

COCTEAU TWINS

BRINGING UP BABY

"I WISH WE WERE SKINNY," SAYS THE NEW, ELEGANTLY SKINNY LIZ.

You are, I say. You are.

"What she means," says the old, determinedly inelegant and unskinny Robin, "is she wishes I was skinny. But I'd be unbearable if I was."

How come?

"Because then I'd be perfect." He prods his tum. "This is just God's way of keeping me in my place."

"You could grow a better beard," says Liz.

I laugh.

"I wish we were interesting," says the eternally fascinating Liz.

You are, I say. You are . . .

IT'S a week ago. The scene is a German hotel room. Robin and Liz are on a press tour of Europe. Simon is on his honeymoon in Mauritius. It's obscenely early in the morning. The room is trashed.

Notoriously elusive interviewees, Liz Fraser and Robin Guthrie have just given birth to a baby daughter, Lucy Belle, a new LP, 'Heaven Or Las Vegas', and a new single, 'Iceblink Luck'. Now they're preparing to tour for the first time in four years. STEVE SUTHERLAND meets up with the proud parents to discover how these events changed their lives. Pics: KEVIN WESTENBERG

Robin, who's been lying on his back, snoring, is brutally awakened by something being shoved in and out of his gaping mouth. It feels like a hedgehog. It's damp and bristly. He opens his eyes and there's Lucy Belle, his almost-one-year-old daughter bending over him holding a loo brush. She's just been cleaning the toilet. Now she's cleaning his teeth.

"It wasn't the best way to wake up," says Robin. I can fully believe it.

"LOOK," says Liz. "Mac's lips!"

She's pointing to the sweat stains spreading under the armpits of her grey matador suit.

"Not big enough yet," says Robin. "Give it half an hour. D'you know, I reckon Mac has silicon implants in his lips."

Liz isn't listening. She's examining the stains which, now I come to think of it, do look like Mac's lips.

"The armpits are the only part of my body that sweat profusely," she says and laughs.

I suggest she removes the jacket before she spoils it for the photo session.

"I can't," she says. "I'm only wearing breasts underneath."

I offer to conduct the interview blindfold but Robin reckons I'd peek and anyway Liz is already telling me about a neighbour who's being a pain in the ass. Liz was pulling the pram up the path the other day when the neighbour, who usually says things like, "I don't wish to say anything but your garden is a bit of a mess", if he bothers to say anything at all, pulls up in his car and shouts, "Hello! Hello!" Liz, who is taken aback by his sudden conviviality but delighted nonetheless, shouts, "Hello!" back.

He glares at her. "I wasn't talking to you," he says. "I was talking to the cat."

I'd have doffed him, Liz. I really would.

OKAY, that's three false starts. It's taken me a fair few years and a fair few interviews to finally realise that who The Cocteau Twins are and what The Cocteau Twins sound like on record are unrelated in that marvellous, illogical, perfectly sensible way that all great bands are unrelated to what they record. They turn their dreams into art, they don't try to live them. They'd rather remain alive than fly on Icarus' wings. They become their other, imaginary selves in the process of recording and then they go shopping or drinking or shagging or whatever. In this way The Cocteau Twins survive to thrive.

Which is great and all that, but where does it leave the biographer, the nosey-parker, the hack who needs to relate flesh to fantasy? Snooping around the garbage of conversations, that's where. Building spurious symbolism from casual phrases casually uttered in casual chat. It's hopeless to search for truth because there is no truth to search for and so the writer is forced into this series of false starts, odd incidental incidents that circle The Cocteau Twins' technicolour void like vultures ravenous for non-existent clues.

Liz is unaware of this. She is still baffled by what happens when a writer tries to suss them out. Robin, though, understands only too well.

"The tape recorder's on," he says, triumphantly, as we sit in a sweltering room to discuss "Heaven Or Las Vegas", their seventh LP. "That's the end of having a good time."

He's joking, of course, but it's a joke that let's you know you're never gonna be onto a winner here mate. Never.

Except . . . for once — perhaps just for this once — there is something to focus on, something from their lives that directly flows onto record. During the making of "Heaven Or Las Vegas", Liz gave birth to Lucy Belle, Robin's child, and it turned their lives around, changed this, changed that, changed the album.

And there's something else as well. Much has been made, through rumours and the like, of the fact that Liz is singing vaguely discernible lyrics for the first time ever. Some people are even going so far as to suggest that The Cocteau Twins are sick to death of not being played on the radio, not reaching the audience they think they deserve, and have made this compromise to rectify their rich seclusion.

