

Mark Beaumont – March 21, 2018

You may not know it, but Pixies are already inside your head. Maybe you were swept along by the beautifully ominous melody that played out as the skyscrapers fell at the end of Fight Club; maybe that same haunting tune, given a gentle synthetic makeover, is currently tickling your dopamine receptors on the latest Galaxy chocolate advertisement. Perhaps you were amazed at how much an iPhone could rock when, in 2014, Phoebe Bridgers covered Gigantic using its various apps. Or maybe you were won over by the quiet/loud dynamic of Blur’s Song 2 and never thought to wonder where they nabbed it from. That’s Pixies, their tiny claws inside your head. Probing.

In the 30 years since the release of their seminal album Surfer Rosa – a record made up of rage, religion, gore, incest and superheroes named Tony – Pixies have become an insidious presence, both the root and backbone of alternative culture. These four oddball outsiders from Boston not only planted the seeds of grunge within the dark, schizophrenic mania of their debut album (Kurt Cobain would admit that he was trying to imitate the record while writing Nevermind) but of much of the best rock music ever since.

“I look back on it fondly,” says Pixies drummer Dave Lovering today. “It’s my favorite. Even though [1987 mini-album] Come On Pilgrim was the first thing we did, it was a demo tape. Surfer Rosa was the first thing of our infancy, of what we did in the first year and a half as a band, so it’s very representative as far as the time and a statement.”

The origins of Surfer Rosa were as off-kilter and impetuous as the fiery flamenco garage rock it contained. Returning from a six-month student exchange trip to Puerto Rico study Spanish in 1984, Charles Thompson IV – soon to become Black Francis – decided to drop out of the University Of Massachusetts Amhurst, get a job in a warehouse and write songs with his old dorm neighbor and jam partner, guitarist Joey Santiago.

Early in 1986, Kim Deal joined. She had never played a note of bass guitar before, but she was also the only person to answer a small ad for a female bassist interested in both US folk revivalist trio Peter, Paul And Mary and Minnesotan rockers Hüsker Dü. Deal got the job simply for liking Frances’s songs. She and Lovering, who was brought in after Deal had met him at her wedding reception, found themselves in a dark sonic place: Pixies’ formative music was a blend of US underground thrash rock, indie surf pop, Spanish-language flamenco and the Biblical mythology of Frances’s childhood.

“I’ve been kinda affected by the charismatic Pentecostal thing, which my family was into when I was a kid in California,” he told Melody Maker in 1988. “I was 12 and religion came over my entire family. I grew up exposed to a lot of preaching and righteous rage, and though I’ve rejected the content of all that, the style has kinda left an impression on me. It certainly left me f----- up, that’s for sure… It was pretty American: all handclapping, heaven and hell and sin. It wasn’t quiet, it wasn’t Anglican. It was all ‘RRRRREPENT’ and ‘GOD!’.”

Having honed their black art around the bars of Boston, Pixies ventured into Fort Apache Studios in Roxbury in March 1987 to record 17 demo songs in just three days. “It was a dump back then and we were there for the weekend,” Dave recalls. “The heat went out while we were doing it so it was getting colder and colder and colder. But it was still amazing because it was the first studio we’d gone into.”

At Fort Apache, Pixies laid out core early themes of deviant sex and classical incest – the ultra-catchy The Holiday Song involved a “wicked son” masturbating over his sister, while Nimrod’s Son updated the Biblical tale of the leader of Babel who married his mother – and the songs themselves sounded just as compellingly unnatural. “Instead of having the typical four line verse, we’ll only sing three lines,” Charles said.” Or when we stop for a pause, we won’t wait the usual eight beats, we’ll go rest for 10 beats… where a four-chord sequence would sound natural, we’ll turn it into a three-chord sequence, make it trip over itself… It’s kind of religious sounding.”

Containing songs that the band would spread over coming albums, the demo became known as The Purple Tape, and its sticky charms engrossed all who heard it, despite it sounding like a rabid, hairy-palmed college kid locked in the basement of U-Mass’s Spanish, Philosophy And Dodgy Religious Studies Faculty.

