

GNOME ALON

● Black Francis is dead, long live, erm, FRANK BLACK. After the final and, some (eg Frank) would say, inevitable demise of much-loved Kings Of Indie PIXIES, comes the solo career of founder and lynchpin Charles Michael Kitteridge Thompson IV. In this exclusive interview, his first since the unexpected announcement of the Pixies' split, Frank talks to GINA MORRIS about the reasons and pressures that dictated his course of action.

Pix(ie): KEVIN CUMMINS

"Are the Pixies so precious that somebody can't leave the band or we can't break up? They're just records. We're just a band."

— Charles Michael Kitteridge Thompson IV (aka Black Francis), July 1990

Before Nirvana. Before Nerdcore. Before Grunge Fever. Before every geeky, specky American waded ashore in a lumberjack shirt offering the very latest in guitar-based punk-metal thrash, there was the Pixies. A pragmatic, heads-down quartet from Boston, the Pixies' potent, vehement, idiosyncratic rock encapsulated an era.

On Thursday, January 14 1993, during Mark Radcliffe's *Hit The North* programme on Radio 5, robust Pixies frontman Black Francis ended two years of anxious press speculation by announcing that the band had split. No tears, no mourning, no regrets, no nostalgia. Just dead.

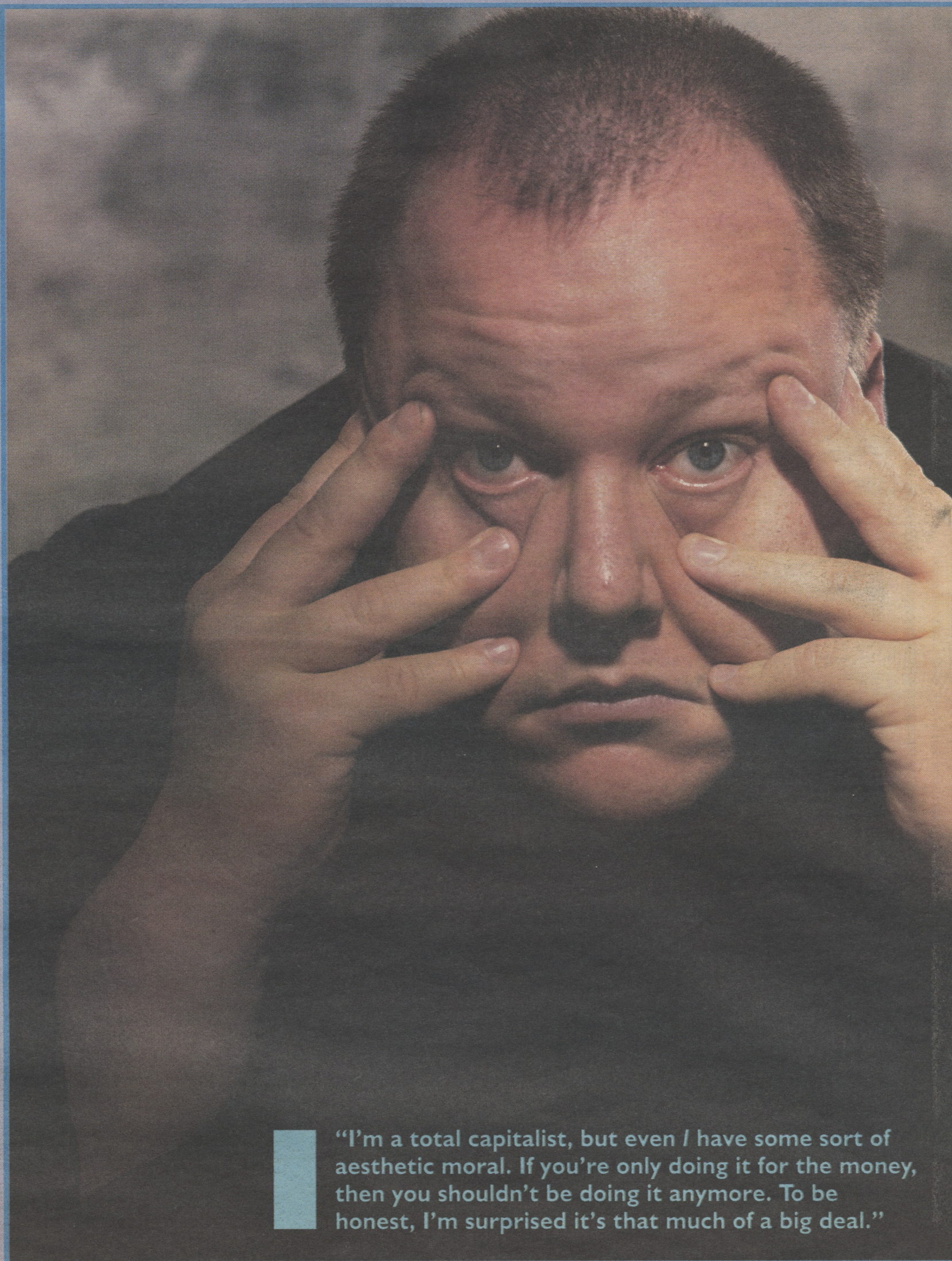
The Pixies made grunge rock fashionable and they were on their way to the big-time. They gave hardcore a pop edge and made it palatable. They made space palatable, surf palatable, small fat men yelling demented lyrics on stage palatable. They were a bunch of misfit 'art wank' freaks, signed to British label 4AD (as opposed to a 'home of grunge' like Seattle's Sub Pop) and fronted by the antithesis of acceptability, Black Francis. An insane fiend, resolutely unsexy, and devoid of conventional 'star' qualities, he demanded his own niche and got it. Just a band? The Pixies were awesome...

