



# “A step into the loudness...”

A big, big love! **PIXIES'** debut album, the savage *Surfer Rosa*, turns 30 this year. To celebrate this momentous anniversary, **TOMPINNOCK** catches up with the band in a sweltering New Orleans, where they reflect on the origins of this remarkable record and its heady themes of “Sex and lust, and lust and sex.” “If there was any backlash,” says Black Francis, “we would have enjoyed the rejection!”

Photo by ANDREW CATTIN Written by TOMPINNOCK

**I**T IS late June, and the Big Easy is sweltering. Outside, it's brackishly humid, while intense air conditioning has turned the interior of every building practically polar. New Orleans, however, is pleasantly hotly compared to Florida, explains Pixies' drummer David Lovering: the band have just driven into the city from the scorching Sunshine State, and have been spending their day off at their favorite Crescent City haunts. “It’s a very unique city in the United States,” says the drummer. “There’s nothing like New Orleans. The architecture, the food...”

For guitarist Joey Santiago, a day off in New Orleans means hitting his favorite seafood restaurant and bar shop, while bassist Pat Lynch has been relaxing

at The Country Club in the Bywater district, by the wide, rolling Mississippi. Lovering, meanwhile, has spent most of the day watching football in bed, recovering from the trials of touring, while Charles Thompson, aka Black Francis, has been catching up with old friends.

“My strongest New Orleans memory is probably the first time we played here,” Thompson recalls, when Pixie meets him the next day. “We played at a club and then did a typical tourist rock’n’roll excursion around here in the French Quarter, ending up at this bar with a lot of bikers; they had all their motorcycles parked in a row in front. So we were standing outside the bar chatting, David touched a motor cycle, and it went over... and it hit the one next to it, and all the motor cycles went down... boom boom boom boom... And we ran!”



The Pixies' classic lineup, circa 1987: Black Francis, Kim Deal, Dave Lovering and Joey Santiago

**T**HAT was 1989, but Pixies are now back in New Orleans as part of a tour with Weezer, and have been fitting in their own headline shows alongside these more regulated outings. Uncut, then, has travelled to the Big Easy to discuss the monumental *Surfer Rosa* album, now 30 years old, as the band prepare to reprise the record and then play a set of special commemorative shows in London and New York in October and November. Perhaps in preparation, the group have resurrected *Surfer's* "Gigantic" for the first time since Kim Deal's final shows with the band in 2013.

"Charles was like, 'Oh, let's play "Gigantic" tonight,'" laughs Pat LaBarchetta. "I'm like, 'Oh, OK.' In front of 20,000 people..."

"That song was the elephant in the room," says Joey Santiago. "We treated it a little too precious, but now that we're doing it it's just a damn song that people wanna hear, you know? So we've got that out of the way."

"Especially those first two releases, it's all about bones and something very functional, organic, exciting," says the band's longtime graphic designer, Vaughan Oliver, "sex and lust, and lust and sex. That keeps us all busy."

"We've never been able to achieve that loose vibe again," says Thompson, "it's hard to recreate a situation or recreate yourself the way you were back then. You can try, but at some point the trying starts to sound like you're trying."

**M**UCH of *Surfer Rosa* took shape in a suitably debauched rehearsal room in Boston's Fenway. Then, the group developed Thompson's copious early material, assembling enough music for their debut mini-album, 1987's *Come On Pilgrims*, and then their debut, the following year. "It was \$15 a week," remembers David Lovering.

"It was awesome that we had a place we could all go to in Boston. But there was a sewer cap right in the middle of the room, flies everywhere, and when you walked in, it smelt of a sewer. It was sickening, but you got used to it. We were in this studio for a year, maybe less - the owner was doing heroin in his office, it was a crazy place. What's funny is that if any of us smell the right smell from a sewer, even somewhere like New Orleans, it's like... memories."

Thompson wrote anywhere he could, even on an unplugged electric guitar pushed against a cupboard or a toilet for extra amplification. He was so prolific, in fact, that the band held over and revisited some of these early songs on later albums: "Here Comes Your Man" (Doolittle), "Dig For Fire" (Bossanova), "Subbaculcha" (*Trompe Le Monde*). After each song was arranged collectively, the group tried his efforts out at their weekly club shows on the Boston rock scene. There was a raw, organic spark to these early works, as Thompson explains. "Naivety is a great thing," he says,

"but it goes away. Luckily we still have the songs to play. Some of [my] best, most well-known songs come from something that just happened one day - you come up with a chord progression, you throw down a lyric and boom... In *Surfer Rosa* there was definitely some of that going on - "Something Against You," it's just a little riff, we play it fast in a punky way, I scream one line on one particular spot. It's almost an instrumental, it's minimalist, like The Beatles' "Why Don't We Do It In The Road" or The Champs' "Tequila".