When The Purple Tape landed in the lap of Ivo Watts-Russell at 4AD records in the UK, he selected eight of its recordings to comprise Pixies first mini-album Come On Pilgrim and signed the band up to record their proper debut album at Somerville’s Q Division studio with musician Steve Albini. “It was like ‘Wow! We’re on a record label now?’” Lovering laughs. “’We’re gonna do a record in a real studio? Who’s Steve Albini?’”

Steve Albini was the righteously anti-corporate member of punk band Big Black and noise rock outfit Rapeman who was starting to make his name as the go-to recording engineer for the US indie rock and hardcore scenes. Since he had some fairly outre interests of his own, he seemed the perfect Pixies fit.

“Steve used to tell a lot of stories that would shock you,” Dave says. “Shocking stories about life. He was very entertaining.” Back in 1988, Dave was more specific: Albini would regale them with details of sexual practices he’d heard tell of, which can't be detailed in a family newspaper. “He’s part of this network of like minds who circulate videos amongst themselves, people like [punk band] The Butthole Surfers,” he told Melody Maker. “Albini has this video of this politician in Pennsylvania who went on a news conference and blew his brains out on air.”

“He’s very extreme,” Francis added. “It’s either ‘That’s great, that’s genius’ or ‘That’s p----, that sucks’.” “P---- or non-p-----, that was the studio jargon,” Joey confirmed.

Rather than clicking, Albini and Pixies somewhat rubbed each other up the wrong way. “Having lunched and dined with Steve Albini, [I’m proud that] we respect human beings,” Deal told Melody Maker. “Listening to him rag and rag, he’s so sure, and nobody can be that sure and not be an a------… How can he actually say ‘this song sucks’, and when he says it, he means it, that’s The Truth. You can’t say that. When he was ragging on people and cutting them down, that was a bad feeling. An old man and an old lady came in the diner and he’d go ‘They’re stupid, they’re old, they’re dumb’, he doesn’t even have to look at them, he knows it.”

Albini himself would later tell Forced Exposure magazine that he considered Surfer Rosa "a patchwork pinch loaf from a band who at their top dollar best are blandly entertaining college rock. Their willingness to be 'guided' by their manager, their record company and their producers is unparalleled. Never have I seen four cows more anxious to be led around by their nose rings.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Lovering says now, in response to the quote. “We’ve done what we wanted to do musically, ever since day one that has not changed. We’ve not had to conform or change our songs or do what someone wants. I don’t know what his take on it was or if it was difficult to talk to the press, I don’t know. It wasn’t an issue that we were being led around by people, I don’t think that was ever the case.”

“I was being rude,” Albini now admits, “that was unkind of me. They had a generally cooperative attitude, which meant that when somebody who worked with them said, ‘let's do this’, they said yes rather than questioning if it was a good idea. After the fact, I felt like I had exploited this go-along, get-along attitude by having them indulge some odd production choices I dreamed up. Only in retrospect did I realize I was saddling them with eccentricities they were going to have to answer for, and that realization helped me form a generally more hands-off working method.”

Any tension in the studio only added to the scabrous magic Pixies conjured on Surfer Rosa. Albini asked the band to use metal guitar picks for added edge, fed Francis’s vocals through a guitar on the brutal Something Against You to make it some grislier and taped a PZM ambient microphone to the wall to capture the rawness of the room. “Everything had to be full-throttle,” Kim said. “All the needles were on red,” Francis added, “he totally overloaded the tape.”

“I recall the songs being really well put-together,” says Albini, “the arrangements were interesting and the dynamics of the playing flattered them. I was dumbstruck by Kim's voice, she sounded beautiful.

“The studio had one main recording room, which sounded nice for the drums but the guitars seemed tame so we rented a couple of Marshalls and did some overdubs with the guitars in the echo-y bathroom down the hall, that made a big difference. [But] the subject matter, the arrangements, the performances, all of that was the band's doing and they should get all the credit for the personality of the record.”