"We never said that," says Robin. "Who said that? I suppose it was a 'source close to the band' was it? The press always do that. They said we were playing the Albert Hall once and my mum was ringing up saying, 'You've got to get me tickets for the Albert Hall'. I said, 'We're not playing there mum', and she said, 'You're just trying to get me not to come aren't you?' It's all shit."

So there's no truth in it?

"Truth in what?" (He knows what I mean, the awkward bugger).

That you tried to make a commercial record?

"Well, you've heard it, what do you think? It's just exactly the same as making all the other records, exactly the same process. We go into the studio, make up some songs and that's the record."

IT goes like this. It always goes like this. Hack meets band. Hack tries to talk about the album. The band can't respond. The hack goes away and writes a review full of his or her own private movies. The hack meets the band two years later. The band relentlessly take the piss out of the hack for his or her review. It never fails. Never.

So "Heaven Or Las Vegas", which was called after half a line of Liz's that Lawrence of Felt — sorry, Denim — thought sounded great, is . . . what? The harvest moon over golden haystacks? Keats' dreams at the cool casement window? The voice of God? (I wrote that about "Treasure" and Robin has never forgiven me). Sod it, somebody else can review it. I'll just say that, for

'I don't want to paint us into a corner because I don't think there's any one kind of person who should listen to our music' — Robin

those who know The Cocteau Twins records, you'll weep with joy when you hear this, and for those who don't, get it or you'll miss out on some of the most pure genius music since "Blue Bell Knoll" two years ago.

"If it's different, it's due to different circumstances," says Robin. "We had the baby, the best baby in the world and everything, Simon's dad died (Ivor Raymonde passed away recently) . . . all these things go to make you a different sort of person don't they?"

Did they directly affect the making of the album?

"She was singing when she was really pregnant, then she had to stop. And then, after the birth, she was singing while she was holding Lucy which was dead sweet, y'know. Most of the songs are about Lucy, probably."

Obviously having the child made a difference to how you look at stuff.

"F***ing too right it did!" says Liz. "Hahahaha!"

In what way is it different?

"I don't stick in the studio for 36 hours a day now. I like to go home and teach her to walk and eat cigarettes and that," says Robin. "Teach her to squash beer cans on her head!"

Was it really difficult making this album, carrying, then having, then caring for the baby?

"It came to a standstill in the end because nature just f***s you up completely as far as other things are concerned. I couldn't really sing. I couldn't feel anything. I just had this big lummo in front of me. It's a really bizarre thing to experience and, when you're trying to do some work that you know you've got to do and the pressure's on, well . . . it just made me mad. I was a dragon. I had steam coming out . . . I turned into a wild woman, a beast."

"I'm not saying nothing," says Robin, grinning.

"I just turned into an animal," says Liz.

"She did actually," says Robin. "The birth was like something out of 'All Creatures Great And Small'."





Some man had a glove on and his hand up . . . "Enough! Enough!"
 "Marvellous it was! And there's me pulling . . ."
 "What? With the rope round its hind legs?"
 "Yeah!"
 "It was really surreal. Surreal is the best word I can think of to describe it," says Liz.
 "It was like something out of 'Alien'," says Robin.
 All this baby talk isn't very rock'n'roll is it? You wouldn't catch the Pistols or The Clash talking about babies.
 "Ah, but where are they now?" says Robin.
 "We're still here aren't we?"

JUST as a break from all this baby talk, Robin tells me about the weirdest thing that happened to him recently. Whenever he goes to America now, he drives around. Even in New York which is pretty f***ing stupid, but still . . .
 Anyway, he gets this parking ticket and chucks it away. Six months later it arrives at his home addressed to Mr Guthrie, Great Britain. That's all the envelope says. How did they find him? Weird huh?

OKAY, back to babies.

"I really wanted to be pregnant," says Liz.
 "When I suspected, I just got wildly excited and then, when we found out it was gonna happen, we just let it take over. You just get really conscious of everything and everybody around you. And then you start getting this confidence, even if you've got none, you get a little and you think you can do all these things and you'll carry on being able to do them. You think, 'YES! I can do f***ing ANYTHING! Ha! And you can't!' But it doesn't last, unfortunately. That's when your hair starts getting greasy."

You planned to be pregnant?

"Well, I certainly did."

And you were tricked into it Robin?

"No, he wasn't duped into it. I seem to remember us talking about it but he just can't seem to remember any of these talks. I think that's because he was pissed everytime that we done it."

"Done what?" asks Robin.

"TALKED! Talked about it my love! It got to the stage where I was determined to have a baby come hell or high water. It's just a female . . . there's no explaining it, no sense in it at all. It happened really quick like."

"Hey! Hey!" says Robin. "I'm sorry. I did the best I could!"

Three minutes? I laugh.

"Three!" says Liz.