"It's a 'lily', and it's a valid form. I got a little bit frustrated sometimes when you get further along in your career, and there's more money



and more production. That has benefits too, but when people say "Let's make an important record," that dirty stuff gets lost."

When Thompson did write more than one line per song, his lyrics were dark, sexual and disturbing, but, like his hero David Lynch, there was humour there too, a sense of surreal absurdity that elevated the likes of "Cactus" and "Bone Machine" to more impressive heights. "You're into Japanese fast food," Thompson sang on the latter, "and I drop you off with your Japanese lover/And you're going to the beach all day/You're so pretty when you're unfaithful to me..."

One of the most striking influences on the songs Thompson was writing in the Pixies' first year and a half was his six-months spent in Puerto Rico in 1985, learning rough street Spanish, discovering hot beans and rice and taking in another culture.

"I wasn't really attempting to be like 'OK, now I'm going to communicate with people in the Spanish language,'" he explains. "It was just what I knew. Sometimes it's just something for a word. Forget the subject matter. That will emerge, if at all, at some point. Really, what's your word, what's your phrase? The composition itself is its own important entity. When you're working on a song, it's like 'OK, it's your turn, little song,' and none of the other songs matter when you're trying to make that one resonate."

"With the 'Surfer Rosa' reference in 'Oh My Golly', I was probably just trying to sing about some beautiful beach gal. There's a neighbourhood in San Juan called Condado, with these big tourist beaches. But if you go away from the hotels and you follow the jungle further down the beach, that's where the locals went. That was a two-for-all, with these little wooden kiosks with fried food and beer, all locals, no tourists, kind of a young person's party atmosphere. I got taken down there a couple of times, so I think that that song is more or less related."

As their notoriety grew, and their club gigs moved from Mondays and Tuesdays to Fridays and Saturdays, in early 1987 Pixies entered Port Apache studios with Gary Smith and a crate of Job Cola to record *The Purple Tape* - a 17-track collection of songs. "That was a feat in itself," says Santlana. "We slept over at the studio, I remember that. We were just so excited. Did I think it was special? Yeah, I knew it was pretty good."

Smith and the band's new manager, Ken Goss, sent the tape to 4AD's Ivo Watts-Russell. He chose his eight favourite tracks and released them as a mini-album, *Come On Pilgrim*, in September 1987.

"My first memory of Pixies was walking around playing the tape on my Walkman, enjoying Joey's guitar on 'Vitamin', a great, wild sound," Watts-Russell explained in Martin Aston's 4AD book, *Facing The Other Way*. "Charles and I ended up working very closely together, and for the most part, very easily."

The Pixies' sudden success might well have inspired jealousy elsewhere within Boston's competitive, yet tightly knit music scene. "If there was any backlash from Boston bands we would have enjoyed the rejection," says Thompson. "We already felt like outsiders there - we just wanted to get out of town as fast as we could."

The contents of the mini-album were immediate and startling - from the hardcore, Spanglish rush of "Inla De Encanta" and the feverish rockabilly of "Mizzrol's Son" to the stately "Levitate Me" - but it was the dark packaging was just as crucial in building Pixies' image.

"I had met a photographer called Simon Larbalestier, who was really influential in all Pixies' album artwork,"

"Naïvety is a great thing, but it goes away" FRANCIS



remembers 4AD designer Vaughan Oliver, the first person from the label to see Pixies live, at Rhode Island School Of Design. "When the brief for *Pilgrim* came up, Simon's graduation show was coming up at the Royal College Of Art, and these two pictures, the man with the hairy back and the body with the fly on it, were on the wall. They were there for the talking, and I couldn't believe it. One of my main goals in the artwork was to create an atmosphere, a texture, that echoed the nature of the music. That's the idea, to be beautifully disturbing, but so there's something seductive about it. The band were a breath of fresh air."

As strong as *Come On Pilgrim* was, it was merely a warm-up for their debut album. "We were coming from little amps and a lot of dinky acoustic guitar," says Thompson, "but when we came to *Surfer Rosa* we had \$50,000 all told, so we were able to go to a better studio and get bigger amplifiers - we had Marshalls. That was nice, because we never really had access to the big volume before, and the record represents that - a step into the loudness."

