

BIOGRAPHY

*Beneath The Eyrie*

They’re out at the old church, the locals said, hiding in the shadow of the one-armed cross. Holed up in cabins crawling with critters, firing up the organ every morning, wailing songs of curses, death, witchcraft and unsatisfied spirits late into the night, on guitars embedded with their own dead teeth.

Pixies, they call ‘em, out there in the wilds of Woodstock, beneath the eyrie.

“It felt a bit haunted,” says bass Pixie Paz Lenchantin of Pixies’ four weeks at Dreamland Recording Studio, in the frost-bitten run-up to Christmas 2018. “We could’ve been filming a *Blair Witch* at the same time. The aura was thick. There was definitely a fifth member inside the church.”

The making of the third new album since Pixies reformed in 2004 was cold on the bones, but warm on the marrow. After three decades beset with upheavals, splits, trials, and tribulations, Pixies was finally a band at ease with itself. Their first era - when Charles Thompson IV returned from a student exchange trip to Puerto Rico, dropped out of college, renamed himself Black Francis and, in January 1986, convinced his ex-University of Massachusetts Amherst roommate Joey Santiago to start a band with him - redefined alternative rock and set the dynamic blueprint not just for grunge but underground guitar music for decades to come, but it was as fiery and turbulent off-record as on. Even as Francis turned his Pentecostal upbringing, flair for all things Spanish and interest in the seedier, more violent Biblical tales and mythologies into gruesome yet melodic punk noirs on seminal early albums *Surfer Rosa* (1988) and *Doolittle* (1989), and indulged his sci-fi obsessions on the silvered savagery of *Bossanova* (1990) and *Trompe Le Monde* (1991), the band fought and fractured. By 1993, the combination of Francis’s rabid roars and saccharine pop babbles, Santiago’s rattlesnake guitar squirms, Dave Lovering’s brutalist drumming, and Kim Deal’s cat-purr basslines had made them influential, era-defining indie rock giants. But they were Pixies no more.

Re-emerging in 2004, Pixies rode back into a town they’d designed on a wave of dark jubilation, headlining festivals such as Reading & Leeds and gathering plaudits like shrunken heads in a bag. Their first new song in thirteen years, “Bam Thwok,” topped download charts in 2004, but there were still rocks in the road ahead. Reluctant to make a new album, Deal left the band in 2013, so Pixies’ sensational sonic sprawl of a comeback album, *Indie Cindy* (released as three EPs in 2013-14, then compiled into an album) was recorded with Jeremy Dubs of Bunnies on bass, and toured with Muffs singer Kim Shattuck stage left. Lenchantin, boasting A Perfect Circle, Queens of The Stone Age and Zwan on her immaculate indie rock CV, replaced Shattuck for the 2014 tour, becoming a fully paid-up Pixie in 2016, in time to record the abrasive sixth album *Head Carrier* (2016). That album saw long-term producer Gil Norton replaced by Tom Dalgety (Royal Blood). “That was quite invigorating, trying something new,” says Dave, and its tour saw one last rattle off-road.

“We coasted over it,” Dave says of Joey having to leave the tour to enter rehab in 2016. “It was a wrench thrown in, but as usual we just picked up and carried on, for the better of Joe. Joe’s been a trouper, he’s been nailing it, so it’s been wonderful. I’m glad it all happened actually.” “When you don’t drink there’s a lot of clarity,” says Black Francis, himself trying his hand at sobriety for a while. “So when he stopped drinking… you got more of Joey. As a non-drinking musician, Joey’s a lot more in control of what he’s doing, the execution is so much more crisp and immediate.”

With Joey back in the fray, his Pixie claws cleaned and sharpened, the band regrouped - “stronger than ever, it feels like a real family,” says Paz - and resumed their relentless touring schedule, taking in a co-headline tour with Weezer in summer 2018 (“Everything about it was fantastic,” says Dave, “it was a circus”) and live residencies in New York and London, immersed in the early Pixies artwork of Vaughan Oliver, to celebrate the 30th anniversary and deluxe reissue of *Surfer Rosa* (Dave: “A joy to play, those songs are like riding a bike”).

