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SXSW Review: loudQUIETloud

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No rock band has ever consistently exceeded expectations quite like Pixies. Formed by four dirt-poor Bostonians in 1986, the band released four albums, an extended EP and a handful of singles on 4AD (an English art rock label largely kept afloat by the inexplicable staying power of The Cocteau Twins), barely blipped the domestic charts whilst enjoying massive success overseas, headlined the Reading Festival in 1991, opened for U2 on the Zooropa tour in 1993, and disbanded later that year after lead Pixie Black Francis announced their breakup to the world on a radio interview, and then to his three bandmates via fax.

Though seemingly destined to drift off into obscurity, the band's long, slow comeback started almost immediately, as Kurt Cobain started telling anyone who would listen that Nirvana's breakout single, "Smells Like Teen Spirit", was his blatant attempt to rip off a Pixies song. That simple endorsement had a lot of power; a quote on the band's record company [website](#) credits Cobain's admission with singlehandedly bringing about "the beginning of the end of counterculture." Hyperbolic, sure, but not necessarily inaccurate: by the end of the decade, when their early single "Where is My Mind" was becoming forever linked to the apparently archtypical modern male's emasculation-via-consumerism through its use in David Fincher's *Fight Club*, the quartet had easily become the biggest dead band of the 90s. I can personally attest to the fact that Pixies fanaticism was only stoked by the band's limited output - with only five records, there's nothing to do but

listen to them all. A lot. In 1994, I played my cassette of *Surfer Rosa* until it wore out. Twice - and, of course, the seeming finality of the divorce.

But then, because irony is a virus that we cannot escape, and can only hope to contain, in the Spring of 2004 Pixies came back, for an almost-two-year, sold-out tour called - wait for it - Pixies Sell Out. *loudQUIETloud*, a film by [Steven Cantor](#) and [Matthew Galkin](#) which had its world premiere last week at SXSW, is about what happened next, and as concert films go, it's fairly phenomenal. Galkin and Cantor paint Pixies' tale as an epic romance that was doomed from the start; when the lovers reunite (for a host of reasons, but not one of them love), the end result is, much like the film itself, both spectacular and sad.

Those grown weary by the latest flood of documentaries will be happy to note that there's not a lot of fat to cut here. We jump right in on the band members, days before their first rehearsal in over ten years. After the break-up, Francis (born Charles Thompson) went on to release a bevy of solo albums under the moniker Frank Black; the first and second produced a semi-successful single each, but later efforts drifted off into country-tinged monotony. When we pop in on him early in the film Charles (as he's referred to throughout) is living on a sleepy, farmy Pacific Northwest piece of land with his pregnant girlfriend and her son. Far from any kind of madding crowd, Charles is casually shopping a new solo record and waiting for his divorce to go through so he can embark on his second marriage. Unglamorous as it all is, compared to the other Pixies, Charles is arguably the best off. Drummer David Lowering, when we first meet him, is sleeping on couches and "persu[ing] such hobbies as magic and metal detecting." Guitarist Joey Santiago (who essentially invented the standard alt-rock dynamic range of the 90s) was, as he says, "eeking it out", supporting his wife and two children on Pixies residuals and the occasional film scoring gig. In one way or another, all the Pixie boys needed this tour - Charles was looking, on some level, to bridge the gap between his personas of Black Francis and Frank Black; David and Joey were looking to bridge the gaps between their debt and the wallets. The single Pixie girl, however, did not.

One night, while the Pixies were still together, bassist Kim Deal went out drinking with Tanya Donnelly, then of 4AD band Throwing Muses, and by the end of the night the girls had decided to record "the ultimate disco album." Instead, they rounded up a couple of other female instrumentalists (including Josephine Whiggs and violinist Carrie Bradley) and the drummer from Slint, called themselves The Breeders and recorded Pod. If the name of the group was a clear knock at Kim's day job ("pixie" being Cold War-era slang for gay, "breeder", for straight), the record itself did nothing to dilute what Thompson would eventually admit to being a threat. For people who thought the Kim-penned "Gigantic" to be the highlight of Pixies' output to that point (and there were a lot of us), Pod seemed to point towards a kind of musical promise that Pixies proper seemed unlikely to fulfill. When Deal returned to the Pixies in 1990 to lay down tracks for their fourth record, *Bossanova*, Charles allegedly "punished" her by limiting her contribution to, eventually, essentially that of session musician. By the band's final record, the brutally underrated *Trompe le Monde*, Deal was still technically a Pixie, but Charles was writing all the songs, and her vocal presence had been whittled down to almost nothing.

