

Joey Santiago

PIXIES REPURPOSE

BY WARD MEEKER



J. Santiago: Simon Foster.

When Charles Thompson adopted the stage name Black Francis to play the Pixies' first gig – at a bar in the suburbs on a Wednesday night in 1986 – guitarist Joey Santiago was right there, the two of them unfazed by the tiny crowd and chilly reception.

Former students at UMass Amherst, Thompson had convinced dorm mate Santiago to quit the books and get serious with his guitar. The two spent 1984 working warehouse jobs while Thompson wrote lyrics on his subway commute and

at night grabbed a guitar to add backing chords. In late '85, they placed an ad in a music newspaper seeking a bassist who was "...into Hüsker Dü and Peter, Paul and Mary." The only response came from a folk-rocker named Kim Deal. Though she

had never played bass or been in a band that made it out of the garage, she had a willing drummer friend named Dave Lovering. The four gathered and after just a few months of the bar grind scored an opening slot when Throwing Muses rolled through Boston. In the audience that night was producer Gary Smith, who in March of '87 took the Pixies to his studio to cut a demo. Eight of the 18 songs became the band's EP *Come On Pilgrim*.

Behind Thompson's songwriting, the band developed a style that would prove supremely influential in the coming years, delivering lyrical messages that were harsh, humorous, or soul-searching

Santiago and Charles Thompson rehearsing in 1985, the former (below, left) with his Ovation Viper. By the early '90s, he was using a Les Paul Classic (middle right). The Pixies (bottom) recording *Head Carrier*; from left are Thompson, David Lovering, Paz Lenchantin, and Santiago.



paired with music that strayed from traditional pop structures via exaggerated dynamics – low-key verses mixed with screaming, go-for-the-throat choruses. Early albums like *Surfer Rosa* and *Doolittle* saw them develop into a college-radio stalwart in the U.S., while in the U.K. they were chart regulars and a huge concert draw.

Though their apex proved short, the Pixies created music with impact. Thom York of Radiohead and every member of Nirvana have referred to their own bands as Pixies rip-offs. David Bowie was a fan of Thompson's odd art, and U2's Bono has cited him as a great songwriter.

After a brief hiatus, the Pixies recorded *Trompe le Monde* in 1991 then toured the following spring before Thompson famously broke up the band via fax (except to Santiago, who got a phone call). They reunited to tour in 2004 and sporadically in the years after. In 2013, they released a compilation called *Indie Cindy*, followed by *Head Carrier* in '16 with new bassist/vocalist Paz Lenchantin.

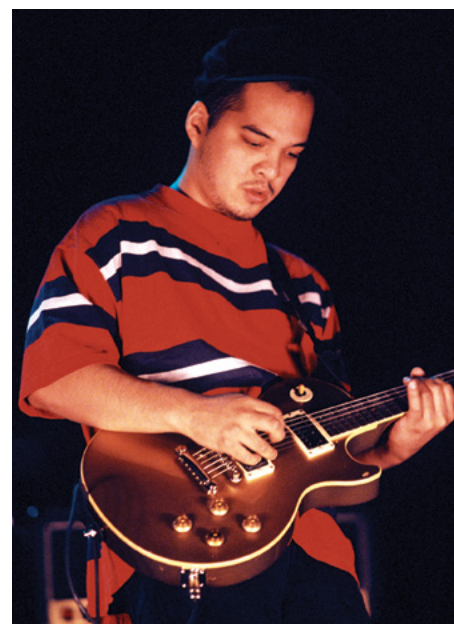
In a 2006 interview, Thompson cited Santiago as “the unsung hero of the Pixies,” for his ability to make simple guitar parts stand out, using a subtle touch in a rough setting. Quiet and soft-spoken, Santiago's role behind the scenes has always been immense and his playing has tempered—or fostered—Thompson's angsty lyrics. We recently spoke with Santiago to learn more about his background and the latest on the band.

How did music first become part of your life?

The Beatles were big where I grew up in the Philippines, and I loved their sound instantly when I heard “Savoy Truffle.” Later, we listened a lot to the “King Biscuit Flower Hour” and watched “Don Kirshner's Rock Concert.” I remember seeing so many bands on that show and thinking, “This is *cool*.” It looked like a good time, and on “King Biscuit,” especially, they played live. I thought, “I want to do that.” It was such a huge dream.

Did you ask your parents for a guitar?

Well, my brother's guitar was right there hanging on the wall, so I got *The Mel Bay Easy Way to Guitar* and learned basic stuff



like “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” But I pretty much went straight to barre chords, then I was like, “That’s all I really need.” I learned other songs here and there – the basics of rock and roll.

Did you jam with friends?

Yes, but it was terrible.

After high school, you studied economics in college. How did that happen?

