



Pixie Progress

Lee Zimmerman

How to view the regrouping of the Pixies, one of the most mercurial bands of the late '80s, a group many claim opened the door for Nirvana and the grunge generation of the early '90s? Those early efforts still sound shocking — menacing, malevolent melodies pierced by torrents of jagged guitar and stuttering rhythms, all underscored by leader Black Francis' nihilistic pontificating. Internal dissension caused the band to split a scant five years after its first recording — the superb *Surfer Rosa* — and a mere three years after its major-label breakthrough, the dazzling *Doolittle*.

Following the breakup, Black Francis opted to reverse his moniker and venture out on a prolific if uneven solo career as Frank Black. His two most recent opuses, *Fast Man Raider Man* and *Honeycomb*, showed him newly entrenched in Americana territory and soaking up a sizable infusion of *Blood on the Tracks*. Bassist Kim Deal went on to moderate success with the Breeders and struggled with sobriety. Drummer David Lovering and guitarist Joey Santiago formed the Martinis before Lovering left to tour with Cracker, study engineering, and reinvent himself as a performance artist, or, as he terms it, a "scientific phenomenalist." Santiago's lately settled into a more urbane occupation as a soundtrack composer.

What a surprise, then, that a tentative Pixies reconciliation resulted in a 2004 tour that found the band as potent as ever. Two new DVD releases — *LoudQUIETloud: A Film About the Pixies* and *Acoustic: Live in Newport* — show opposing views of this perpetually conflicted outfit and its retooled presence in the new millennium. The former is perhaps the most revealing, an intimate portrait of the personalities involved who, between various concert clips from their recent reunion gigs, lay bare their inner souls, a tack that makes them decidedly less intimidating to their fans and, one supposes, to one another. The acoustic offering shows them in the most unlikely of circumstances — at the venerable Newport Folk Festival, the venue where Dylan went electric and was bombarded by catcalls in return. "We're a rock band," Deal announces before they launch themselves unplugged on an opposite route, managing to make angst-ridden anthems like "Monkey Gone to Heaven," "Bone Machine," and even "Wave of Mutilation" less a series of sanitized sing-alongs than actual hints of the essential if irascible melodies that lie at their core.

So how do the Pixies fare? Remarkably well considering their infamous in-fighting and the passage of time. By allowing themselves to reveal their own humanity and accessibility, each offering demonstrates in its own way that while one might mellow, it doesn't have to be at the expense of passion or purpose. At the very least, it's a case worth considering. — Lee Zimmerman