

ATOMIUM ART MOTHERS

An impossibly thin, geeky-looking Dutch bloke strolls into the back room at Brussels' VK club to bid farewell to four of his friends.

"You guys were really great," one of them tells him. "You played a really good show. You had the crowd panting for more."

"No, no," he rejoins, blushing under the shower of praise. "You were incredible. Anyway, what did you think of the crowd?"

"They were good, I guess," comes the reply, "but between songs it got really quiet. You could hear people shuffling their feet. They were much, much louder for you guys."

"Oh no," he squirms, "they weren't at all..."

"They were. After your set they were stomping and whistling. They were mad you weren't playing some more. They were screaming for you."

The Dutch bloke glances at his watch, grabs his laundry and makes for the door. "Thanks again," he smiles, "and see you on the Dinosaur tour in England."

WELCOME TO the justified and ancient mutual appreciation society, whose eight-person membership takes in the members of two of '93's most important bands: Come and Bettie Serveert. They came together on different sides of the world, these two great hopes, but they've more than a little in common.

Both bands contain people who've just entered their 30s, each with a long history of service to little-known groups who disappeared unnoticed, and life in the bohemian, artsy underworlds of Boston and Amsterdam. Such personal histories mean that Come and Bettie Serveert are both genuinely overjoyed at the success that's recently come their way.

The similarities go further. Come's Thalia Zedek and Bettie Serveert's Carol Van Dijk are both captivating, astoundingly talented individuals who've been squeezed into the hackneyed "women in rock" stereotype – and they both deal with the darker side of the human condition: Carol with those times when love's just left you and you're feeling momentarily lost; and Thalia with what, if you're unlucky, lies beyond such

● **Welcome to the 16-legged mutual appreciation tour that comprises Amsterdam's own BETTIE SERVEERT and Boston's finest, COME, two of 1993's great hopes who've found they've a lot more in common than two captivating, talented female frontpersons. JOHN HARRIS gets sprout of it in Brussels. Atomium rooster: STEFAN DE BATSELIER**



Tales of Orb-inary madness: Come (l to r): Thalia, Chris, Arthur and Sean

temporary sadness – misery, self-degradation, despair.

Anyway, they're both at similar stages of their ascents, too. Come's debut album, 'Eleven:Eleven', sent critics into fits of rapture, as they heralded a band who managed to fuse the blues with a nightmarish, confessional ambience and the guitar-hammering approach of the American underground.

'Palomine', the 4AD-sponsored debut by Bettie

Serveert, was similarly lauded, chiefly on account of its emphasis on wondrously tear-jerking songs that seemed to seize on the soul-baring, abrasive example set by PJ Harvey and take it sufficiently near to mainstream pop to make the results sound utterly timeless.

The result? The agent for the current Dinosaur Jr tour had the inspired idea of putting the three bands together as a kind of low-rent Rollercoaster-type package. If you live in Glasgow, Leeds or Nottingham, you may already have thrilled to the show laid on by this stunning triumvirate; those with tickets for Manchester, Birmingham, Cardiff and London have such pleasures to look forward to.

IT'S HARD talking to Bettie Serveert (the name translates as 'Bettie Serves', the name of a '70s TV show presented by Dutch tennis ace Bettie Stove). Aside from the fact that their English tends to be a little fractured, they give off a real

Berend, the drummer. "We thought we'd get some recognition out of it, I guess – but we never expected this to happen."

"In Holland," muses guitarist Peter, the gangly bloke mentioned above, "bands tend to put a record out, get about two weeks' attention from the Dutch press and then just disappear. That hasn't happened to us, and we're amazed."

That will soon stop, though, I venture. In six or seven months' time, Bettie Serveert won't be nearly so fazed. Will they?

"I think when you're playing at a venue and you see about 20 or 30 people in the front row singing the songs, knowing them by heart, that is really incredible," gasps Carol. "And things like that will still be incredible to us in the future."

You believe her, too – because Bettie Serveert's mushrooming success comes after years of small-time slog in their native Holland. The group first played together back in the mid-'80s, and it's taken nigh-on a decade for them to achieve the burgeoning popularity they've enjoyed over the last few months.