INSTEAD of the three days it took to record *Purple Tape*,

Pixies now had two weeks at the more up-market, 16-track Q Division. There was time to experiment, for both engineer Steve Albini and the band; from using metal picks on guitars for extra bite and rigging up Radio Shack mics to capture room ambience, to capturing audio-visual studio-chat and utilizing the studio's giant bathroom for the oceanic reverberation "Where Is My Mind?" ▶

## INTO THE WHITE

Vaughan Oliver on *Surfer Rosa*'s debased artwork

W GOT inspired by just talking to Charles, and hearing how he'd lived in Puerto Rico and picked up the Spanish. Not understanding the language, the songs he'd written in Spanish had this amazing phonetic resonance, and I started to think about Spanish icons, simply because of the two songs with Spanish lyrics. So I thought, how can we take the Spanish tradition and defuse it? I thought of *Isadora*... but having the dance tapeless, Simon [Larbalestier] came in, he was my Pixies man. We didn't have a studio, so we hired a room above the pub opposite 4AD, and took in these backdrops I dressed it, styled it, and

it's one of the more complete projects that I've worked on from scratch with a blank canvas. It was a nice evening and a lot of decorum employed there. Had a friend who used to go to *Romance* classes, so she brought her teacher in, I think Kim struggled with it from a feminist point of view, but I thought we were doing something else. It's not like a shot of a girl in a topless calendar; we were doing something a little bit more artistic. The offending points were stickered in the States, and I just thought, 'What the fuck is that about, man?' This is rock'n'roll, and it's more than rock'n'roll. There's something odd in this."

"It was great," says David Lovering. "I'm very happy with the sound, especially as the album starts out with 'Bone Machine,' which begins with my drums in that room."

"Albini was definitely more focused on things like the guitar tone and making sure the performances were honest in some way," says Thompson. "He didn't try to slick us up—and we were not slick at all at that point."

"I've sent me a demo tape of Pixies, and I thought it was quite strong," Albini told *Uncut*. "It was quite distinctive-sounding, and I particularly liked the songs that Kim sang. She has an astounding voice, as if Doris Day was a little dirty. While Charles and Kim were yacking back and forth with each other, the conversational tangents they would go off on were funny, and charming so when they were doing something interesting, I would roll tape."

Pilgrim's "Vamon" was deemed good enough to re-record, and it provided room for Santiago to cut loose on his Gibson Les Paul Goldtop, borrowed from Dead. "We had the tapes going backwards and all that stuff," remembers the guitarist. "I just pretty much let [Albini] do whatever. I think I was throwing tennis balls at the guitar at one point."

Then there was "Gigantic," co-written and sung by Dead. Aware that the bassist was perhaps seeking more creative input, Thompson had set her a challenge using a circular chord sequence he'd developed. "We'd started doing a bit of the loud-quiet-loud dynamic, where we would bring things down to bass and drums, the kind of thing you'd hear on a Sisters Of Mercy song. I wanted to do a song that didn't change chords, like Lou Reed's 'Sweet Jane'. So I just said to Kim, 'Let's do a song called "Gigantic", this is the bass riff, quiet in the verses, loud in the choruses.'"

Deal's offering was anthemic and transgressive, and probably the most accessible product of the sessions. Packaged in an evocative and controversial sleeve [see



"As for the split, I think the problems were already in place"

DAVE LOVERING

page 68). *Surfer Rosa* was released on 4AD on March 21, 1988, comprising 13 tracks, all but one under four minutes and most hovering around two.

The following month, the band struck out on a European tour with their friends, fellow Bostonians Throwing Muses. The two groups shared a bus, and Pixies especially were struck by the reception they received—by the end of the tour, they had displaced the Muses as headliners. "That was a great tour," says Thompson, "two bands in one van, sharing equipment. We were in heaven. Sandwiches in the dressing room... my gosh, all the beer you could drink. Kids screaming at you and every thing! That was my favourite tour ever. Gear always seemed to be playing at venues the night before us. So there was fake blood and confetti and all kinds of shit everywhere. The clubs could never seem to get it all off the stage by the time we arrived."

"The Pixies gave that tour a hometown feel," Kristin French explains. "We were all just little babies in a van together, we were so pathetic we would sing sad folk songs together because we were lonely. We were complimentary bands and we were all friends."

Tight already, the two bands bonded, too closely, in some cases, with Deal and Muses guitarist Tanya Donnelly beginning to plot the formation of a new group. The Breeders, as the pair became increasingly frustrated with their lack of input to their respective groups. Tensions flared again in August '88, when a re-recorded "Gigantic" was released as Pixies' first single. Now it was Thompson's turn to feel put out, the primary songwriter upstaged by the band's charismatic bassist.

"It ended up being one of our biggest songs," says Thompson. "You get proprietary if you're driving the energy of the band, [if you were the one to say] 'Hey, I'm starting a band, you wanna be in my band!' It's kinda like I've got the reins of control somewhat in my hands, and everyone agrees to participate in the band, they defer to that naturally 'cos that's the dynamic."

