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PIXIES

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Fat jokes? What fat jokes?
Pixies 2004: (l-r) Dave
Lovering, Kim Deal,
Black Francis, Joey Santiago

Words: Steve Sutherland in Palm Springs
Photographs: Chapman Baehler in Palm Springs



PIXIES

How a stoner, a madcap surrealist and their two mates became the world's new favourite old band

It's Black Francis' world, and we just live in it – or what's left of it anyway.

About 30,000 of us are standing in 105-degree heat. There is no breeze, no shade, no ozone. It is May and California is burning up. Literally. This is what they meant when they warned us about global warming. You can smell the Coachella crowd frying. And Black Francis, eyes screwed tight, is yowling at us: "Now there's a hole in the sky/And the ground's not cold/And if the ground's not cold/Everything is gonna burn/We'll all take turns/I'll get mine too".

Coincidence? Think again. Now Francis is singing in Spanish and many of the crowd are whooping it up harder than ever. Why? Because at the current rate of growth, it won't be long before California's Latino population outnumbers the Caucasians. Spanish is

fast becoming the primary language, like it was before America nicked the land off Mexico in 1847.

Another coincidence? OK. Now Francis is screaming, "Gouge away!", taking liberties with the gruesome biblical tale of Samson, who is enticed by his girlfriend into revealing the source of his great strength and, once weakened by a haircut, has his eyes torn out by his enemies.

This is what Francis told *NME* in 1988: "Bible stories are great! Everything you want: sex, violence, it's all there. Brutal too. The hardcore stuff, whoooo, that stuff'd make spicy movies." As he sings, the *LA Times* is reporting that Christians are being emotionally blackmailed into going to see Mel Gibson's harrowing, hate-filled *The Passion Of The Christ*. The message from church elders: if you don't go, you're not a true believer!

**The Pixies
need us,
need our
attention.
But boy,
do we
need the
Pixies too**

You want more? Now Francis is wailing: "I got no lips! I got no tongue!". Seen Courtney Love lately? Seen any of the current TV shows about what happens when cosmetic surgery goes wrong?

Or how about this? Francis is hollering, "Got me a movie ahahahoho!/Slicing up eyeballs ahahahoho!... Wanna grow up to be/Be a debaser!". The song is about the surrealist movie *Un Chien Andalou*, which shocked audiences into rioting when it was first screened in 1928 because it starts with a woman having her eyeball sliced in half with a cut throat razor. When I looked up the movie on the net before Coachella, one site runs that scene on its homepage. A few days later, Islamic militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi hacked American contractor Nick Berg's head off with a knife and posted the footage on the net for the whole world to see.

All these songs were written and released at the tail-end of the '80s when they were greeted as fucked-up sci-fi ditties created by a bunch of misfits. Today, they make perfect sense.

No wonder the Pixies have hit 2004 like a tidal wave. Their songs sound better and more relevant than ever. They are, quite simply, the soundtrack to a world gone mad. A world where every day we set out for school or work, we cannot be sure we are ever coming back. A world where, post 9/11, we don't know if where we're going is safe, what we're hearing is true or what we're seeing is real.

The famous scream which Francis unleashes during the Coachella set opener 'Bone Machine' is arguably the only pure expression of despair left to us now that political double-talk and fabricated images have wrung any certainty from our language and media.

Yeah, the Pixies need us, need our money, need our attention after floundering solo careers. But boy, do we need the Pixies too. The collective goodwill that greets them at the backstage press conference tells us all we need to know about the vacuum of meaning that needs filling in rock. Why else would we be laying palms at the feet of the returning Morrissey on the back of an average new album? Because better a below-par Moz than the vapid alternative. And better the Pixies – older, fatter, balder yeah, but they were never exactly lookers in the first place (Kim excepted) – than the alternative void.

Black Francis:
the eternal
screamager



So no dredging up their acromonious split and how come, if Kim hates Francis and Francis hates Kim, they're so buddy-buddy. No mention of how zoned-out Kim appears. No quips about the magic act drummer Dave Lovering's been doing these past few years. And no dirty talk of dosh.

We willingly forgive and forget and get on with the worship. And quite right too because the Pixies have never sounded so good. Some put this down to the Cobain filter. Kurt happily admitted that he nicked all his quiet-loud-quiet angsty shit from Francis. Prior to Nirvana, Pixies sounded marginal and weird. Post grunge, they sound mainstream. It's like what happened when the Stones copped all their schtick from Muddy Waters and those old blues guys back in the '60s. They added a little sex and saccharine and paved for us a primrose path back to the brutal and – in most cases – better originals.