"F— the Pixies! Will the legacy of the Pixies haunt me? I sure as f— hope not 'cos I don't see it as a legacy at all. Some pretty good albums, I got no problem with that, but hey, if it's a legacy I wanna get paid for it... Y'know, we were just a band that took its cue from other bands. I don't really feel like I started something and then someone else made a million bucks off it and, hey, even if someone did, good luck to them, take 'em for all they're worth."

In the pseudo-stately setting of the poor man's Dorchester, Black Francis is sipping a freshly-squeezed mid-morning orange juice. This is the Kensington Gore Hotel, famous for its indoor plant life and the framed prints which litter every wall in every room like crazy Art Deco wall paper. When I enter the room, he lifts himself up from his comfortable armchair, and greets me with a warm, chubby handshake. "Please, call me Frank..."

BLACK FRANCIS has a new life now. He's a born-again one-man-and-his-geetar solo artist with a remarkable new album soon to be released. He wants us to call him Frank. Frank Black.

Charles, Black, Frank — whoever — this small, rather dumpy, courteous 27-year-old man has hit back at our



"I'm a total capitalist, but even I have some sort of aesthetic moral. If you're only doing it for the money, then you shouldn't be doing it anymore. To be honest, I'm surprised it's that much of a big deal."

uncertainty with 'Frank Black', an album that puts a period after the Pixies and begins year 28 with a bang. More controlled, mellower, more — gulp! — accessible, songs like 'I Heard Ramona Sing', 'Everytime I Go Around Here' and 'Old Black Dawning', see Black out-growing the screaming strops that characterised the Pixies and embracing a more sophisticated pop vision. A few Pixies purists may hate it, but a lot more will love the natural progression. See, Frank wants to forget about the past, he wants to end our long-standing relationship without so much as an explanation.

"F— the Pixies," he barks, slamming his glass onto the table and shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "It would have been announced a lot sooner but the fax that I sent to my manager on New Year's Eve... well, he didn't like it, he thought it was too brief and too cold. He didn't want that to be like..." he throws back his head, rolls his eyes and waves his arms about in mock drama, "...the announcement to the others. For me, I thought it should be nothing but brief and cold. I really didn't want to have this big session. Y'know, have everyone fly to LA to talk about it. It's like, what are we gonna

talk about? It'd just be them going, 'Ah, really?' and me going, 'Yeah', and them going, 'Oh don't'. So the best way to do something like that is just do it."

