film’s a hard sell. But since when was Plan B about selling? For me, it’s about sharing discoveries and passions, spreading the word on stuff which the mainstream would never deem to notice.

The Death Of Mr Lazarescu, the second film from young Romanian director Christi Puiu, pretty much defines that category. It’s a two-and-half-hour film about an old man dying alone in the Bucharest night. And it’s brilliant.

This film’s a hard sell, isn’t it?
“I know, I can’t imagine how to sell a film like this.”

How did you get people to see it in Romania?
“Very few people go to the cinema in Romania; we have 20 channels of TV, and people watch sitcoms. So we promoted our film by relating it to sitcoms. When the film was presented at the Transylvanian Film Festival, the audience thought they were coming to a comedy. It was like they were watching Mr Bean: they laughed from the beginning to the end, almost. Ten minutes before the end, they stopped laughing, because then they saw that this was no joke.”

There were times I laughed too, but I don’t see it as a comedy – do you?
“No, I don’t. Though the film does have some comic situations, even if they are black. And some people were laughing to escape the painful situation they were dragged into. You can laugh this way; protecting yourself. But some people cried. Everyone has different reactions.”

I’ve been watching someone close to me dying recently, and it’s horrible. I don’t see any redemption or anything, like you would in a Hollywood film; it’s just horrible.
“I see it like this too. I’m not very optimistic. I think we are doomed; we are condemned to this absurd life, and there is no way out. The traditional picture of departure – as an old man, like 120 years old, lying on your bed, surrounded by your family – this has nothing to do with real life.”

‘I’m not very optimistic.
I think we are doomed’

How would you like to die, if you could choose?
“There are some hills outside Bucharest that I like to visit, and the idea of death seems so normal there – I’m part of this cycle of regeneration, nature and so on. But we don’t dare to face death in town; we just want to get as much pleasure as we can. That’s probably why I am so afraid of death. And because I am afraid of it, I would prefer to die instantaneously.”

Me too! I’m all for having a big heart attack, before my body starts failing.
“Yes. Big heart attack, all in one second, and bye bye.”

Three...Extremes
Japan/South Korea/Hong Kong, 2006
This East Asian portmanteau movie gives three of the most imitable directors from the region the opportunity to express what they believe horror to be.

Japan’s Takashi Miike is the master of cinematic provokedo’s. His works range from love-and-torture tale Audition, through incest essay Visitor Q, to any number of subversive yakuza flicks. He’s less acknowledged for his lyricism, which is striking in ‘Box’, the claustrophobic tale of a writer who fears being buried alive. Miike’s compositions are uncharacteristically static and spare, yet he displays his usual disregard for narrative structure with unmatched flair.

Where Miike is subdued, South Korea’s Park Chan-Wook (the Vengeance trilogy) is hysterical with the meta-film ‘Cut’, in which a movie director protagonist is forced to watch his wife’s fingers being cut off by a disgruntled extra.

Most mesmerising is Fruit Chan’s ‘Dumplings’. Its horror lies in the hyper-everyday, with much of the action occurring in a run-down area of Hong Kong. Yet Christopher Doyle lenses the film with the same sort of sensuous clarity he’s brought to Wong Kar-Wai’s work. The story of an aging woman who’ll do anything to remain young enables Chan to blend the horrid crunch of sinewy flesh and bone with the pleasure of eating. It’s a boldness that pays off, and one he elaborates in the equally successful full-length feature, Dumplings.

Stewart Gardiner

Access All Areas
June-July 2006, NFT, London
Stack of great rock movies being shown during this season. The jaw-dropping Abba: The Movie. The evil that lurks within the hearts of men in Gimme Shelter. Funk maestros strutting their good stuff in Wattiaston, Ziggy Stardust. And so on…

There are also more recent offerings – the caustic, insightful dissemination of mid-Nineties Seattle music in Hype!, Sub Pop founders Ion and Bruce absolute stars; the electrifying and downright painful insight into on-the-road indie life, Dig; the fine Undertones movie Teenage Kicks – worth seeing if only to catch John Peel talking with customary enthusiasm, The Fearless Freaks starring The Flaming Lips (pictured right); and the excellent 1994 Jeff ‘Daniel Johnston’ Fueruzig documentary Half Japanese: The Band That Would Be King.