"Quality time," says Robin.

Quality over quantity.

"No, quality and quantity actually. That's a Wendy James one; it's not length, it's thickness. I like that. Hahaha!"

You don't feel that having a child in any way inhibits what you can do?

"No. I needed to be a bit more enthusiastic. I mean, really! It was a real chore in the end. I just couldn't get excited about it at all. I thought, 'This isn't enough. There's something not happening here that should be'. Not the music. There was so much other shit, it just didn't seem rewarding enough."

What, life in general?

"Yeah."

Do you want more kids?

"Sometimes I think, 'Wheeee! Yeah!' And sometimes I think, 'F*** off, it's a nightmare'. Sometimes you feel you're really bad at it. Y'know, you're doing a crap job being a mum so you think, 'This has been a big mistake'. Not because she's a brat, she's wonderful. It's just I think, 'I'm too demanding!' Because I do. I demand things of her always. I want attention. I must have her and she's going, 'Shove off mum, I want to investigate that jam tart over there'. I'm going, 'Come back'. She's already doing all these things that she doesn't need me for. It makes you feel like running over her in the car and getting her in a wheelchair so she's really dependent on you."

"You're f***ed up!" says Robin. "No, really she's a brilliant mum. She really is brilliant."

What about when Lucy wants to leave home?

How will you feel then?

"Oh, maybe things will have changed by then. I'll be wanting to go out to parties and shit."

"She'll be a prostitute or something, I know it,"



says Robin.

"A high class one though," says Liz.

That's okay then, you won't have to work anymore.

"Exactly!" says Robin. "She can stay in bed all day and work at home."

Can you articulate how having Lucy affected the songs you wrote and the way you sang them?

"I can't articulate anything," says Liz. "It wasn't hard work this time. I've not sorted it out yet and I'm not sure I can be bothered to sort it out but I think I was more inspired. I didn't really care that I was singing about me this time where I would have avoided it..."

"She's always been very, very paranoid before about what she's singing about, making things incomprehensible because of the basic paranoia she had," says Robin. "But this time she seems to have lightened up a bit. I see all the words written down and then I listen to the way she sings them and she still f***s them all up though, makes it all twisty and turny."

"Lucy was born while we were making the album and, I think, between the pre-birth thing and the post-birth thing, it's changed Liz's voice. She's able to do a lot more deep voices now that she couldn't do before."

"No, I don't think that's true. I've not gained anything. I've lost. But I feel better. There's notes I can't do. High notes, particularly, that I could do before that I can't seem to do. Maybe I'll be able to do them again. It doesn't matter if I can't."

Lucy Belle matters more?

"She smiles all the time. She loves everyone and everything. She doesn't know the meaning of the word fear yet."

Does it mean you can't go out and get completely slashed like you used to?

"We just do it at home."

"It's when she gets up at half six in the morning and comes downstairs and you're still up, you feel guilty as hell," says Robin. "We still go out though. We've been out about four times in the last 10 months! We went to the pictures. We went to see 'Parenthood'. They wouldn't let us in. 'Parenthood' for God's sake! Eventually they said, 'You can go and sit beside the door, but if she cries, you're out!'"

ROBIN'S favourite film director is David Lynch and "Blue Velvet" is his favourite film. He has it on video at home and watches the gas mask bit over and over. Liz likes Lynch because he says "snookers" instead of "snooker". I like him because he says great things in interviews, great things like, "I don't know why people expect art to make sense. They accept that life doesn't," which just about sums up the relationship between The Cocteau Twins and the press.

"I wish I'd said that," says Robin.

I assure him that he will.

"People tend to just want one song to be one message. It's all they can handle. They just want it all in black and white. Why can't they make up their own ideas of what it's about—that's what I do. I've got ideas about what some of the songs are about. They're probably a million miles from what they actually are about, but at least they're mine, y'know."

Doesn't it frustrate you that you go into a store and find your records in the New Age section?

"There's nothing we can do about it. That's not our fault. That's the way we're sold to the public. We've really got no control over that."

Some people try to exert more control over it than you do.

"How can we tell people not to put us in the New Age bin? People just have a preconceived idea of what we're about. There's nothing we can do about it. There's nothing I'd really want to do about it. It bothers me, but people have got to make up their own minds. If, because we're on 4AD, some little goth somewhere can take pleasure from listening to our records, who am I to say, 'No, you can't do that?'"

"You can't pick your own audience can you? Too many bands paint themselves into a corner. Like The Mission will always have Mission fans won't they because they painted themselves into that little corner and that's what they got. But they're gonna find it very difficult to get out of that corner. I don't want to paint us into a corner like that because I don't think there's any one type of person who should listen to our music."