Well, I apparently had the brain for it. After I aced my mid-terms sophomore year, a professor said, “I see you’re undeclared. Would you be interested in economics?” I said, “Sure.”

And you met Charles because he lived in your dorm?

Yeah, he was two doors away.

What were your first impressions of him?

He was *jolly*. He was drinking milk from the little cartons you got at the cafeteria, and had his acoustic guitar. He was more into blues and stuff. My Ovation Viper was back home when I met him – I was focused on keeping up my GPA and didn’t want to be distracted. But I brought it from home and we started jamming in the common area.

Would people give you looks?

Yeah, and some would actually come over to watch. I don’t know that we worked on any songs that became anything, but we had some cool riffs... no lyrics.

Was there chemistry right away?

Yeah, we were having fun. I think he liked the weirdness in what I was playing. Years before, I’d found these albums in the public library. It’s a funny story... AC/DC was playing in town, and I rode my bike to the hall and cruised around back. When I spotted someone by their bus, I said, “Hey, I want to meet Angus,” and the guy said, “Beat it, kid!” So, I went to the library instead, got a card, and took home these albums by Joe Pass, Wes Montgomery, Les Paul. I thought, “That’s what I should learn if I want to play weird stuff in some kind of rock-and-

roll thing.” I understood Jimi and Jimmy and Townshend and all that, but people had already done it. I was trying to find something *else*. That said, I did learn the opening chord to “Purple Haze” and used it a lot in the Pixies, but you never wig out on “Is She Weird” one note at a time.

And you weren’t into the shredder

this awesome distortion I thought was great – super gainy even with the Volume turned really low.

And a clean channel that was unbelievably loud...

Yeah, I kinda ignored that (laughs). But that was it – I had the Viper, that amp, and a tuner. Nothing else.

When did you start using more effects?

When we started recording, and then *all* I bought was distortion pedals. Later, I fooled around with delay. To this day, I have at least eight delay pedals.

Feedback was a pretty important part of your sound.

Right. Playing live, I’d get that by turning up and facing the amp. The cool part was finding that spot where you could get it to really sing. It was like “Alright, where’s the feedback in this room?” I remember the stage floor at CBGBs had this loose plank I would jump on to rattle the spring

reverb. It would make this sound people thought was magical. I’d jump, and ka-boom!

What was the next guitar to come along?

I was always into Teles because of the cover of Bruce Springsteen’s *Born to Run*, but of course Charles had one. So, I bought a Fender Mustang when we started touring. There ended up being a lot of guitars around and Charles gave it away one day because he thought it was his (laughs)! That’s when we knew we had a lot of guitars – and s****y memories! That’s when I got a Les Paul

What year was it?

It was Kim Deal’s – a ’70s, with soapbar pickups. And when I started [using] the vibrato, I’d get crazy and Kim quickly said, “Can I have my guitar back?” So I got my own, a goldtop Classic. I was the cheapest one I could find with the thin neck I loved. I still have it, but I broke it playing in Paris; I put it on a stand while



Santiago and bassist Lenchantin during the recording of *Head Carrier*.

scene at the time – high-gain tones on superstrats?

Yeah, *two* things I wasn’t into (laughs) – the speed because *everybody* was doing it, you know? It sounded like “How fast can you type?” I was more into the Cars – Elliot Easton’s lyrical playing. And Queen. When I found out Roy Thomas Baker produced both bands, I made the connection. Back then, I would read about producers and recording engineers, and I noticed on a lot of jazz records how the sound was open and simple – I figured they probably used one microphone. When Charles and I met, I started listening to Iggy Pop.

Which amp were you using when the Pixies started gigging?

A Peavey Special. It was cheap and had



1) Santiago makes frequent use of the Bigsby on this '65 Gibson ES-345. Its Varitone control rarely moves out of position 3. **2)** This Les Paul Custom is Santiago's primary stage instrument. Completely stock including the Bigsby, it's as heavy as it looks. **3)** This Les Paul '60 Classic is a longtime road companion and was once his primary stage axe. **4)** An ES-Les Paul Goldtop. **5)** Santiago rarely moves his 50-watt Marshall JCM 800 from the high-gain channel. For clean sounds, he relies on a mid-'60s Fender Vibrolux Reverb.

doing a solo where I'd play with just the pedals, doing this thing with delay where I'd make it sound like the guitar would keep playing. I thought, "Man, this is f***ing cool!" But sometimes the guitar came out of the stand and went flat on its face.

Did it suffer that famous neck-angle whiplash that has claimed so many Les Pauls?

Yeah, and it was probably the third time it had fallen like that. I picked it up and the strings were all loose. Then, I got the Les Paul Special.

As alt-rock became more popular,

followed by grunge, did you see Pixies influence in other bands?