FRANK BLACK looks like a baby Buddha. His shaven head accentuates his large round face, his skin is clear and smooth with a ruddy complexion and his gleaming pale blue eyes give a fake impression of naivety. A small droplet of perspiration trickles down his forehead as far as his eyebrow before he swiftly wipes it away with his hand.

"I feel like I've been debuting for five years now. Y'know, c'mon, here we

go... Pixies! Black Francis! Pixies! In a way I'm glad that other bands, supposedly from the same ilk, have superseded us, at least in financial terms, y'know, sold more records. I'm glad that all that King Of Indie stuff was just a tag for an article and not reality."

So you never felt like the Pixies were the Kings Of Indie then?

"Well, we were called that a lot of times and I was like, is it true? Is it just because they're writing an article? I dunno, it's kinda hard to figure out. Not that it's important. There are no kings, it's just records. I have a boring, realistic take on things. Do I de-

stopping abruptly mid-quote to either apologise or find his line again. He has a business-like manner, occasionally shattered by a sharp outburst of rage, but more frequently he interrupts himself with a laugh. Not a great huge roar, but a slightly reserved chuckle. He seems happy to be rid of the Pixies, happier being a solo artist.

"Well, I haven't actually performed as a solo artist yet. In my head, of course, I'm much happier. I only have to look out for myself... yes, that's nice... I mean, I say it's nice, but I've known all along that it will significantly change my financial income for the lesser. But I was always the one in interviews to say, 'Well, people don't deserve success, you get what you get'. If you sell a million, great, if you sell 200 copies, fine, that's what the kids wanted to buy. There's nothing you can do about it, I know that. So let's see just how un-bitter I can remain."

But you have actually performed solo before. Those three shows at London's Borderline have indelibly etched themselves in the minds of all who managed to get in. They were by far the best gigs of 1990.

"Thanks. Well, the solo shows started off as a little dare, y'know, can I do this? I mean yeah, I've done it on the back of this big indie rock band, but the people who were coming were kinda the most hardcore fanatics and it was like come sing-a-long with Charlie. Y'see, I don't know if I'm a great solo performer or anything like that – maybe I could be – but playing at The Borderline and singing a bunch of Pixies songs is another context. If I tour with this album, I'll do it up and put on a big show. To just go out with an acoustic guitar when the arrangements are so big and grand, it would be, y'know, too drippy."

ANOTHER TINY bead of sweat begins to trickle down his forehead but he doesn't seem to notice. Mr Whatthisname is on a roll. He's telling me about his experience on Concorde and the QE2, how he'd love to do the Trans-Siberian Express but he's a sucker for cable TV and 24-hour room service. He's telling me about the time when his long-term girlfriend, Jean forgot to book non-smoking seats and how he flipped out at the check-in desk and was consequently up-graded to Club Class to shut him up. He's telling me about the time he had tea with Morrissey, dinner with David Bowie and breakfast with Nick Cave. Right now, less dramatically, he's having lunch with me.

We've moved from hotel bar to hotel bistro. Black Francis is hungry; he's been up since 8am. At 8.30 he was in his 'local' laundrette, washing his clothes. Tomorrow he flies out to New York for three weeks of intensive interviews. He doesn't seem too worn out, at least not when he eats. He likes his food and has perfected the art of eating and talking simultaneously, always endeavouring to offer that sweet smile despite having a mouthful of squashed black olives.

But whenever the Pixies are mentioned he sighs, not impolitely but enough to let you know that he's tired: tired of playing 'Monkey Gone To Heaven', tired of his 'old' band and tired that even now, after finalising two years of wary hypothesising, he still has to talk about it.

"In the minds of some people, the Pixies were like this big important band and so they were always trying to get at the internal chemistry, so people have practically been egging me on to do it for years. Even the record companies in their own blind kinda way. I'm sorry, I can't think of anything specific, but just stuff they say or situations they put you in, they almost encourage you to say, 'F— it! I'm not gonna do this any more'."