Meantime, new sounds started bubbling out of the cauldron again. A handful of songs that hadn’t stewed quite long enough to make it onto *Head Carrier* were still in the mix. A clutch more came together during three weeks of pre-production rehearsals up near Charles’s place in Massachusetts, spring of ‘18. A few more ideas span themselves out of sound checks, spidery little critters. By the time Pixies wended their way to Woodstock that winter, they had half an album pulling them this way and that, like will-o’-the-wisps coming in from the woods.

All sonic intentions, as is Pixies’ way, were left unsaid. “There’s no speaking of music,” says Paz; what would come would come. But there was a sense of freedom in Dreamland’s ghost-thick aura, of a consolidation period, completed and horizons thrown wide. *Indie Cindy* had been an exploratory, transitional foray out of their comfort zone, imagining what music Pixies would have been making during their decade stranded on some faraway planet of sound - by turns frenzied, glacial and sci-fi serene. *Head Carrier* had taken them, in Joey’s words “back to Pixie-land”, a dense, inward-looking record, by Pixies for Pixies, nodding to *Surfer Rosa* and *Doolittle* as Dalgety pushed everything into the red. This time, even as they joked and cooked and meshed creatively like never before in their communal house - “It definitely felt really solid as a band,” Francis recalls, “we arrived as a band, intact” - each Pixie brought their own secretive piece to the puzzle.

“At one point I thought that we were going for some kind of western sound and I kinda ran with that for myself,” Joey reveals. “I was into Ennio Morricone again, a grown-up version of surf music. Anytime I could put a western twang on there, I’d try my darndest to do it.” Paz, encouraged to contribute songs and lyrics during wine-fueled late night writing sessions with Francis emerged with two songs, “The Long Rider” and “Los Surfer Muertes,” dedicated to a surfing friend and “legend in the water” called Desiree who died catching waves while Paz was recording *Head Carrier*: “It was a fluke,” she says “the fin hit her and she drowned. It’s in a light spirit - she couldn’t think of a better way to go.”

And as for Francis, who spent most mornings teasing melodies out of the church’s organ, he allowed himself one word of dark guidance. “Before we embarked on the record I said to Tom ‘I don’t know, but maybe this record is gonna have a more gothic feel.’  When we arrived at the studio, it’s a kinda spooky, gothic kind of a place, so if something suggested lyrically or musically something gothic, we made it more gothic, because that was the improv word that had been thrown at us. Anything that suggested gothic, we totally embraced it. So the record overall has that kind of a vibe. Every song fits that category. It’s a little bit darker. It’s elemental; it’s moon, sky, water, tree, earth, ice, wind, spirits, animal spirits, death, battling or grappling with something, with forces, some of them seen, some of them unseen.”

How dense the macabre? Francis even brought along a four-stringed guitar he’d had custom made with a large molar he’d recently lost embedded in resin in the headstock, roots and all. “I think it’s cool,” he says, “but most people I show it to find it gross or weird.”

No wonder Pixies emerged from Dreamland with a record - *Beneath The Eyrie*, named after the bald eagle’s nest – or “eyrie” - that Dave spotted in a tree by some abandoned railroad tracks just behind the studio - that reads like a dusty book of eerie folklore tales, full of black arts, Byronesque imagery, death, and its aftermath. “On Graveyard Hill,” the cranky new wave “Debaser” that was Paz’s third co-write on the record, pictures a witch called Donna casting a fatal curse - or is it a love spell? - on her unsuspecting lover. “This Is My Fate,” (“a Twilight Zone episode,” according to Charles) portraits a drunkard riding the mule trains out of Harmony Borax in Death Valley, high on mandrake root. The dreamy alt-pop limbo of “Daniel Boone,” inspired by Francis almost hitting a reindeer on a foggy drive to the church, imagines a spirit rising from the wreckage that might have been, bound for reincarnation.

Most Coleridgean of all is “Silver Bullet,” a visceral Morricone gunfight theme left over from *Head Carrier*, in which a “man condemned” wanders the night, hunting out a duel to end his internal torment. “It’s become more doppelganger,” Francis says. “Right after the song was done my daughter was like ‘silver bullet? This is a werewolf song.” After she told me that it did take on that kind of aspect to it. Whether it’s literally a werewolf I don’t know, but it’s definitely one wrestling with oneself.”

