

Vaughan Oliver

# 4AD DAY

**TO CELEBRATE THE FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION OF VAUGHAN OLIVER AND 23 ENVELOPE'S CELEBRATED ARTWORK FOR 4AD, LUSH, PALE SAINTS AND THE WOLFGANG PRESS BRAVED A GALE-LASHED CHANNEL CROSSING TO TAKE FRANCE BY STORM. PAUL LESTER WAS OUR MAN ON BOARD. PICS: MIKE MORTON**

**THIS IS NOT A GOOD OMEN.** RUMOURS ARE circulating around Portsmouth docks' passport control that people have only this evening perished in a cross-Channel incident. Apparently, a passenger-free ship with its 19-strong crew found itself the victim of hurricane force winds, it was blown off course and was later discovered dashed against the rocks. We, that is, the various members of 4AD bands Lush, Pale Saints, The Wolfgang Press, The Pixies' Kim Deal, Simon "Cocteau Twins" Raymonde, part-time A.R. Kane and W. Press drummer, Benny Dimassa, assorted 4AD and "Snub TV" people, the NME and Melody Maker, affect a mixture of jokey flippancy, fearless bravado and genuine terror.

On boarding the boat one crew member greets us with two comforting snippets of information; our journey will last seven hours; tonight's winds will reach gale force 11. Requests to swap the figures round are promptly denied as several of the party contemplate alternative methods of transport. With the prospect of over half a dozen hours spent having our insides whisked by the pitiless motion of the English Channel, possible modes of enjoyment are considered. And how do you imagine this throbbing mass of raw, youthful energy — the assembled ranks of some of Britain's most powerfully exciting pop groups and attendant media arbiters of cultural good taste, many of whom are being unleashed on Europe for the very first time — would while away the undulating hours on the Seven Seas? Consume astonishing quantities of drugs? Indulge in an orgasmic display of frenzied sexual activity? Throw TV sets overboard? Nope.

They go to bed.  
Rock 'n' roll, phew.

**THERE** are two reasons why 35 people are being forced against their better judgement to endure a 28-hour journey to North West France. Firstly, a 10-year retrospective exhibition (set up by the Centre For Cultural Research And Development) of Vaughan Oliver's sleeve designs for 4AD, via 23 Envelope, is to be unveiled in Nantes' prestigious L'Espace Graslin gallery on the evening of our arrival. Secondly, Pale Saints, Lush and The Wolfgang Press are to perform the following night at the city's L'Escall concert hall. The latter are already fairly big in Europe, but the other two bands haven't yet played abroad. "Snub TV", along with "Rapido", are to film the events at both venues for future broadcast, and the bands will be involved in numerous television, radio and press interviews. Basically, North West France won't have seen this much activity since The Occupation.

This would explain the huge throng of observers on the pavement eagerly anticipating our descent from the coach as we make our way to the gallery. A few dozen leather jackets and black Levis, the occasional Unusual Haircut (Miki of Lush), a couple of pairs of dark sunglasses and France is frothing at the mouth. You can see the whites of Nantes' eyes, "Snub TV"'s cameraman, Pinko, films us as we walk towards the exhibition and we all feel very famous indeed, which is great for those of us whose sole claim to fame is to sit three seats in front of Kim of The Pixies on a tour bus. Once inside the maze-like, multi-tiered L'Espace

Graslin, we are bombarded with taped selections from the 4AD back catalogue and ceiling-high corrugated walls full of Vaughan Oliver's striking, luxuriantly-coloured art work for Colourbox, Xmal Deutschland, Throwing Muses, Bauhaus, Birthday Party, Xymox, Modern English, This Mortal Coil, The The, AR Kane, the Cocteau, as well as book covers for Ian McEwan, mounted, on miniature blocks of wood, and designs for David Sylvian and Michael "The Cook, The Lover, His Wife And Her Lover" Nyman. Of special interest are the beautiful prints for the forthcoming Lush EP, "Mad Love", and Pale Saints' album, "The Comfort Of Madness".

As 800 local luminaries, dignitaries, notables and liggers dive into the room-length tables of wine and cheese, reports start filtering through that the mayor will be introducing Oliver to the people of Nantes. No one's sure where Vaughan is, although one source reckons to have seen him wandering around in an inebriated daze.

A cropheaded Geordie resembling a docker, dressed neck-to-toe in black, teeters onto a podium in the centre of the gallery, mumbles something incomprehensible, describes the day's events as "a very intense experience" and generally manages to look both surly and sheepish. It's Vaughan Oliver. To his left stands the mayor, to his right a translator, explaining Oliver's more inaccessible Newcastle colloquialisms to the French gathering. Chris from Lush soberly considers how "4AD has quite a European feel to it, so it makes sense to have this exhibition in France", Pale Saints' Graeme is baffled as to what the locals will make of the pictures of Jimmy Hill on the Colourbox record cover, while 4AD's press darling, Deborah, reckons the whole happening is "totally bizarre", especially the bit where the translator has to put Vaughan's favourite and oft-repeated phrase, "kicking in", into French.