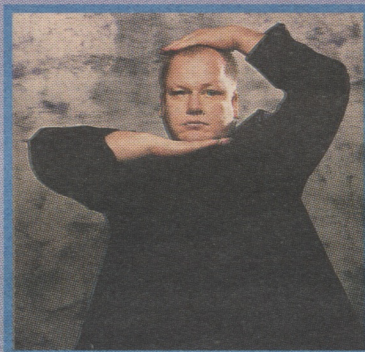
Were the rest of the band surprised? "I don't know. I don't know how surprised they really were."

Have you spoken to them yet?

"Not all of them, no."

Will it be bitter tears when you do eventually speak to them?

"No. I just don't wanna talk about it, what is there to say? Yeah, I feel bad because they're gonna feel bad but, y'know, what's the point if I'm not interested in doing it anymore? There's no reason for any of us to hang around and continue this thing. It's sort of, for



The changing face of Charles Thompson/Black Francis/Frank Black

what? So in ten years time I can play in stadiums, y'know, if I stick it out for ten more years, no way, no way am I gonna do that."

I read a quote of yours, around the time 'Bossanova' was released, when you said, "We're only just starting out as a band".

"I can re-phrase it now: I feel like I'm only starting to make records. For some people that might be a lot of records – five or six albums – but for me, taking into consideration how long I've been doing it and how many records other people have been involved in, it's not that much. It's like an apprenticeship, even if your most popular stuff is at the beginning, I'm

amazed that most people think I've been making records twice as long as I actually have. I've been around for maybe four or five years, my first release was the fall of '87."

Was Kim Deal one of the reasons the Pixies became too much for you? She said in an interview a few years ago, "Charles is the lead singer, not only that but he sings every f—ing one. Who does he think he is? Mr Hog? Mr Bigshot?" Was there songwriting friction between you? Black slowly puts down his cutlery and slumps back in his seat.

"She wrote maybe half of two songs. For that matter, Joey and Dave have credits on other Pixies songs. I'm not trying to downplay it here but... I am downplaying it here. Y'know, since '87 I have written and published about a hundred songs, not that I want tons and tons of credit but sometimes, being in a band with other people is, y'know, difficult."

Do you feel like the bad guy?

"I'm sure people see me that way. I don't mean necessarily people in my band, I mean people in general. I'm sure they see me as some sort of a bad guy, but I dunno."

Did you immediately feel this new album was better than anything else you'd done previously with the Pixies?

"Oh, of course. You always feel that way every time you make a record, at least I do, because if you start thinking it's less, you might wonder about it for a while, but if you start convincing yourself that it's less you start putting yourself through pain every day, spending more money and more time. You may as well give it up, go on tour and keep playing the old hits. So, of course it's better."

If this album, by some bizarre twist of fate, flopped and you found yourself needing money, would you ever consider reforming the Pixies?

"No. No. I wouldn't do that."

Even if you were desperate for cash?

"Talk to me when I'm desperate... and make me an offer for a reunion. But I don't want to do that. I'm sick of singing all those songs. It's better to leave people in the lurch a little bit rather than let them get bored with you. The classic romantic notion is it's better to burn out than fade away."

What if people start labelling you as the man who lost it?

"Well, I've had a good response so far, not that I think people wouldn't lie to my face or anything, but I think the new record is good, I worked hard on it and I don't think I've lost it. I don't

know if I ever had it, that's the thing. I know people put out bad records after they've made good records and vice-versa and I know this is gonna sound really pompous, but I don't think I've ever put out any shitty records. I almost feel like I can't put out any shitty records. Until I reach the point where I can't even write a single song, I don't think it's that impossible to make a good record, it shouldn't be that hard."

Does the future scare you?

"What do you mean? If it all goes wrong? Well, yeah, it scares me a little bit, of course. If I start spending more than I'm selling then that's bad because the label will drop me or they'll start exercising more control over what I do. I figure as long as I'm selling more than 10,000 records, I'm not worried. I think I could still earn a living through records and concerts but, sure, it would bum me out if it was a total flop, I'd have to start thinking, real fast."

So was it an entirely selfish decision to split the Pixies?