See Jad explain his theory of music: there are only two types of songs, monster songs and love songs. See Jad explain precisely why The Beatles pale into insignificance next to his jarring, beautiful, adrift music. Watch Matador Records founder Gerard Cosloy come across as the ultimate rock nerd.

Marvel at Penn Jilette’s hair. A funny, touching and inspirational couple of hours spent in the company of the sweetest man in America, and his brother. What could be better?

Everett True
fellow americans
Words: Jack Lewis and Marc LeBrun

Jack Lewis reports from New York City’s Whitney Biennial

Day For Night
Curated by Christi Iles and Philippe Vergne

The historically problematic Whitney Biennial is meant to embody an array of contemporary trends in American art. The curators of this year’s edition smartly decided to question the idea of what it means to be an ‘American’ artist.

Upon entering the museum, at the elevator, visitors are greeted with Aaron Young’s large rock sculpture with the words ‘LOCALS ONLY!’ spray-painted on it. Young, a surfer, has in the past created similar ad hoc signs at secret surfing spots in order to claim them for his own. In this show, his sign reads as a comment on America’s conflicted immigration policies and also as an attack on casual art viewers, drawn to the Biennial like rubber-neckers to an accident.

Just when I thought photo-realism had become repetitive, Marilyn Minter shows two dazzling, photo-realistic paintings full of sweaty glitter, high-heeled dirty feet and garish charm. Hannah Greely’s ‘Silencer’ (above) is a sculpture of a baby hiding its head under a winter coat. It looks how I imagine many Americans feel: infantile, helpless and scared of the world.

In a room all its own, there’s a group of work including JalalCyrus ‘The Dowling Street Martyr Brigade’. The piece collages a Black Panther image on top of the cover of Cream’s ‘Disraeli Gears’ album, as if the Panthers are reclaiming the guitar licks Eric Clapton ‘borrowed’ from the blues. Also hidden away on the fifth floor mezzanine is the evocative ‘Down By Law’. Curated by the Wrong Gallery, the mini-show features over 40 artists and includes a hidden pipe bomb, a classical portrait of the Unabomber, mugshots (OJ Simpson, Eddie Murphy, 9-11 terrorists) and other work about what it is to be an outlaw in America.

On the fringe of the art world lives the black magic practitioner and Sixties film icon Kenneth Anger. Here, he shows a selection of work including stills from past films (Invocation Of My Demon Brother with Mick Jagger) and his new video ‘Mouse Heaven’, a series of four erotically charged music videos featuring vintage Mickey Mouse toys performing choreographed dance routines in compromising positions. Meanwhile, Daniel Johnston and Jim O’Rourke battle it out for best musician/artist. O’Rourke’s dull video piece about doors called ‘Doo’ pales in comparison to Johnston’s disturbing id-inspired illustrations.

With so many artists, it was easy to overlook Roxy Coss’ black and white photo essay about a drive to the beach; a classic all-American activity. At the centre of the work one can see two re-photographed newspaper articles about the murder of a man who was presumed gay. It’s an eerie comment about America’s quest for entertainment/escapism (a trip to the beach), freedom (choice of religious views) and its hidden demons.

Impatient viewers looking for immediate satisfaction are drawn instead into a makeshift theatre with plush seats. There, they are treated/punished with Francesco Vezzoli’s ‘Trailer For A Remake Of Gore Vidal’s Caligula’, a trailer for a non-existent B-film referring to the Bush administration’s abuse of power.

Although this isn’t an overtly political Biennial, one can’t deny a subversive undercurrent in a lot of the work. It feels playful and raw and even hopeful. a mythical biker gang, and the construction of, naturally, a shrine. You are invited to come, worship and try not to forget.