They've only just given up their day jobs: Herman, the imposing, big-built bass player, was a DJ; Carol worked for an animation company colouring in transparencies used for kids' cartoons; Peter was a poorly-paid painter whose speciality was apparently "torture, execution and alchemy", and Berend... well, Berend was the husky voice behind countless Dutch TV commercials. True!

"The most famous one I did," he recalls, "was for Oranjeboom beer. I had to say 'Kroonprins der Pilsners' – 'The Crown Prince of beers'. I did a Dutch Bailey's Irish Cream advert, too – 'The boy likes to rave about his girl because she's so perfect and she wears his shirts' – that one was really awful. All kinds of things – toys, printing firms, loudspeakers..."

And did it pay well?

"Oh yes. It paid enormously well."

"We have a new job now, though," says Herman. "It's called Bettie Serveert."

And does that pay well?

"Er... no," cringes Berend.

"Not yet."

COME – BILLED above Bettie Serveert on the Dinosaur tour on account of their slightly higher critical profile – have yet to quit their day jobs. Scattered around Boston, working in places as varied as a health-food eatery and the legendary Newbury Comics record store, they've started to live the strange double-life of scrimping-

probably helped us, though," says Thalia, a surprisingly genial figure, given her angst-ridden image. "There's a lot more interest in American bands now, so I guess we benefited from it."

You may not say that when you get to England. "Oh, sure," she agrees. "I'm sure we're moving towards the inevitable backlash."

It doesn't help that the British tabloids have seized on "grunge" as the latest thing...

"The tabloids?!" shrieks Arthur, incredulously.

The tabloids, I confirm, not daring to tell the tale of the gossip-page hack who phoned Come's press agent with a view to an article – to be founded, no doubt, on Thalia's lesbianism and her past troubles with heroin.

"In a way that's good, though, isn't it?" Arthur muses. "Because now, if we make a good impression on somebody, it's a little more earned than if we were just a band caught up in some kind of generic hysteria."

They needn't worry about the sudden sprouting of cynical anti-grunge sentiments: although countless Yank bands are probably on their last commercial legs, a group as vital, fascinating and mesmerically malevolent as Come will doubtless prove to be resiliently fashion-proof.

After all, albums as stunning as 'Eleven: Eleven' don't appear every week. Endowed with a sprawling, spiralling guitar attack and heart-wrenching blues inflections, it exudes an embittered, screwed-up view of the human psyche, founded both on Thalia's tempestuous life thus far, and despair about the way the country Come live in is destroying itself.

"There's an epidemic of domestic violence in Boston right now," Thalia explains mid-way through a conversation about the USA's post-election prospects. "And lots of people are getting killed for absolutely no reason. The new thing is drive-by shootings on f—ing bicycles; people riding mountain bikes letting off machine guns."

"There have been four murders recently where I live. One of them was over a minor disagreement at a set of traffic lights; another was of a guy who was delivering a pizza when he got robbed and killed; and then two women were killed by their husbands."

And what happens to someone like you, stuck in the middle of it all?

"You just get disgusted. You just think 'this is completely f—ed up'."

ALL OF Come's world-weary confusion comes out in that night's performance. Thalia, looking for all the world like the female Keith Richards, grows through 50 minutes of dark, impassioned music that, by the time she lets rip with the delicious second single, 'Fast Piss Blues', has the audience reacting with a mixture of shell-shocked disbelief and warm appreciation.

And Bettie Serveert? An hour before Come's onstage exorcism, they're delivering the tender, lifting songs that made 'Palomine' such a special record: 'Leg', a tale of being stood-up at the bus-stop by someone with whom you're besotted; 'Kid's Alright', which finds Carol momentarily putting on a brave face and almost snarling, and the wondrously weepy 'Brain Tag', which is plain heart-breaking. The calls for an encore would qualify as a standing ovation were it not for the fact that the audience is on its feet anyway.

Some of you will soon be experiencing these two startling bands first hand, only to have your enjoyment furthered by the laconic, lethargic wonder of Dinosaur Jr. Can you wait?

"The whole Nirvana thing has probably helped us. There's a lot more interest in American bands now... But I'm sure we're moving towards the inevitable backlash." – Thalia, Come



Bettie Serveert (l to r): Herman, Peter, Berend and Carol remember those humungous pay checks...