"Absolutely, but for the sake of the world though, y'know?" He laughs, leans forward and unintentionally jabs his fork towards my face: "I can guarantee there weren't any more good albums left in the Pixies. Mostly because my interest has waned. Yeah, I could've cashed in a cheque, and set myself up pretty good for the next year or two, but then what do you do? Then you're pressured to promote what you've just cashed in for and, if you don't, it's just gonna hurt you in the long run. If I tried to do a solo career two years from now, everyone would say, 'Well your last two or three things were flops, forget it'."

"I'm a total capitalist, but even I have some sort of aesthetic moral, and if you're only doing it for the money, then you shouldn't be doing it any more. To be honest I'm surprised it's that much of a big deal, I haven't performed in concert here in almost two years, there's been two big scenes – the Manchester scene and the Seattle scene – which have exploded since I've been making records, so this can't be that interesting, can it? If it is, I'm impressed."

Be impressed. Be very impressed.

● **Coming soon, Frank Black welcomes us into his new life, gives us the rundown on his new album 'Frank Black', talks about his childhood, his CB radio, the love of his life and, erm, dinosaurs...**

PIXIES CAREER OVERVIEW NEXT PAGE



Tired but relieved, Frank gets his head in shape to go Black to the future

glamorise things? Yeah, I do that a lot, only because I don't have a good glamour schtick worked out. Like a lot of English bands are in a mode which makes them seem like real assholes in hotel lobbies, but if you can be really entertaining about it then it's good – I just don't have anything that theatrical to offer."

The big guy has the nervous habit of tweaking his lips whenever he ends a sentence, which isn't often. He'll begin a train of thought with all the intent of a politician discussing a delicate topic, skirting the issue in his own innocent way. He thinks aloud, sometimes

...GONE TO HEAVEN

PIXIES MAY BE DEAD BUT KEITH CAMERON RECKONS EVERYTHING'S FINE, LONG AS YOU'VE GOT YOUR ELF

OK, so they were after Sonic Youth and Hüsker Dü, but then these days who isn't? The Pixies managed to be ahead of, before and of their time – simultaneously. What were they like? Oh, you remember... Iggy Pop meets Slayer while talking animal sex with David Lynch and listening to Brian Wilson's album of 'Manuel's Music From The Mountains' covers. At a UFO convention. Loudly. Yeah, that good.

Scene: The Rat Club, Boston, USA. 4AD boss Ivo Watts-Russell has just flown in from London to watch his band, Throwing Muses play a set of new material. He is jet-lagged but excited about hearing the songs that will form the core of the Muses' next album. First, though, there's a support band to watch. What a chore.

Half an hour later, Ivo and two UK journalists also in attendance are gibbering wildly, and it's not because of the jet-lag. They have just seen the Pixies for the first time and are floored by this genius update of the trad rock band format into a salacious Latino-metal pyjama party. The singer screams whenever he's not shouting, grunting or cackling. His name is Charles but he calls himself Black Francis and has given up archaeology in order to rock. Wisely, Ivo decides to release their record.

'Come On Pilgrim' (1987) Rum goings-on involving caribou, various Old Testament characters, a dead man called Ed and something that isn't a holiday. Plus some other stuff in Spanish. In spite of its considerable mystery quotient, 'Come On Pilgrim' made one thing clear: this was rock 'n' roll pure and simple, played by a group of very smart people.

The title comes from a Christian folk singer, Larry Norman, whose catchphrase

was "Come on pilgrim, you know He loves you". The verdict of Him upstairs on these batty Bostonians was as yet unknown, but discerning listeners everywhere reckoned these Pixies were a religious experience.

Key lyric: "One night upon my motorcycle/I through the desert sped/And smashed my body so that all my friends thought I was dead/My sister held me close and whispered to my bleeding head/You are the son of a motherf---er".

BY THE time the Pixies arrived in London in March 1988 to play their first UK gig, public anticipation was at an almost unprecedented level of fervour. This was partly due to the billing of the band alongside their friends and labelmates Throwing Muses, but far more a result of the second Pixies album which had just been released to paroxysms of delight. This Pixies business was getting very special indeed.

