

# Loud quiet loud

After a 12-year silence, the Pixies are back on song. MARK EDWARDS finds out how it happened

First you play quiet. Then you play loud. It doesn't seem such an amazing idea. But it was. When the Pixies started doing it in the late 1980s, it helped to kick off a musical revolution, sweeping away hackneyed power chords and awful soft-metal and inspiring a new generation of underground rock. When Nirvana, as Kurt Cobain admitted, "ripped off" the Pixies' quiet/loud dynamic to propel the 1990s' most important single, Smells Like Teen Spirit, the sound had conquered the world.

In 1993 the Pixies broke up. Frontman Black Francis launched a solo career as Frank Black; bassist Kim Deal found success in the Breeders; guitarist Joey Santiago initially kept a low profile but latterly formed the Martinis; drummer David Lovering made the most unexpected move, re-emerging as a magician.

However, instead of fading into memory, the Pixies joined that exclusive coterie of bands whose fame only grows after they split — bands like the Velvet Underground and the Stooges. And while the Pixies had achieved greater success than either of those outfits, they became viewed in a similar light: as a band that was ahead of its time, "godfathers" of the music that followed.

Eleven years later, the Pixies are sitting in the bar of a Manchester hotel, trying to remember where that whole quiet/loud thing started.

"When you first start out, you play the guitar a certain way. You think, oh they like that, and you keep it. You scream and they all applaud and you think, uh-huh. And that's how you form your sound," says Charles Thompson, the band's frontman under the

nom de band Black Francis. "I don't know how that quiet/loud thing started. I think we just needed an 'arrangement'. So it was: 'Joey, you don't play right now ... okay, everyone play now.' It was the first idea we thought of. But it worked, so we kept it. It wasn't like a whole vision thing.

"And we were probably influenced by Talking Heads and Violent Femmes. Some of that stuff is really skeletal. That told us it was okay to just go 'ner-ner-ner-beep' and just put in a little 'squurk' here or there. We never discussed any of this. But I think that stuff was around. Now there's none of that. Now there's just ..." Thompson launches into a parody of the over-the-top vocal shenanigans of the Pop Idol generation.

But that isn't all that's around now. The Pixies are around now. Back with their ner-ner-ner-beeps and Santiago's extraordinary squurks, Thompson's strange lyrics of biblical intensity — tales of bone machines and monkeys that get to heaven, blood-smearing clothes and debasers — and above all the sheer explosive power that is unleashed when all four get together. They have re-formed and they're touring, selling out gigs and dominating festivals. Next up is the V Festival (Stafford on August 21, and Chelmsford the next day).

For more than a decade, a reunion seemed as unlikely as it was

devoutly wished for — by a generation of music fans who had only discovered the band after they split, as much as by those who saw the band the first time round. The split between Thompson and Deal had apparently been too rancorous; the fact that Deal's band, the Breeders, had a hit album while Thompson, as Frank Black, found it difficult to escape the shadow of the songs he had written for the Pixies, probably didn't help, either.

So what changed? "I was doing a radio interview in London last year, one of those morning shows with two or three jocks and all their buddies," Thompson recalls. "And they were like: 'Sooooo, when are you guys gonna get together and do a reunion?' I said 'Heeey, we get together and jam all the time.' They were like 'Really? Wow!' I didn't even think about it again. But the next day it was in the New York Post and on the CNN ticker."

Thompson's interview — on Xfm — was indeed reported around the world's media as hard fact. Did they actually ever jam together? "Oh, no," says Thompson. "I thought it was plain that I was being completely silly.

But whether I did that consciously or unconsciously, the cat was out of the bag. So then I thought, well, why don't we? So I called Joe, and Joe called

Kim and David, and everybody said sure."

It couldn't possibly be that simple. I put David Bowie's theory to Thompson: that you can't go back and play the old songs until you're sure that your new songs stand comparison with them. Certainly, the most recent Frank Black albums have been greeted with greater critical acclaim than some of his earlier solo work.

"Maybe," Thompson muses. "That's a nice theory. It certainly fits." And then, not for the only time in the interview, Thompson neatly avoids a compliment, deflating any praise for his recent work with his own self-deprecating theory. "Instead of getting mocked every time you show up in town, you just get older and the guys who write up your gigs start calling you 'the legendary Frank Black'. It's kind of a 'respect your elders' thing. So maybe I did get a little more chilled. Well, they don't think I'm a complete buffoon, so let's get the old band back together. I don't think it's that black and white. But there may be some truth in it." Thompson also cites "a bunch of life changes", including his recent divorce and "going to therapy, stuff like that, kinda having everything turned upside down. Suddenly you see everything different".