WITH THROWING MUSES, APRIL 1988





The current lineup: (l-r) David Lovering, Kim Lennox, Jimmy Santiago Brown, Black Francis

Because of tensions in the band, more collaborative writing wasn't really possible. If Kim had been more chilled out, and if I had been more chilled out, we probably could have figured out a way, but whatever, we didn't really know how to do that.

"I suppose this was still in the honeymoon period, and definitely by the time of *Doolittle* we were getting out of that."

**M**ORE live albums followed, of course, including the immortal *Doolittle* (featuring, finally, The Purple Tape's "Here Comes Your Man"), and the more-expansive, produced *Bossanova*. But the band dynamic was never as smooth as it had been during those early years, and after a couple of short hiatuses, Pixies split in early 1993.

"I think any problems were already in place," muses David Lovering. "It's just as time goes on it exacerbates. I don't think there was a cause or effect of anything. It was just time."

Those tensions seem not to have dissipated completely, with Kim Deal departing from the reunited lineup in 2013 to concentrate on the Breeders. The introduction of Paz Lenchantin as full-time bassist and vocalist seems to have revitalized Pixies, though. Her quiet personality chimes with the others', she says, and her command of practically every Pixies song past and present means they can play almost anything during their setlist-free shows.

"It's kind of a perfect match, meant to be," says Lenchantin. "There's not much analysis, you just do. And I think at this point, you can just follow your instinct and know that it's pretty solid."

The sun is still bright in New Orleans when the band arrive onstage in Champions Square, right behind the saucer-like hulk of the city's Superdome. As is customary, there's no chat, and no streamers or fireworks, just 22 songs powered through in 70 minutes. From *Pilgrim* and *Surfer*

"I didn't learn to scream. I just have it!"

FRANCIS

*Rosa* come many of the highlights: "Isla De Encanta", "Caribou", "River Euphrates", "Gigantic", "I've Been Tired", "Cactus", "Where Is My Mind?" and the closing, extended "Venus".

"Tonight was the first time I used Dave's drumstick on the guitar in a long time," says Santiago backstage after the performance, decked out in a new hat. "I'm running out of ideas with 'Venus', I've done a lot of things with it - all these fucking antics! I've gotta feel it, because it's not right when it's faked."

"It's the only kind of stagecraft we do," laughs Lovering, recovering from the heat onstage.

Later this year, Pixies embark on a series of shows celebrating *Pilgrim* and *Surfer Rosa* - there are imposing visuals promised, but the band and Vaughan Oliver are reluctant to spoil any surprises.

"The Roundhouse is gonna have some kind of artwork all around," reveals Santiago, "and the stage is sort of gonna be white, which makes sense [with the album cover]."

While Pixies commemorated *Doolittle*'s 20th anniversary in 2009, *Surfer Rosa* is perhaps their record that's most worth reliving: "It put us on the map," Santiago says. The band never sounded as threatening, as loud or as vital again after they swapped Steve Albini for the more conventional, crafted production of Gil Norton. They created some masterpieces, but nothing quite as singular or shocking as their debut.

"It's my favourite," says Lovering. "When I compare it to the others, probably because of the time in my life, it has something about it that I enjoy more."

"Every recording session is like a snapshot of where the band is at that particular time," explains Thompson, ahead of Pixies' nine-hour night drive to Dallas for their next show. "Steve Albini was

responsible for some blown-out sounds, and there's a really heavy dose of quirkiness. That vibe was very successful. I feel that's why it's our most charming record."

"It got us out of town for real, it got us overseas," he concludes. "It got us to England, to Holland, where the gigs were rained. That was the first time we left. 'OK, so we are a band... there is an audience there for us.'" ☘

Come On *Pilgrim*... it's *Surfer Rosa* is released by 4AD on August 24. Pixies' residency at London's Roundhouse begins on October 30



Black Francis unleashes that scream

LOUD AND PROUD

## CORD PROGRESSION

Black Francis reveals the secrets of his scream

**W** DIDN'T learn it, I just have it. It's physiological, basically, to do with your build. At least that's how a vocal coach explained it to me, if you have the right chest size you can do it. I went to him partially to get more to my higher range a few years ago, so he taught me some techniques. The power isn't there the way I want it to be every night, especially early on a tour. It's almost like I have to blow it out a bit, then I can find a warmer tone that feels correct. The guy who

taught me how to scream was our neighbour. I used to work for him sometimes. He was Thai. He played in Thai wedding bands, and he brought me into this little home studio that he had, and we did a Beatles song, "Oh Darling". He had to teach me how to belt it out - I was very grateful. You gotta sing, it like you hate that bitch. It's what he said. I think my daughter is physiologically prone to it as well, she's so loud!