Though specific incidents aren't named, when pressed on camera, several band members blame problems between Charles and Kim as the final factor in the band's demise. It certainly couldn't have been easy for the egomaniacal Charles to agree to get back on stage with her - after all, in the post-breakup decade, Deal has seen her personal myth balloon to the point of surpassing that of the band as a whole. Even if you've never heard a Pixies song, if you turned on a television or radio at all in 1993 or 1994, it's very likely that you have had some exposure to The Breeders. Their second full-length album (their first as a "real", full time band, with Kim's twin sister Kelley replacing Donnelly on lead guitar), *Last Splash*, spawned three hit singles; The Guardian branded the biggest of those hits, "Canonball", as "probably the only song taunting the Marquis de

Sade to get repeated play on MTV". Though no one who turned on the television during the career peak of Marilyn Manson could say that with a straight face, there's no question that "Cannonball"'s massive popularity was gloriously, triumphantly weird, and it made Kim and Kelley very unlikely stars. After opening for Nirvana, and proving the highlight (if not the official headliner) of the 1994 Lollapalooza tour, The Breeders fell apart in late 1994, when Kelley was busted for receiving a FedEx package full of heroin and a court ordered her to enter rehab. Kim had her own addiction struggles, but she continued to record and play shows throughout the 90s. Shortly after she and Kelley reformed The Breeders in 2002 with a few ex-members of LA punk band Fear, Kim finally took steps to sober up. When the Sell Out tour began, she was one year out of rehab; a poignant but singularly odd moment in *loudQUIETloud* comes when Deal's mother says that her 42-year-old daughter needs the rock n'roll reunion because it'll "keep her out of trouble".

Deal's struggles to find non-alcoholic beer whilst touring Northern Europe aside, at the beginning, at least, she's the best poster girl possible for why this tour was potentially a good idea. After their first warm up gig, Deal runs backstage to submerge her hands, blistered and bleeding, under ice. Her face an incredible rotating model of exhilaration and fear, she looks around the room at her fellow bandmates and exclaims, "They were freaking out out there ... they were freaking ME out." But whatever the reaction of the crowd does to galvanize the Pixies early on, the thrill soon starts to fade. In between shows, the boy Pixies retreat to their individual bus bunks and hotel rooms, and Kim, to the motorhome she has rented so as to be able to accommodate Kelley, her human security blanket, for the length of the tour. David pops pills to shakily deal with the death of his dad; Joey iChats with his wife and kids; Kim records new Breeders demos on a four-track and goes out of her way to accommodate her rabid fans; and in one of the film's most incredible scenes, Charles verbally follows along to self-help actualization tapes. The appeal of a shirtless, obese rock star closing his eyes and chanting, "I am a good person. I am cute", cannot be underestimated; whether he's actually taking steps to better himself or just screwing with the cameraman is for debate.

Charles also gives a lot of interviews over the course of the film, and in one he hints that he's dying to get the other three Pixies into a recording studio. This is a sentiment that Charles never seems to share with his band members, and it's unclear whether he's making it up for the sake of the publicity, or if he's confiding in the reporter something that he can't bring himself to say to his bandmates. It becomes evident that we're watching the process of professional entertainers - even though they're working in a milieu in which spontaneity is ostensibly part of the allure, these guys are able to turn it on and off at the stop of a dime. And as the reunion trudges along - what was originally scheduled to be a few North American dates, culminating with the Coachella Music and Arts Festival in the spring of 2004, ends up ballooning into a world tour over the course of about 18 months - a deep, unspoken sadness sets in. By night, the Pixies are rock n' roll superheroes, traveling the globe to valiantly rescue millions of fans from the doldrums of what is by now a highly corporatized alterna-scene; by day, they're just four surly co-workers with very little to say to one another. It's a living, for sure, but for a fan, it's gut-wrenching to see how little life goes into it.

As I was writing this review, an eerily applicable Google News Clip appeared above my mail: [Pixies Planning One More Summer Tour](#). In the article, Santiago tells the reporter that there's no new record to support, and no foreseeable new Pixies material on the horizon. If *loudQUIETloud* gives the impression that Pixies, undoubtedly a national treasure to those of us who care about such things, have reduced themselves to prostitutes, then it's up to the band themselves to prove that impression wrong. Here's hoping this next tour is the final sell out.

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