Pil and Galia Kollectiv

Mike Nelson: Amnesiac Shrine
07.06.06–30.07.06, Matt’s Gallery, 42–44 Copperfield Road, London E3

Although in the last five years or so labyrinths have become far too fashionable in the art world—from Gregory Schmider’s to Gavin Turk’s—nobody does them as well as Mike Nelson. Over a succession of shows at the ICA and the Venice Biennal Nelson has constructed complicated sites in which half-forgotten fragments of fiction are set out through stage props, allowing the viewer to walk through an abandoned film project and become its unintentional protagonist. Like a hellish theme park operated by William Burroughs’ gang of wild boys, Mike Nelson labyrinth can be anything from old government offices occupied by bikers on acid to a Moroccan street market in a disused cold war nuclear bunker. ‘Amnesiac Shrine’ promises the return of the Amnesiacs, a mythical biker gang, and the construction of, naturally, a shrine. You are invited to come, worship and try not to forget.

Pil and Galia Kollectiv

future

We wanted to tell people about America’s neverending struggle between order and disorder

Dada’s Boys: Identity And Play In Contemporary Art
27.05.06–16.07.06, The Fruitmarket Gallery, 45 Market Street, Edinburgh

There has recently been much debate about ‘reactionary modernism’ – the continuous lines that connect the spirit of European utopianism (and its negation) between the two World Wars and American neo-liberalism (free market capitalism, personal fulfilment through universal democracy, etc), which has ruled the waves since.

Duchamp and Picabia, the original Dadaists in this show, which documents the preoccupation of the post-Dada tradition of American artists with ‘male identity… irreversible humour, self-consciously laddish repartee, preoccupation with taboo bodily processes…’, would probably roll in their graves laughing upon hearing the words ‘post’ and ‘tradition’ in relation to Dada.

Sadly, the tradition of the avant-garde as a groovy old Dad(a)y that teenage boys are busy rebelling against has managed to suppress the amazing forgotten female artists of the Modernist period — where are all the Mama’s boys? Nevertheless, an exploration of infantile humour as a critique of American values of normality doesn’t sound like a bad way to spend an afternoon.

Pil and Galia Kollectiv

Future City: Experiment And Utopia In Architecture 1956–2006
15.06.06–17.09.06, Barbican Art Gallery, London

If politicians had not stood in the way of Utopian architects since the Sixties, we would all be living in fully automated palaces in the sky floating above an ocean of metallic liquid by now. Your parents would probably be living in a satellite suburb over Florida, and Hackney would have its own underground service.

In ‘Future City’, the Barbican celebrates the beautiful, visionary and occasionally naïve dreams of the life that could have been after the abolishment of war, poverty and famine. Lebbeus Woods imagines parasitic structures precariously dangling from the ruins of postwar European cities, ready for occupation by upwardly mobile squatters, while Zaha Hadid borrows geological forms to rewrite urbanism. Perhaps not a single structure featured in this exhibit will ever be built, but the influence of these radical re-thinkers of the way we live reaches beyond concrete and MDF, and it sure looks pretty.

Pil and Galia Kollectiv

Staalplaat Soundsystem: The Ultrasound Of Therapy
24.06–30.07.06, Cornerhouse, 70 Oxford Street, Manchester

After having their details taken by a woman in nurse’s uniform, visitors to Manchester’s Cornerhouse will be admitted to a rubic, complete with hospital bed, where artist ‘doctors’ and ‘nurses’ will treat their ‘patients’ with personalised sound therapies. These include the ‘Hot Shaking’ therapy in which the patient lies on a bed with an electrical blanket and a massage machine controlled by sound. AEG takes body sounds and two bass shakers are mounted under the bed, while a soundtrack of Seventies porno is heard through headphones, apparently.

Although this sounds like a cross between an art guerrilla intervention and Carry On Nurse, the Staalplaat art collective explores quite serious issues such as the physiological and therapeutic aspects of music, the link between performance and medicine, art and healing.