Thompson was committed to a Frank Black tour, so the other three began rehearsing without him last November in Deal's LA rehearsal room. "It's strange how it all comes back," says Deal. "Just as you're thinking, 'Oh my God, I can't remember how this goes,' the fingers are moving into the right place — muscle memory."

Thompson joined the band early this year. "I was really nervous



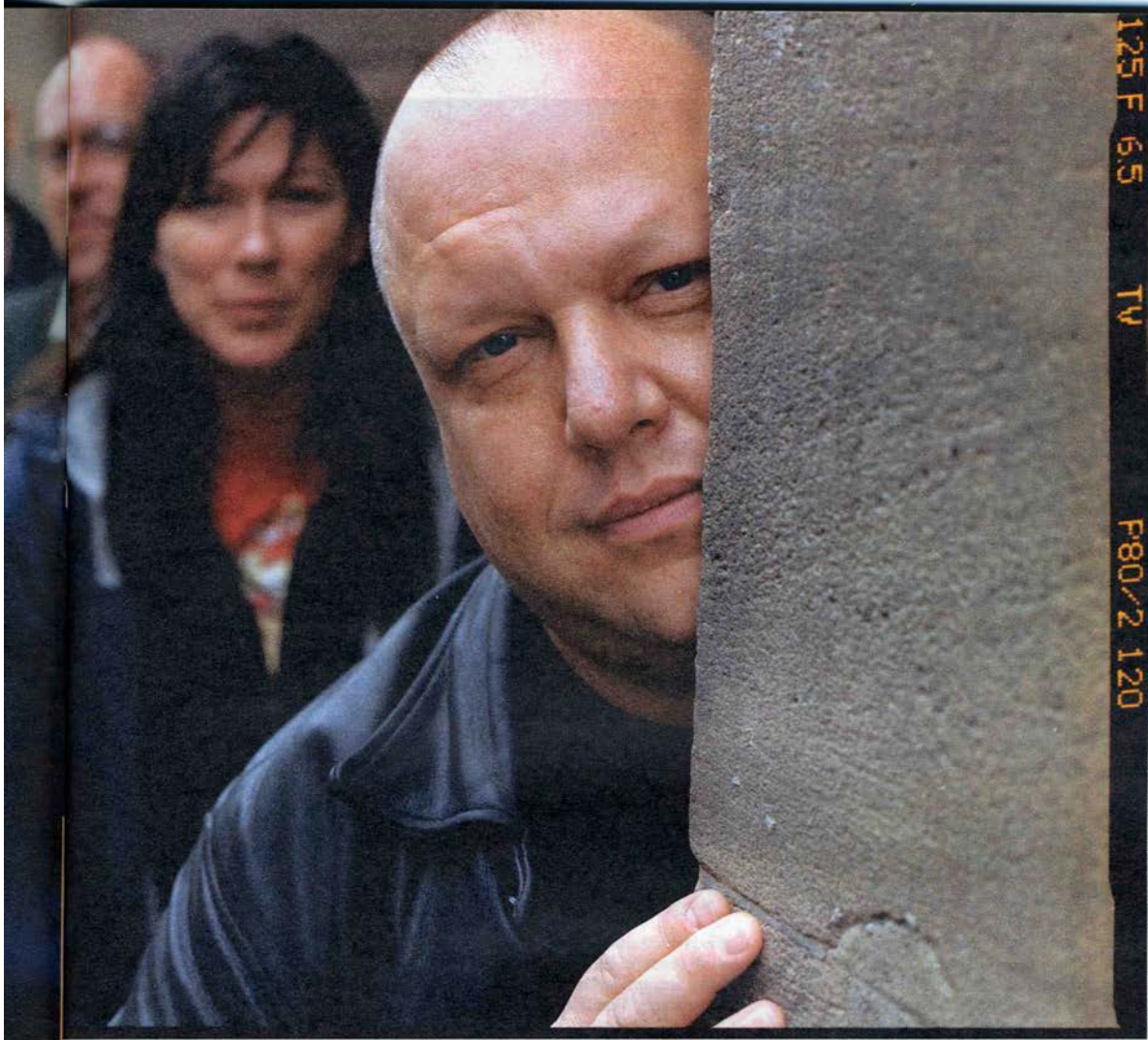
because I hadn't seen Kim in so many years and she hadn't seen me, and we didn't know how things were going to go. What was great was Kim's rehearsal space was of the style that we used to get back in Boston. Just a little hole in an industrial neighbourhood. It wasn't like we booked the hot rehearsal space with roadies running round. It was like we were starting out, exactly as we would have rehearsed years ago. Psychologically, it was kinda good to have it shrunk down like that."