The record’s personality was that of a bubblegum surf pop band kidnapped and forced to play for their lives in a serial killer’s dungeon. Opener Bone Machine set a seditious tone with a compulsive grindhouse churn over which a desperate-sounding Black Francis fantasized about torturing an unfaithful lover and claimed to have been molested in a parking lot by a priest. Elsewhere, a bride-to-be shoots herself the day before her wedding on I’m Amazed and a prisoner begs his partner to send him a dress caked in her sweat, blood and saliva on Cactus.

Incest infected the record too: in Vamos – the flamenco punk stomp during which Santiago often unplugs his guitar and “plays” the feedback from the jack onstage – Charles shacks up with his sister and has sons; Break My Body finds him sleeping with his mother and Broken Face is about the deformed inbred children that a man fathers with the children from his relationship with his sisters. Fritzl-wise, this was off the scale.

Yet there was always a strong melodic impulse to the songs which lightened the record. Pixies sung about having sex on the beach with the titular Surfer Rosa on Oh My Golly! and honored a superhero named Tony on Tony’s Theme. They celebrated inter-racial love on Kim’s major contribution to the Pixies canon, their first single Gigantic. Inspired by the Sissy Spacek movie Crimes Of The Heart, “It’s about... watching a young kid and an older married woman get together,” Kim explained on MTV. “Sex between a black man and a white woman. In the Fifties, when it was, like, taboo to do that.”

Considering that she’d go on to make some of the best indie rock records of the Nineties with The Breeders, was Kim undervalued as a songwriter in Pixies? “At the time, it seemed to me as an outsider that one of the main features of the band was that Kim's voice was almost as important as Charles's,” says Albini. “Even when she was singing a second part, it seemed like less of a backing vocal and more of a counterpoint. In subsequent records her role definitely seemed to get more marginalized, and while I'm not privy to the internal workings of the band that seemed intentional.”

Equally playful, but with arguably greater impact, was Where Is My Mind? the eerie Fight Club ballad about a time Francis was chased by a small fish while snorkeling in the Caribbean. “I just think the song is likeable,” Charles told IGN. “Even though Kim barely sings on it, there’s something about her singing that little haunting two note riff. The same thing with Joey, he’s got a little two note thing going on too. It’s so simple, and then there’s me in the middle singing the wacky cute little lyrics. So, it’s kind of a quintessential Pixie song. It displays [that] everyone’s personalities are very strong.”

“There’s a lot of younger people I meet and when you say the Pixies, they say ‘’Where Is My Mind?’’,’ Lovering says today. “A lot of people were made aware of the Pixies or that song because of Fight Club. That blew me away.”

Pixies would go on to record another mythological masterpiece in 1989’s Doolittle before going more sci-fi on later albums, but it’s the gruesome glory of Surfer Rosa, and the ruined sexuality of its cover image (a topless flamenco dancer in a crumbling Mexican bar), that truly defined the band and set a fresh blueprint for an indie rock dynamism that would become as widespread and influential as punk. These sinister sounds weren't coming from the usual pantomime metal Satan botherers but a bunch of collegiate cranks. Pixies’ misleading facade of normality, combined with Francis's unhinged tone and their passionate flamenco pace, opened new pathways of melodic menace for the disenfranchised suburban kids of America and bridged the chasm between the hardcore underground and the indie pop mainstream.

“Pixies were a fine band and made music to suit themselves,” Albini says. “It's gratifying to have been involved in something that was both a realized ambition of the band and cherished by their audience.”

“The best thing you can say about Pixies and that record is that they didn't sound like they were embedded in their times… there's a kind of fragility to their aesthetic that would have been unthinkable to some of their harder-rocking contemporaries.”

It’s no wonder Pixies harked back to Surfer Rosa on their latest album, 2016's excellent Head Carrier: it was very much the crux and pinnacle of alternative guitar rock over the past three decades. Three decades on, which other musicians will step into Pixies’ shoes, try this trick, and spin it?