Pil and Galia Kollectiv

‘We wanted to tell people about America’s neverending struggle between order and disorder’

(Thanks to Kate Wolf)
Kieron Gillen

**Singstar Rocks (PS2)**

The PS2 - does karaoke - but better game reaches the world of rock. That is, just stuff with guitars.

Heavy weighting towards the sort of fatty deposits building up on pop’s great vessels preparing for the final blood-shooting-from-eyeball coronary death spasm of modern culture, which means far too much time is spent flicking past tracks trying to find the handful you dig (or are willing to admit you dig, for the more elitist parties). There are too few sausages on sticks, too many bad fringes.

Perhaps useful as a critique tool – you really have no idea how bad Razorlight are until you actually have to sing their lyrics – but nowhere near as overwhelmingly life-affirmingly essential as the Singstar Eighties edition.

In short: Should have been brilliant. But it has Keane on it.

Kieron Gillen

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**Super Mario Brothers and the human condition**

Words: Mathew Kumar
Illustration: Matt Pattinson

I’ve been playing Electroplankton.

Like many other people disappointed with the current trends apparent in videogames, where you aren’t having fun until you’ve shot a hooker through the head to increase your street credibility-o-meter, I hoped for a gaming experience in which I was allowed to just play.

Yeah: Still hoping. Japanese media artist, Toshio Iwai, has created a piece of software that no matter how hard you try, you just can’t call a game. It’s little more than a collection of quickly boring sound-creating art pieces. Even the potential-filled ‘Beatnes’, in which you can create delightfully quirky tunes from NES sounds effects, is scuppered by an inability to record your creations or sustain a tune for any length of time. No matter how much I wanted to like Electroplankton, in its attempts to be art, it didn’t succeed in being a game. It doesn’t even succeed in being art.

Kind of works both ways. I found myself at the reception for a small art exhibition at the InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre in Toronto. Controller: Artists Crack The Game Code was an exhibition showing works from artists working in the field of videogame modification. I hoped to be far more impressed than I was with Electroplankton.

That hoping word again. Bastard hoping.

Walking into the small gallery just on the edge of the fashionable Queen West artist’s district, I was caught off guard by what appeared to be a Ms Pacman machine. I was two syllables off. Ms Pacmondnian, the creation of Toronto-based media collective Prize Budget for Boys, was an arcade machine conceived to use Piet Mondrian’s ‘Broadway Boogie-Woogie’ as a map for Ms Pacman.

If you’re aware of the piece, you’ll understand how obvious that is. But as a piece of art, it had very little to say or offer about either of its sources. An entirely unplayable game and a trivial piece of art, it seemed to establish that games don’t become art through simple combination.

By far the most well known works on show were presented by Myfanwy Ashmore. Her Mario Trilogy, simplistic modifications of the original NES title Super Mario Bros, removes all features and architecture from the levels, leaving an empty landscape in which the player is invited to take Mario for a walk. As a gamer, I found the pieces quickly boring, but was that because I’m too used to being told what to do in videogames?

Faced with the futility of Mario’s existence in ‘Mario_battle_no1’, Ashmore told me how others chose to deal with it: “One person spent the entire time trying to get at the only question mark block. I left that is inaccessible, until they died. Another person ran as far as possible until they died, others danced, jumped, were silly, and one guy shoved a floppy into the controller to wedge it so that he wouldn’t actually have to play, and walked away. I figured he was probably in upper management.”

Other pieces included RSG (Alexander Galloway’s ‘Prepared Playstation’, an installation with several television sets each displaying a heavily glitching copy of Tony Hawk’s Underground 2, and Apollo Shrapnel Part 1 and Restless Wrath, hypnotic and terrifying videos of Atari glitches created by Tasman Richardson.

Yes, very clever. But the more I interacted with these pieces, the more I became aware that rather than subverting gaming to create something more, they merely subverted gaming to create something less. While a copy of Mario with no aims could conceivably be asking us to consider the meaningless of our existence, does it really have the gravitas of a work like Rene Magritte’s ‘The Human Condition’? More than that, does it even have the gravitas of the original Super Mario Bros? Or is it just an elaborate, one-note joke that says nothing? And, in the case of Electroplankton, is the punchline just us being expected to pay for it? I hope not.