Still not very rock 'n' roll, phew, though. Not yet, anyway.

**THURSDAY** night, 8.15, L'Escall. A capacity crowd of 1200 people politely welcome Pale Saints onstage. The French reputation for cool-as-f\*\*\*dom is so far intact. The Leeds threesome, augmented by Ashley (on loan from Edsel Auctioneers, North Yorkshire indie trainspotters) on subsidiary rhythm guitar, waste no time in impressing us with their radiant, colourful tangle of melody and noise. Singer/songwriter Ian's pudding bowl haircut, the group's name, the title of their debut EP ("Barging Into The Presence Of God") led me to suspect this was the start of a new genre in pop — Monk Rock — complete with poker faces, sincerely wrinkled brows and dogmatically solemn approach to existence, but Pale Saints' bracing, vigorous attack soon knocks this preconception into touch.

By day, Ian, Graeme, Ashley and Chris look like fresh-faced schoolbrats away from home for the first time. Right now, they seem a good deal fiercer and wiser. The steep gradients and vertical swoops of "Language Of Flowers" put years on them. Pale Saints up their charisma quotient during "Way The World Is" and its arresting drum assault, and maintain it during the weary melancholic jangle of "You Tear The World In Two". Suddenly these four young lads are playing like men twice their age. On "Time Thief" and its J.Div-y, dolorous hollow-bass throb they sound weighed-down, fatigued, "True Coming Dream", on the other hand, is a delicate, weightless feather of a song, far less pained and just plain pretty.

Pale Saints' feigned indifference and New Order-ish lack of movement is matched by the audience until a few happy souls excitedly recognise the intro to "Sight Of You" and thereby thaw the icy Gallic cool. No matter that "Sight" is Orange Juice minus the complex ironic subterfuge, nor that "Fell From The Sun" betrays Pale Saints' unsightly C86 roots. These shortcomings are more than made up for by the scattered psychedelic fall-out at the climax to "Insubstantial" very Todd Hendrix, and the shit-sure drumming throughout ("Chris is good tonight, innee?"). Pale Saints aren't the gospel just yet, but they are rising in the right direction. Save a prayer.

Lush are welcomed like homecoming heroes, which is strange because they haven't played a note in Nantes in their lives. Miki is fighting a debilitating sore throat, Emma has just stopped pacing a nervous furrow in the backstage area (this is their biggest crowd to date) and still Lush appear automatically, emphatically confident. Any anxiety about Miki's ability, virus-bound as she is, to sing high are winningly dispelled by "Downer", from the new, Robin Guthrie-produced four track EP. Talking of whom, Lush are distant nephews and nieces of The Cocteau Twins, a compact, concise paraphrase of the Fraser-Guthrie planetview, an accessible summary of the Cocteaus' more exquisitely awkward moments.

"Thoughtforms" gets the remix/remodel treatment in readiness for "Mad Love", "Breeze" is exactly that, while the freefall dive of "Bitter" offers a neat introduction to current indie-pop imperatives, swooning post-Byrds harmonies, narcotic haze of guitar noise, and all. Think of Vaughan Oliver's sleeve design for "Scar" for some idea of the live Lush sound. Tonight, they almost approach the rich pinks and deep purples of the EP cover, helped not a little by near-perfect acoustics, and a PA that would shame an equivalent system in London.

Later, backstage, Emma attempts to wrestle my gig notebook off me to recite embarrassing chunks of enthusiastic prose. Right now, she doesn't need anything to tell her about "Second Sight" and its weirdly chilling sensuality, or the chaotic swirl of upwards-spiralling guitars that form the crux of "Baby Talk". Lush blush to think of all the words being wrapped around their music, but it can't be helped. "Scarlet" just is a ravishing headlong rush that may well rob you of your breath, while "Etheriel", Lush's other giddy peak, really does achieve a vocal and

instrumental purity the likes of which only My Bloody Valentine, in this particular field of music and beauty have bettered in recent times.

But if Lush want a balanced critique they'll have to do worse than this. Okay, so maybe "Leaves Me Cold" treads uncomfortably close towards being a parodic homage to prototypical late Seventies goth metal screechers, Banshees or Penetration, and "De-Luxe" is perhaps an aggravatingly slow grind after the viscous flux of the older material, but the rest is nigh flawless. Even a sub-Shop Assistants/Tallulah Gosh-style skip through Abba's "Hey Hey Helen" fails to foul their path to perfection. Lush are presently about one-fifth as good as they will be in two years' time, yet they piss on most other young bands. This is great for Lush but shit for any pretenders currently spending their leisure time in pop groups. Wise up suckers.

Of all three acts, The Wolfgang Press sell least in Britain but are the best known in Europe. As a consequence, they appear last and are greeted by the loudest cheers so far. This is only some measure of their merit. Like Lush and Pale Saints, TWP are in hock to ancient musical customs, although they often seem to do less bewilderingly original things with these sources than the other two bands. Also, while the previous two groups' debt is to the Sixties, TWP owe much of their existence to late Seventies/early Eighties rock-dance innovations. This close proximity to its source material lends the music an overly familiar feel.