Whatever, the Pixies seem so 2004 it hurts. 'Doolittle' sounds more modern than 'Nevermind' and there are signs that, far from this reunion being an easy greatest hits haul round the world, the band are homing back in on their original mischief. Their set changes gig to gig. So does their treatment of the songs. Pixies right now are gloriously unpredictable and right on the button. Black Francis may as well change his name to Nostrodamus. And when he finally does get around to giving that interview and he's asked, "What does the future hold for the Pixies?", you'd better hope to fuck he doesn't answer: "Dude, there is no future."

PIXIES' TOP 20 TRACKS - AS VOTED FOR BY YOU!

1 WHERE IS MY MIND?

"I don't know where it is, but I know that the song is an angsty mismatch of teen-pubescent confusion"
Jordan Salari

2 DEBASER

"Great bassline, even greater lyrics – a milestone"
Reinhard Piker



3 GIGANTIC

"It pre-empted grunge by several years with its quiet verse, loud chorus dynamic"
Kirsty Morrison

4 HEY

"The band's most beautiful moment"
Leon McLaren

5 GOUGE AWAY

"A three-day party in just under three minutes, it's dark and angry but it makes you feel alive"
David Lockwood



6 MONKEY GONE TO HEAVEN

"When Black Francis starts singing, 'IF THE DEVIL IS SIX, THEN GOD IS SEVEN!' it's spine-tingle time"
Leigh Twist

7 WAVE OF MUTILATION

"Fucking great lyric"
Edward Croghan



8 HERE COMES YOUR MAN

"The best song ever by anyone"
Ollie Carlisle

9 ALEC EIFFEL

"One of the reasons 'Trompe Le Monde' is so underrated"
Steven Myles

Third rock star from the sun

CLASSIC
1991
INTERVIEW

In this classic interview from the NME archives, we look back at how the Pixies created their very own planet of sound

Words: Roger Morton in 1991

Photographs: Steve Double in Andalucia

The thickset man in the lumberjack shirt sitting in the back of a New York taxi has had a relaxed weekend. A few days up in the woods at Massachusetts, hanging out at his father's bar, buying birthday presents for his kid brother, and meeting 'n'greeting the family's new arrival, a bull-mastiff puppy. Someone had slaughtered a pig and a lot of pork got eaten.

But Monday had barged in on the weekend, and there was work to be done. Rock'n'roll work. A late-night drive to New York. A day of photos and more photos. And now some music paper writer jammed in alongside on the back seat of a taxi, and nothing much to say. What could you say? About how you like to cruise the broad New York streets, late at night?

"Charles, you still got your cadillac out in LA?"
"Yeah I still got it, but I'm thinking of changing it. I want to get some kinda four-wheel-drive thing, so I can drive out into the desert. Drive into Arizona, up into the ghost towns. Cadillac's no good for that."

Charles Thompson, aka Black Francis, was brought up in Los Angeles, a reclusive type of kid who, neither being athletic, nor a surfer, nor a Chicano gang member, didn't fit in at the LA City School. In English classes he'd write science fiction stories or poetry.

Out of school he'd be locked into his headphones listening to '60s music and giving rein to a "strong rock'n'roll fantasy imagination and a strong sexual fantasy imagination". Before high school was over his family swapped coasts, moving from a seaside cow-town in Massachusetts, from where Charles would go to university at UMass, Boston.

After six months of living in Puerto Rico as part of

a 'Spanish Studies' phase of his course (archaeology and anthropology were in there somewhere too), Charles decided to head back to Boston to form a band with his mate Joey Santiago.

The trajectory of the Pixies' career has been well charted. The 4AD link-up and the Latino-punk of 'Come On Pilgrim'. The gut-wrenching body violation of 'Surfer Rosa'. The solidifying reputation as raunchy surrealists coming out of the eyeball-slashing sleeves of designer Vaughan Oliver and the linchpin chart friendliness of 'Doolittle's' anthems.

It's five months since Charles was last at home in LA. After the Pixies tour ended this summer, he went drive-about in Europe, navigating by solo festival dates, or just drifting with the road. Even now, in New York, he's debating with his co-pilot girlfriend, Jean, whether to head back to LA the hard way. Overland.

"I've been doing trips across America since I was three months old," says Charles. "I've been doing them ever since. Mostly just moves. My family has this funny habit of moving 3,000 miles to the other side of the country, back and forth between Boston and Los Angeles. And now, being in a band I do it all the time, criss-crossing America."