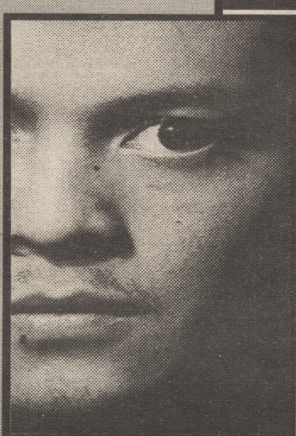
'Surfer Rosa' (1988) Not much different from 'Pilgrim', just more. More songs, more screams, more twisted tales of incest, blood and a superhero called Tony. The Pixies found the ultimate foil for their barbarous racket in former Big Black noisnik Steve Albini, whose 'production' technique apparently amounted to little more than sticking a mic in the bass drum and then turning everything else up to compensate, but Christ, the results were devastating.

'Bone Machine', 'Break My Body', the dangerously rhetorical 'Where Is My Mind?', an ultra-metallic remake of 'Vamos' from 'Pilgrim' – all shook with a bruising physicality that felt like the Pixies were taking rock back to some primal breeding ground. Then there was 'Gigantic', the band's biggest pop coup thus far, written and sung by bassist Kim 'Mrs John Murphy' Deal. Rock bodes invariably make a case for this being one of the five best albums of the '80s.

Key lyric: "He buy me a soda/He buy me a soda then he try to molest me in the parking lot/Yep yep yep!"

Another key lyric: "You're so pretty when you're unfaithful to me."

Yet another key lyric: "Caminamos bagala luna caribe/Oh my golly! Oh my golly!"



PICTURES: STEVE DOUBLE



The fab four (clockwise from top left): David Lovering, Joey Santiago, Kim Deal and Black Francis

VERY QUICKLY, the Pixies became the hottest and biggest band in indiedom. The tour with Throwing Muses was a triumph but hardly did the Muses any favours, forced as they were to spin their perplexing webs around ears bludgeoned by 45 minutes of Black Francis and co.

Later that year, on their own headline tour, the Pixies unveiled new songs that suggested the screw was being wound still

tighter around their knuckle-headed pop vision. The next album would confirm this.

'Doolittle' (1989) After Albini's thump'n'grind treatment, the Pixies opted for a little light and shade on the production front. But, in fact, as Black Francis pointed out at the time, the songs were harder and more extreme than anything he'd previously written.

'Tame' was like 'Gigantic' but compacted and ground down, till all that remained were the screams and the gasps. 'Dead' was biblical and diabolical, likewise 'Gouge Away', while elsewhere sex properly involved sweat and mutilation. Room was also found for a summer breeze hit stab ('Here Comes Your Man') and the small matter of 'Monkey Gone To Heaven', the Black man's very own greenhouse effect. As 15-track albums where the best song appears first and the band audibly puzzle how they'll ever better it go, 'Doolittle' is OK.

Key lyric: "Ha ha ha ho." Another key lyric: "Uh! Is the

sound that the mother makes when the baby breaks."

IN 1989, the Pixies moved ever further towards stratospheric status, with 'Doolittle' entering the UK charts at Number Eight, a massively successful tour and a champion performance at Glastonbury.

It was remarkable progress for such an uncompromisingly pitched rock band and the Pixies looked odds-on to reap the massive commercial whirlwind that had ultimately passed by their spiritual forebears Hüsker Dü.

But, also in 1989, Kim Deal formed The Breeders with Throwing Muse Tanya Donnelly and ex-Perfect Disaster bassist Josephine Wiggs, ostensibly as an outlet for her songs. Why, people wondered, could she not find this outlet via the Pixies? The Black Francis solo gigs were cool, too. Hmmm...

'Bossanova' (1990)

Perhaps inevitably, the tension that had underpinned their first three albums was gone, replaced by an aura of well-being and assurance. Instead of sinful sex, surf and sci-fi were this year's little Black books, and for the first time the Pixies sounded like they were playing parts in someone else's film.