Think of Pere Ubu's slate-grey industrial funk, or Talking Heads' jagged, jerky rhythms. Imagine a dub version of Wire's "154" or PiL circa "Metal Box" played by competent musicians instead of clumsy geniuses. Wolfgang Press are Mark's keyboards, Andy's guitars and Mick's lugubrious monotone grumble of a voice. The sluggardly funk deathrattle of "Raintime" best exemplifies TWP's slow songs — like funtime party disco anthems at 7rpm — while "Sweatbox" sheds some light on how the fast ones



Wolfgang Press

work. Like this: chunky wah wah Shaft-style guitars, great fat pulsating bass lines and unswervingly precise drum patterns, the latter two courtesy of machines, not men.

Until the arrival of Simon Raymonde on bass and Benny Dimassa on drums, that is. Now the sound is more fluid, less arse-tight constricted. On "Sucker", TWP can actually be heard to swing. By "Kansas" they've lurched into a quirky monster groove in which they stay until the Tenpole Tudor-meets-Adam Ant-greets Black Uhuru gangling novelty reggae thrash of "Deserve" puts an end to the night's proceedings.

**BUT** not quite. There's still the bit on the coach back to the hotel where a dozen grown men desperately attempt to inveigle their way into the affections of gorgeous local film students. Then there are the stories about one particularly cherubic and innocent-looking member of one of the bands staggering back to the hotel at 5am with not one, not two, but *three* (count 'em) luscious Gallic lovelies hanging on his arm and his every drunken *bon mot*, muttering something about the relative merits of Brittany and Blackpool's female populations. Simon Raymonde recounts a few more million tall tales of tour madness from the previous 10 hours, uses the word "grope" no less than 17 times, admits that it was all "very 'Spinal Tap'" and we climb onto the coach, a lot sadder (those of us who missed out) and wiser (those who were there).

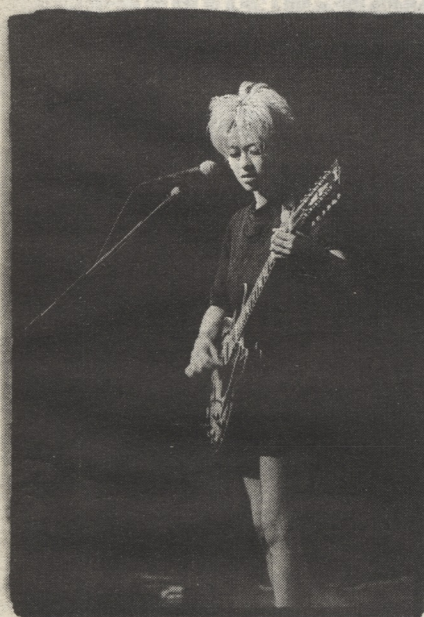
And that's it. Apart from the drugs bust. Haven't I mentioned the drugs bust? Oh, all right, then. Just after lunch in Le Havre, as we're about to get on board for the final stretch home, sniffer dogs are seen rummaging around our belongings and customs police start to encircle the coach. By all accounts the dogs have discovered what they take to be suspicious, possibly illegal substances on the coach and we all have to wait until the police have given the vehicle a thorough going over.

Then the order from one particularly officious little French police twerp with greedy eyes on a promotion who hasn't seen this much action since he got a toothpick stuck in his front teeth last autumn, decides to search each and every one of us for further quantities of drugs. Brave smiles turn to worried frowns. We all fear the worst. Thoughts turn to the horrifying jail scenes in "Midnight Express". More worryingly, Ashley is due onstage with the Edsel Auctioneers in Wolverhampton in 16 hours time and it looks like he may not make it.

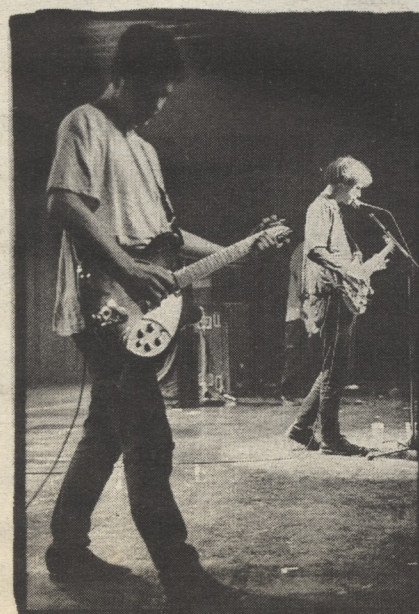
Miraculously, one hour later, we are allowed on the coach with little more than a collective slapped wrist. The crossing back to Blighty passes without incident until, on the M3 home to London, Brian the coach driver picks up the on-board microphone and thanks us for our collection, adding, in suitably deadpan tones, "You may all be pleased to know that, after all the hassle back at Le Havre, the entire contents of the coach toilet were found spilled out in front of the customs offices just as we left!"

Rock 'n' roll, phew! Rock 'n' roll, phew!

See you next year, 4AD.



Lush



Pale Saints