What have been the best trips?
"Well, definitely the last one I did in the car a couple of years ago was great because I took mushrooms and went to Graceland on Elvis' birthday. Actually it was really horrible because I was under the influence of drugs and there were all these sobbing people, crying at Elvis' graveside. It just got so morbid."

Didn't you fly on Concorde once?
"Yeah, that was totally fantastic. We had talked about it for a couple of months and decided it was



The introduction of the pineapple on percussion was a possible reason for the Pixies' original split

"Flowers, candlesticks?
We actually asked for
pie and chips!" (Below)
On the cover of *NME*
in October 1991

PIXIES



too expensive. But we ended up doing it and it was great. I was lookin' for UFOs the whole way, 'cos I was convinced, 'cos we were so high up. You could see the curvature of the earth and the deep blue of space, and feel the heat on the window because of the friction, and the sound is all behind you 'cos you're going to Mach 2. It was totally thrilling."

And didn't you come over on the QE2 once?
"Yeah, I probably shouldn't mention that I do these things because I'm sure that people think I'm the crassest fuckin' asshole on the whole planet. I took Concorde not because it's expensive, but because I get to see the curvature of the earth and maybe that's the closest I'll ever get to space."

"You know, I'm already mad that I started the Pixies instead of going to look at Halley's Comet about six years ago. Everyone was taking boats down there and I got the OK from my dad. He was going to help me out. I got a camera, and I was... I'm not totally into astronomy, or at least, then I was only marginally into it. I was doing it because it was Halley's Comet and it only appears once every 76 years, but I backed out and said I'd move to Boston instead and call up Joey and start the Pixies. So I've always regretted that. It's classic, a classic choice: rock'n'roll or Halley's Comet. And I took rock'n'roll."

But Charles never really gave up on comet chasing, for new album 'Trompe Le Monde' has the best of both Pixies worlds. A noise-world that is right in your face, and an orbiting mind-world that is far, far out. 'Trompe Le Monde' is awash with the leakage from Charles Thompson's parallel universe. The one where he's Black Francis, stargazer, voyager, rocker and alien wreck fiend.

Most conspicuously, 'Motorway To Roswell' deals with the alleged cover-up of a UFO crash landing in

New Mexico in 1947. But the interlinked obsessions of space, travel, aerodynamics and architecture are threaded through songs such as 'Planet Of Sound', 'Distance Equals Rate Times Time' and 'Alec Eiffel'.

'Trompe...' was originally intended as a quickly recorded 'punk' album - Charles might be far out, but the Pixies are far from laid-back. They sound *angry*.

"I tell myself that I'm just contributing to the formula of rock music and just trying to be a shouter, because you're supposed to shout. I don't know what I'm angry about. It's just anger. Anger that you

"I'm a soldier in the Army Of Rock, and I'm here to spread the word about rock music, the guitar and the riff" Black Francis

wouldn't express to anybody, that you wouldn't even try and explain to yourself. Just a sort of self-pitying pissed-off anger."

Are you deliberately keeping the Pixies abrasive?
"No. I got nothing against getting more mainstream or even more mellow or anything. It's just gotta be really good. If people could mature and end up sounding like Roy Orbison I suppose there'd be a lot of good records, but... basically everyone just sucks."

Charles Thompson doesn't smoke, doesn't drink (tonight), doesn't seem angry. He seems civil, open,

distracted, perplexed. Occasionally, when in the grip of extreme speculation, his chin tilts up and his eyes roll around madly. He has none of the matey jocularity common to many touring rockers. Instead he has a kind of bull-in-a-china shop sincerity that stomps on cynicism and encourages fanciful ideas.

Where does all the space stuff come from?
"I dunno, I didn't think about lyrics at all while making this album, then I just said, 'Fuck it, I'll just sing a bunch of songs about UFOs. Who gives a shit?' Then you start to think pompously, and you start to think you want to write a rock opera even though you know deep down you're not going to get away with it. It's not like a concept, it's just I felt relaxed singing songs about planets and space."