Still, as fantasies went, 'Bossanova' was mind-boggling, full of grand gestures and fun conceits. 'Rock Music' was indeed, while 'Down To The Well', originally debuted on the '88 tour, finally made it onto plastic. And the Pixies became the first band to use a theremin since the Beach Boys on 'Good Vibrations'.

Query for Pixies sadoes: what word do the first letters of 'Ana's six lines spell?

Key lyric: "Are you looking for the motherlode?/No".

THE ORGIASTIC Pixie-fest that was the band's 1990 Reading appearance is widely agreed to be their finest two hours. Certainly, events after this suggest a band running on

empty, delaying the inevitable.

The Breeders album was considered by many to be superior to 'Bossanova' and Deal expressed eagerness to follow it up sooner rather than later. Amidst much touring, 1991 saw a ho-hum open air bash at London's Crystal Palace, which only went to prove that not even the Pixies could gain much inspiration from playing to an alcohol-starved crowd in pouring rain from behind a mini-lake.

'Trompe Le Monde' (1991)

Bitty, but better than 'Bossanova' ran the consensus. With maybe four tracks less, 'Trompe' would be up there with the band's best, as the likes of 'Motorway To Roswell', 'Planet Of Sound' and the hilarious 'Space' are classic Pixie-rock, fitful and fun.

But the cover of the Mary Chain's 'Head On' was a mixed blessing: it rocked, sure, but harder than several Black Francis originals here. The title loosely translates as "Fool The World", but the Pixies were fooling only themselves if they truly thought this was the best they could do.

Key lyric: "Jeffrey! With one fl Jeffrey!"

AND THAT is pretty much that. Touring with U2 in early '92 was, according to Charles: "Easy. You turn up at 7.30, play for 45 minutes and that's it, see ya! No pressures, nothing."

But there was a point in their history when the prospect of the Pixies opening up for Bozo and friends would have seemed woefully beneath a band that in the first three years of their existence had kicked such life back into the toothless ol' mutt called Rock that the likes of David Bowie and – yes! – even U2 themselves were suddenly no longer shy of admitting they quite still liked it.

Then again, it is only rock 'n' roll. Maybe Black Francis/Frank Black himself said it best in the NME three weeks ago: "Forget about the Pixies. You bought the records, play 'em when you're feeling nostalgic..." OK, Frank.



Straight outta Boston: circa 'Surfer Rosa'

PICTURE: STEVE PYKE

THAT PIXIES TOP TEN IN FULL

- 1 'Winterlong' (cover on Neil Young tribute compilation 'The Bridge'): Black Francis said it was the best thing they'd ever done, and he was right.
- 2 'Gigantic' ('Surfer Rosa'): Kim's deal from 'Surfer Rosa'. A big big love.
- 3 'Debaser' ('Doolittle'): Cut-up frolics with a girlie so groovy, subsequently rewritten by Sugar as 'A Good Idea'. Altogether now, "dananana-dananana-dananana..."
- 4 'Planet Of Sound' ('Trompe Le Monde'): Fuelled rumours that the forthcoming album would be 'heavy metal'. Succeeded in getting "f-ing around" aired during the Top 40.
- 5 'In Heaven (Lady In The Radiator Song)' ('Gigantic' B-side): A terrifying version of the tune from David Lynch's *Eraserhead*. Makes Heaven seem like the last place one would want to be.
- 6 'Broken Face' ('Surfer Rosa'): Great false intros of our time, Part 329. Pugnacious.
- 7 'The Holiday Song' ('Come On Pilgrim'): Highly dubious goings-on involving someone who paints his sister onto a sheet, then rolls her up and they kiss till both are dead. Nice tune.
- 8 'Motorway To Roswell' ('Trompe Le Monde'): Conspiracy theories involving the US military, UFOs and acoustic guitars.
- 9 'Hey' ('Doolittle'): The cue for many a drunken audience's participation, this is the funny one where Black finds he's got whores in his head, in his bed... whores everywhere, in fact. It's a tough life.
- 10 'Monkey Gone To Heaven' ('Doolittle'): If man is five, and all that tosh. Black Francis says he broke the band up 'cos he was bored of playing this song. Weirdo.



Sign of our times: for those you have rocked, we salute you