I did, and probably the first time was when I heard the opening to "Smells Like Teen Spirit," by Nirvana. I saw an interview with Dave Grohl later, and he was talking about recording and telling his band, "This sounds like the Pixies, I don't think we should be doing this."

What was your reaction when Charles put the band on the backburner in '93?

After I hung up the phone, my girlfriend – now my ex-wife – said, "What happened?" I said, "Um, the Pixies just broke up." I didn't make a big deal out of

it – went back to cutting vegetables. It was a relief, really, because we were unhappy.

What was your plan from that point?

Well, after going into depression and staying in my room for three months, I discovered recording to a computer. So I made a bunch of demo tapes and thinking, "Why don't I compose music?" Everyone always called the stuff I played "atmospheric," anyway, so I got an agent and became serious about it. I also went back to college to finish my degree, but then one day my agent called and said, "This guy, Judd Apatow, wants to meet you." He had heard my demos. So we



Santiago in the studio, pedals galore.

met and he asked, "How long did take you to do this?" I told him, "Some of it was an hour, some was 20 minutes." And he goes, "You're not bulls***ing me, are you?" I told him, "No," and he asked me to compose the score for his TV show, "Undeclared." I also started doing films.

Head Carrier is the band's first set of songs written to go together since *Trompe le Monde*. Was the process similar to those earlier albums?

No, we took about three weeks just sorting through songs, then figured out which would go to the wayside. Then, we went to Toronto to record proper demos and met with producer Tom Dalgety. Right away, we were bonding, and he thought we had enough songs, so we started recording. We did pre-production for a couple weeks, decided on arrangements, then pretty much nailed recording in three weeks; David did drum tracks in three days, then we recorded bass, then guitar, then vocals.

And Charles' lyrics were worked out?

Kinda. There were a handful he wanted to tweak.

What amps did you use?

I had my Marshalls and my Vibrolux.

Did your parts come together pretty easily?

Yeah, we were writing guitar parts as we went, but I got them down pretty quickly.

The album has a strong modern-rock

feel but still sounds like a Pixies record going back. It reinforces the thought that you guys were ahead of your time.

Well, we were drawing from the past – we embraced what it is, what we are, what comes naturally to us. And it might sound different because Kim left, but it's different [because we were] experimenting.

How did you decide Paz was right for the band?

We knew it, really, on our second tour with her. And when we started recording the album, she had great suggestions, and she had chops, obviously.

What was the first connection with her?

She played with my ex-wife and I in the Martinis once, which I sometimes forget because it was years ago. But, I called my friend, Josh Freese, the drummer in Perfect Circle, and said, "Is there anyone you think would work?" We wanted to try out three people. Charles knew of one, and I also thought about Rachel Haden, of That Dog; she played with Todd Rundgren and was spectacular. Then Paz came in and was very much in our mood, had a good sense of humor. We enjoyed every moment with her.

How do you describe the nuance Paz brings vocally, compositionally, and in her bass parts?

Her vocals are *right on*, she's a perfec-

tionist, and her attitude in the studio was very light. We loved that she fit in – it's hard to find people as weird as us. She's positive; we call her "Pazative."

So, if it wasn't for rock and roll and the Pixies, what would your life have been like?

I don't know... I would probably be trying to be in a band. It probably wouldn't be as good as this.

Did you ever wonder if that knack you had for economics could have amounted to anything?

The only thing I knew about economics was that Mick Jagger was also an Econ major. So my economics background has nothing to do with the Pixies... other than me wanting to tour more because the fixed costs were already paid. I remember one professor asking a class, "Who wants to work for IBM?" A lot of people raised their hands, but I didn't. I thought, "Hmm, I shouldn't be here."

How have fans reacted to *Head Carrier*?

All very positive. We made something fresh and smeared our fingerprints all over it! Seriously, though, it's been great playing the new songs in the live show. They fit in really well.

Have there been notable tour highlights?

We had great shows in the U.K. and Ireland to start, and now mainland Europe. A personal highlight for me was when my kids came to Paris to see us at a Lollapalooza in July. It was interesting to experience through their eyes.

How does Europe compare with the U.S.?

I prefer to tour in Europe. It's got a liberal vibe and the architecture is interesting.

Do you have any expectations for the fall tour in the U.S.?

I'm definitely looking forward to visiting cities we have not done with this album, including shows in Canada and the Midwest, particularly. I look forward to every tour.

What's next for the band?

After this, we'll take a break, but then we have two more U.S. tours. Next year, we're planning to visit another continent – one we have not yet done on this album. And we're thinking about recording a new album.

What do you think it is about Pixies music that draws a perpetually young audience?

I guess when a part of each generation reads that Kurt Cobain was into us, they take a listen. Plus, "Where Is My Mind" was on *Fight Club*. **VG**