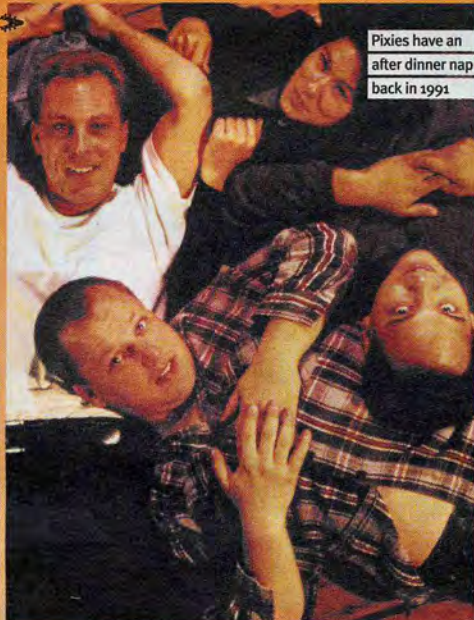
What is it about space rockets?
"I don't think I sing specifically about a rocket, but of course the rocket is a symbol of travel beyond this planet. I think that's why something like Ziggy Stardust seemed kinda cool."

Have you come close to any unexplained phenomena?
"I physically was at a very real UFO incident, but I was too young to remember anything about it. It's only been recounted to me. But I was reading some UFO magazine a few months ago about this Peruvian guy who had some big UFO organisation down in South America, and he refers to the UFOs, the ships, as manta rays. And I've written two songs using manta rays as images for UFOs."

"Then I was reading one of those goofball books about Area 51, the airforce base in Nevada where they supposedly have the alien bodies and ships on ice. I'd read this book that is known in UFO circles as *The Ranch* and I've got this song called 'The Happening' where the opening line goes

STEVE DOUBILET/RETNA/UP





Pixies have an after dinner nap back in 1991

“You know, I’m already mad that I started the Pixies instead of going to look at Halley’s Comet. I’ve always regretted that”

Black Francis

They’ve got a ranch they call number 51 and I’d never heard of this place they refer to as The Ranch. I know they’re stoopid coincidences that don’t really amount to much, but a grin can’t help but crawl across your face. It’s kind of fun to think, ‘Well, gee! They’re fucking with my mind, man!’ Down, deep, subconsciously I know!”

Suddenly, Charles puts on a tape of Iggy Pop’s ‘Lust For Life’ and tells us how to hypnotise chickens before enthusing about hunting for frogs with a flashlight and painting turtles with nail varnish.

Have you ever felt that you’ve belonged anywhere, that any kind of organisation or body or opinion was for you?

“Well, I’ve always liked what Samuel Beckett said: ‘My books mean nothing. You should just read the words and the words mean what they mean.’ And I always like it that Sun Ra said he was from Venus or whatever (*Saturn, actually – Space Jazz Ed.*)”

Do you feel that being involved in rock music is essentially worthwhile, or is it all ludicrous?

“Well, it’s totally both. I’m a soldier in the Army Of Rock, and I’m here to spread the word about rock music and the guitar and the riff, but it’s also a subculture and that it’s weak and egotistical. It’s totally both. This is total bullshit. This is totally fuckin’ baloney. This fuckin’ means nothing in the long run. And on the other hand it’s the most precious thing in the whole world.”

“I’ve got a CB radio in my base station in my apartment which I bought to do vocals with at the studio. One day I was coming up from this Mexican border town, and I knew there were a few trucks out on the road, it was about seven in the evening, and the sky was beautiful. A few big, classic dramatic Arizona clouds and a big rock bluff over here on the right, and just this view all around. I opened up Channel 19, the main channel, and there was complete silence. I picked up my CB and said, ‘Boy... that sure is beautiful.’ And there was a pregnant pause, and then the response came over the radio: ‘Yeah... sure is.’ That was great. Now, every time I go to Europe and rent a car, I don’t go and see a fuckin’ thing. All I do is get a map, and get to the next place. It’s weird, how you can get lost out there.”

10 NO 13 BABY

“Who else can sing about ‘tattooed tits’ and make it sound this good?” **Paul Kelly**

11 RIVER EUPHRATES

“It has the kind of screeching chorus that it’d be rude not to jump about crazily to” **Ben Meakin**



12 VELOURIA

“Structurally, lyrically... it’s amazing! The harmonies are top-notch even by the Pixies’ high standards” **Jenni Millar**

13 CACTUS

“Bowie covered it. Sleazy as hell. Says it all really” **Kerry Black**

14 BONE MACHINE

“Best start to an album ever. Albini’s production is amazing” **Brian Mahone**



15 DIG FOR FIRE

“The first Pixies song I ever heard. I was like, ‘Holy shit, who are these guys?’” **John Bench**

16 THE HOLIDAY SONG

“The first time I heard that riff my life changed forever” **Paul Mitchell**

17 U-MASS

“Fantastic use of the words ‘cunt’ and ‘cock’ by Black Francis. It’s educational” **Jill Smith**