He believed he was a star. It didn’t matter that only a handful of people agreed with him.

The last time I met him, he was dressed like Johnny Thunders – lace cuffs, velvet sleeves, a scarf carelessly slung round his neck – hanging round the front of a Mercury Rev showcase in New York: tousled-haired, smiling, maybe a touch of mascara. His face lit up when he saw me. “It’s The Legend! – (!) – very nice to see you,” he said, the pinnacle of charm; suave, and with the ability to make even a pauper feel like a king. “Shall we get drunk?”

Well, of course.

The following day, Nikki played an in-store at a small Lower East Side record store, and I went down with Kid Millions from Oneida to watch him perform. As usual, he was magical: his voice cracking and wavering with emotion, joking with the crowd, with his guitar held high and jangling. He asked if anyone present would be willing to share drugs with him afterwards. Someone offered him dope. “Sorry,” he laughed. “I only do hard drugs.” He spotted me lounging at the back, and waved his guitar in my direction, trying to entice me to play a few numbers.

I shook my head. I was enjoying myself too much.

Nikki was a true gent – too beholden to rock’n’roll mythology, for sure: too taken with the spills and frills and empty whisky bottles of the early Seventies – but a true gent. He believed he was a star. It didn’t matter that only a handful of people agreed with him. He believed he was, and so he was a star his entire adult life. Unlike most self-proclaimed stars, however, Nikki made the people he was with feel like a star themselves – not by patronising, not by bullying, not by proselytising – but by treating each moment as special.

Nikki and I went back two decades or more – but not to the time of his first group, the lo-fi skronk pioneer kings, London’s Swell Maps. I discovered their homespun magic, late, a few months after my peers – months, years, it didn’t matter because back then every minute seemed like an age. Swell Maps. Their name is lore. Started by 15-year-old Nikki and his 12-year-old brother Epic Soundtracks in the early Seventies, a group that grated and spun with insouciant glee, a group that unconsciously grabbed hold of the punk DIY zeitgeist years before Mark P headbanged his way into experimental freefall.


It was in the mid-Eighties that I most knew Nikki. Swell Maps had long since departed and Nikki had taken to walking around central London with a swaggering gait, incontrovertibly in love with The Rolling Stones and rock’s central mythology of decadence and bandanas and a thousand other relics I couldn’t even begin to comprehend. He formed the Jacobites with fellow freewheeling spirit Dave Kusworth, and proceeded to reinvest the tired old clichés with freshness, with further layers of legend. The songtitles gave it away: ‘Death Is Hanging Over Me’, ‘The Last Bandit’, ‘The Ragged School’... Nikki was (or wanted to be, which amounted to the same thing) a doomed romantic, fatally damaged by rock’s spinning web of beautiful lies and complicit deceit – and for a short while, I fell under his spell, hanging with his bohemian, eccentric, carelessly elegant English crew. Nikki was nurturing, enthusiastic. There are a handful of albums from that era – Texas and The Bible Belt foremost among them, rediscovered by a new generation a couple of years back, thanks to some Secretly Canadian reissues – that still hold a special bond in my heart.

After the Jacobites, Nikki continued to strum and sing and take drugs and romanticise across the far corners of the world – a troubadour indeed – solo, with Kusworth again, with R.E.M., with likeminded enthusiasts and starry-eyed dreamers such as Sonic Youth and Rowland S Howard.

Earlier this year, I was booked to play a show in Berlin at an art gallery – a former haunt of Nikki’s as it transpired. I turned up, thought maybe I could sing his heartrending ‘Jangle Town’ a cappella by way of tribute, with words printed out hours before from the Internet. Just five words into the first line at soundcheck I was drowned out by an effusive vocal from the man who’d arranged the concert for me. I sang it later anyway, the occasional clink of a wine glass breaking the hushed reverence.

I know Nikki would have been smiling.

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