"Those were our best shows," says Santiago with a wry smile. Santiago says hardly anything in the interview, but every comment that he does make has his bandmates cracking up with laughter.

The band staged a low-key warm-up tour, playing their first gig in Minneapolis. Not that there was anything low-key about the

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PAT POPE, LEFT TO RIGHT: EDWARD J. HANCOCK, HOTEL MANAGER

**From left: Joey Santiago, David Lovering, Kim Deal and Black Francis**

I'm the bass player. I don't mind singing a song now and then' — but she's not after my mic. Having said that, I've loosened up a little. I'm not as territorial as I was about the intellectual property aspect of it. I'm not arrogant ... not *as* arrogant."

This seems to be true. The first, and so far only, new Pixies song is a Kim Deal composition, Bam Thwok, which was made available via iTunes. "It was super poppy, but I guess it wasn't near poppy enough," says Deal, cryptically, before revealing the song's origins. Those who felt the song seemed rather cartoon-like will be intrigued to learn that Deal wrote it when the band were asked to submit a song for *Shrek 2*. "They told us, 'We're looking for something a little edgier,'" says Thompson. "We gave it to them and they said, 'It's a little too edgy.' So there you go — nothing's changed."

One thing has changed, and it's good news for Pixies fans. "I forgot how much I liked playing with these three people," says Thompson, "because I'd been telling myself for years that I didn't like it because it ended on a slightly sour

gig for Pixies fans. "They were posting our rehearsals on the internet," says Thompson. "They were hiding in the alley with cellphones and texting. Oh, they're doing Gigantic, now they're doing Where Is My Mind? Blow-by-blow accounts for three days before the gig. So there was quite a buzz. Not screaming pigs — not that kind of rock'n'roll buzz. More like people lurking across the street and watching you, or people at the club trying not to grin or to look at you, because we're 'cool' rock, right?"

The band members' memories of that first gig neatly delineate their characters. Lovering is matter-of-fact: "It was what it was ... for a first gig." Deal felt what you might expect to feel on taking the stage and being met by worshipping fans: "We were so excited. It was a lovely feeling. I was freaking out." Santiago just shrugs, as if

it is ridiculous to expect that he will have any particular memory of his band's first gig for 12 years. Thompson's modesty kicks in: "It was a little embarrassing."

Huh? "In a good way ... y'know what I mean?" Not really. "Because everyone was treating

one of the seminal rock oeuvres. But as well as engaging, Thompson can also be an intimidating presence, notably when he greets roughly every third question of the interview with a stony silence. I assume this is his way of letting me know that my questions are

mindful of the need for a certain intra-band diplomacy. This suggests that the reunion can extend beyond the current tour, which runs until Christmas in the USA. Would the band like to continue after that? "One day at a time," says Lovering. "I guess we don't

**‘I forgot how much I liked playing with these people ... I’d been telling myself for years that I didn’t like it because it ended on a slightly sour note’**

us like we were heroes, like we rescued a baby out of a well. I mean, c'mon, we're just playing songs. I don't mean 'embarrassed' in a negative way. More in a positive, golly gee, kinda way."

Thompson's modesty is rather engaging from a man whose songwriting many would place alongside that of, say, Lou Reed as

beneath contempt; it's only after the tape is shut off that he explains that his silences are designed to ensure that his more reticent bandmates say something.

Thompson's attempts to avoid verbally treading on the other Pixies' toes are good news for the band's fans, suggesting that this potentially volatile group are

know," says Thompson. "Hey," says Deal, "we're at the table. We're all here," underlining that this in itself seemed unthinkable not so long ago. According to Thompson, some of the key territorial issues that tore the band apart have been resolved. "Kim has said she doesn't want to be the frontwoman. She told me, 'Hey,

note. But there's this thing we have ..." Thompson gestures to suggest the impossibility of defining a band's chemistry in words, "... and I forgot about that. And I appreciate it now." □

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