18 I’VE BEEN TIRED

“It’s got it all – whores with disease, Lou Reed, politics and beer, breasts like a cluster of grapes, and a killer riff” **Michael Clewley**

19 LEVITATE ME

“Ignored by many fans, but Kurt Cobain may as well have called Nirvana’s ‘Aneurysm’ ‘Levitate Me 2.’” **Joe Simpson**

20 INTO THE WHITE

“Truly a Kim Deal classic!” **Debbie Haynes**



Complete your Pixies back catalogue at EIL.COM/NME

Here come your fans

The stars rifle through the Pixies’ back catalogue to choose their favourites



Robert Turner
Black Rebel
Motorcycle Club

What did the Pixies mean to you?

“I only saw them once before, when they went out with U2, and it was like an arena tour. It wasn’t like their environment or their fans and the lights were all on and it was still great. It’s really cool that they’re getting back together. It seems like people are more enthusiastic about them now than when they were going the last time. It seems like there’s a rebirth.”

Fave Pixies song: “‘Dancing The Manta Ray’ or ‘Caribou.’”



Conor Deasy
The Thrills

What did the Pixies mean to you?

“They were fucking unbelievable. If the lead singer looked a little bit more like Kurt Cobain, they probably would have been the biggest band in the world, you know? But that’s how crazy and fucked up the music industry is, really. But great songwriting stands the test of time and that’s what it’s all about.”

Fave Pixies song: “‘Debaser.’ It’s kind of sad when you pick their most well known song, isn’t it?”



Ash

What do the Pixies mean to you?

Rick McMurray: “I think the Pixies are a really influential band. When we started out we got into them through Nirvana – they were obviously a big influence on Nirvana. We sorta got into them and



Perry Farrell
Jane’s Addiction

Fave Pixies song: “I don’t have a favourite song but I have a favorite title. I love (*T-shirt slogan and compilation album title*) ‘Death To The Pixies’, that’s hysterical.”



Wayne Coyne
The Flaming Lips

What do the Pixies mean to you?

“Gosh! I think anybody who will change their name to Black Francis, you’ve gotta kind of like that... ‘If man is five and god is seven...’ you sing along to that and something good happens. Watching them yesterday at Coachella, they really did enjoy playing with each other and it seems like they’re having a time of it. I don’t believe in reunions that much, I’m like you know, who cares.”

Fave Pixies song: “‘Monkey Gone to Heaven.’ Thankfully Kim Deal’s not on drugs any more for her health or whatever reasons. I sort of envisioned they’d get back together and she’d be zonked out on drugs and during the height of that song she would just bash Charles (*Black Francis*) over the head with her bass from behind and that would be the end of the Pixies reunion. Wouldn’t that be phenomenal?”



Matt Bellamy
Muse

What do the Pixies mean to you?

“Weird guitars. I think they were the first (*band*) to bring experimental guitar playing into great pop songs. We kind of discovered them through an older brother, and Dom our drummer’s older sister... bands like The Cure and the Pixies.”

Fave Pixies song: “‘Velouria.’ It has that kind of strong melody and I just love Black Francis’ voice, the way he just went kind of crazy and lost the plot every now and again. I think it’s kind of edgy ‘cos the songs are really melodic and really great, kind of poppy tracks, but it’s got this hard edge to it with this weird vocal and this weird guitar. I think that’s probably the first band I heard that did that kind of thing.”

“I envisioned they’d get back together and Kim would be zonked on drugs and bash Charles over the head with her bass”

Wayne Coyne

then a few weeks later they split up. We never thought we’d actually be seeing them let alone be playing on the same bill as them.”

What’s your favourite Pixies song and why?
Charlotte Hatherley: “‘Velouria.’ I don’t know why; it’s a really great song. There’s so many great Pixies songs so it’s hard to choose.”

Tim Wheeler: “It’s also the worst video of all time.”
Charlotte: “They always did really shit videos.”
Rick: “I loved ‘Dead’ on ‘Doolittle’. I love that they do like really strange biblical things as well.”

Complete the sentence, without the Pixies there would be no...

Rick: “Probably half the bands at Coachella would not exist if it wasn’t for the Pixies.”



Josh Homme
Queens Of The Stone Age
Brody Dalle

The Distillers

What do the Pixies mean to you?

Josh: “I love the Pixies.”
Brody: “I love ‘Trompe Le Monde’. I like the sound. I love the songs. So good. It’s a solid record.”