Do you subscribe to the notion of up-to-dateness? Do you recognise the times



changing with The Stone Roses and Happy Mondays?

"Yeah, but what happens? You get a couple of bands like that and the next thing you know you've got the f***ing Soupdragons. It's like Sham 69 and punk."

You don't feel old-fashioned?

"No, we're young!"

Your music still sounds relevant?

"It does to me and I thought it was back then too. I never felt it fitted in with what was going on around us five years ago so why should I feel like it fits in or doesn't fit in now? I never felt we belonged to a movement as such or anything like that. We just make the records we want to make."

Is there a danger of self-parody, of making Cocteau Twins records that just sound like Cocteau Twins records?

"Yeah, but I think that happened about seven years ago. Hahaha. It's nothing we can help. How'd you get out of that without consciously changing your style and changing your haircut..."

"As long as it's getting better, it doesn't really matter," says Liz.

And you feel it's getting better?

"OH YEAH!" she says. "OH YEAH!"

THE Cocteau Twins are about to tour for the first time in four years. I wonder why. Liz says it's because they've forgotten how boring it was last time and Robin says it's because he kept reading about these so-called new bands having fun on the road when some of them were in their thirties, a fair bit older than him. He's also excited by the prospect of taking a band out for the first time. They've recruited two guitarists, a rockabilly called Ben who wants to wear shorts and a Japanese guy called Mitsuo who they met in Tokyo six years ago. He'd come over to Britain to be a sushi chef so, Robin says, he should be chopping 'em out on stage!

They advertised for guitarists in the *Maker*. The ad said you had to be into The Cocteau Twins and they had a fair few nutters apply. There was one girl from a famous heavy metal band and another bloke from Manchester who came down and met Simon, who was doing the interviewing while Robin was off producing Shelleyan Orphan. The bloke from Manchester just sat there in a sulk. "Where's Robin?" he wanted to

know. "I thought there'd be someone from the band here to meet me."

So, it'll be a heads-down, no-nonsense, Status Quo guitar army mindf*** will it?

"That's not quite the way I would have put it," says Robin. "I've just got to try and stop Ben from duck-walking across the stage."

What all this means is that, for the first time, the Cocteau Twins will be able to play the songs they want and change the set when they want because they won't be shackled to the discipline imposed by using backing tapes. But how will Liz cope? Distant memories of Cocteau's gigs are of Liz crying, punching her throat, running off stage in distress, her voice ruined by trying to compete with Robin's guitar maelstrom. It was great theatre, utterly rivetting but truly sad.

Robin says those days are over—Liz has little ear implants, a little wireless thing from Harley Street that allows her to hear herself on stage.

I wonder if she'll have to wear an elaborate bouffant or something to hide it? (I harbour this fantasy of the Cocteau Twins going out dressed like Showaddywaddy—that would f*** up the critics and get the crowd going).

"I don't have to wear a funny hat if that's what you mean?" says Liz.

"But halfway through the last tour, we just about packed it in because Liz couldn't figure out why she couldn't hear her monitors," says Robin.

"Then, one day, Peter the monitor man said, 'Have you tried taking your hat off?' and it was the f***ing hat! She had it pulled down over her ears! She couldn't hear a f***ing thing!"

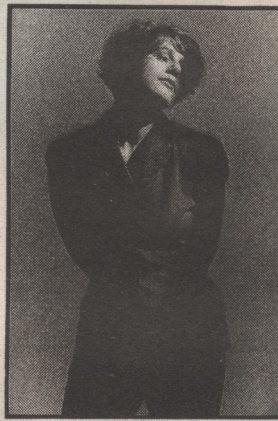
The prospect of going back on stage doesn't scare you then Liz?

"Oh, I'll shit my pants like everybody else," she laughs. "It's exciting stuff!"

AS you read this, Robin and Liz will be in America doing press. They will take the time to eat eggplant pizza and see "The Adventures Of Ford Fairlane", the Andrew Dice Clay movie. Before they left, Liz told me she can't stop singing the Elton John single, I told her that calling a song "Frou, Frou Foxes In The Midsummer Fires" was asking for it in TTT and Robin said his favourite ever Cocteau lampoon was when we made up our own Cocteau songs. "'Crispy Fiver Blue' was the best," he laughs. "We should have called one that." He then recounts how Simon thought he'd finally got a handle on Liz's lyrics when he misheard "Road, River And Rail" as "Rod, River And Reel" and was convinced she'd written a song about fishing.

Surely, I told Robin, this band is the voice of God.

"Iceblink Luck", the Cocteau's single, is out next week. "Heaven Or Las Vegas" is released on September 17, Lucy Belle's first birthday.



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