Supernatural beings abound. The furious, frustrated punk searching the streets of “St Nazaire” for a “selkie bride.” a Gaelic seal woman who can return to the sea if her seal coat survives her romantic liaisons. And then there’s Black Jack Hooligan, the Scottish sprite telling the tale of how his girlfriend became known as “Catfish Kate.” “This is a story from my childhood that I inherited from my father,” Charles says of the album’s breezy, infectious track. “I told the same story to my kids when they were younger. Kate’s up there in the mountains of South Dakota or wherever in the 1800s, she’s living in the world of Native Americans and fur traders and soldiers and wanderers. She falls into the river one day, she’s taken into the river by a giant catfish, she wrestles with the catfish. There’s a gothic feel to that, this woman battling with a monster-sized catfish, emerging from the water wearing the skin of the catfish as her new robe with the blood dripping – ‘I am alive, I battled all night long with the catfish, and I won, I ripped him open.’ She’s victorious.”

Here, and throughout the record, a painful subtext is at play. Black Francis has recently undergone a divorce, the lyrical impact of which he was unaware of as the songs came together but is blinding in retrospect. Compulsive album opener “In The Arms Of Mrs. Mark Of Cain” speaks of being content in a cursed relationship (note the piano reprise from “Motorway To Roswell” at the end). “Ready For Love” is as blatantly, brutally romantic as Pixies have ever dared to be. The bitter, snarling “Bird Of Prey” might be told from the perspective of what Francis describes as “an unsatisfied spirit riding a [Calèshe](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barouche%22%20%5Co%20%22Barouche) like the ghost-riders in the sky - ‘I am here to haunt again because I am not satisfied,’” but linger too long on lines like “you’ve stolen my tomorrow/So I come for it today/You stole it when you stole my yesterday” and even Francis admits it’s a divorce song: “I didn’t necessarily know it at the time but I do now.  It’s a song of longing I guess… it’s about the loss of love.”

Death hangs heavy over *Beneath The Eyrie*, not least on the deceptively jaunty campfire closer, “Death Horizon,” Here’s a vast millennium of endings. Short term, it’s the death of a relationship. Medium term, the extinction of humanity by its own carbon smothered hand. And long term, the death of the Earth in a supernova fireball. A near infinity of horizons, each darker than the last. “Here we are standing on the seashore looking at the horizon,” says Francis, “and even though the sun, for all of our lives represents life, we know from our knowledge of the stars that one day that star disappears. That star blows up or implodes or whatever stars do when they finish their cycle. That usually means the end of everything in its orbit. We already know what the end of the story is, so there’s that more cosmic finality. There’s the death of the here and now and the things that are important to us in our current lives, then there’s the death of humanity, and then there’s the ultimate one - at the end of the day it all goes up in a supernova anyway. If you were gonna add a fourth level to it, it’s also the death of the record, isn’t it? It’s like ‘you’ve heard everything, you’ve heard all of the stories, you’ve heard the songs, you’ve experienced everything, the record’s over now’.”

*Beneath The Eyrie* recaptures the rabid velocity, boundless invention and vivid, enveloping aesthetic of Pixies’ legendary early albums without feeling the need to recreate them. Instead the band toys with new wave, ragtime, Gallic noir, western psych, doom rock, Weezer pop and the vaudevillian cabaret they only hinted at on “Mr. Grieves.” “We can do any kind of song, it doesn’t matter if it’s reggae, ska, jazz, Europop, we can make an attempt at it,” says Dave, and the creativity in full flow now that Pixies are a solid family again is evinced by the fact that eight or nine songs from the album’s demo sessions will be released as a companion album. “There are at least two of them that I really like,” says Dave. “I wish they were on the album. One or two of them might be better than the record so it might take off!”

For the first time, we’ll get a peek behind the curtain of *Beneath The Eyrie* too. Journalist Tony Fletcher miked up the band and studio for the entire month to document the making of the record for a podcast series called “It’s a Pixies Podcast,” premiering in June. A podcast liable to bury Pixies’ reputation as glowering devils forever. “In our later years, we joke and play around way, way, way more than ever in the past,” Dave says, and Joey agrees. “People are gonna be surprised how not precious we are making a record. There’s a lot of buffoonery and Dalgetafoolery going on. People probably think we’re really serious about making our craft but, to us, it’s one big fun-fest.”

There they were, Pixies, out at the church with the one-armed cross, cackling into the night. Weaving music that grips like a spell, crushes like a curse.

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