

# FRANK'S MILD YEARS

● OK, the Pixies have split, got that? Good, because Black Francis, or rather FRANK BLACK as he now prefers to be known, has moved on to more interesting things, like singing, and the chance to join the next generation of karaoke stars, and hell, who knows, maybe even the prospect of one day getting hitched on the Trans-Siberian railway. The condemned man ate a hearty meal. GINA MORRIS picked up the bill. Pix(ies): KEVIN CUMMINS

Frank Black slaps his small, podgy hands on to the sheet glass wall of the huge display cabinet, leans forward, and presses his round face against it. Four pairs of tiny glazed eyes fixed into four cute, darling baby animals – lifeless yet animated by some skillful taxidermist – stare back at him.

We're at The National History Museum in Kensington because Frank Black – ex-Human Anthropology student, ex-vegetarian, ex-fiendish frontman of indie rock heroes the Pixies – wants to look at the stuffed exhibits.

"Y'know," he says, without removing his paunchy cheeks from the glass, "just by looking at an animal's fur and eyes, you can tell whether or not it would taste good roasted over a spit – those little guys are good eatin'."

**CHARLES MICHAEL** Kitteridge Thompson IV was five years old when he first decided he wanted to be in a rock band. He was exploring the next-door neighbour's house when he discovered a big blue, gleaming drum-kit under a dust sheet in the basement. It was the most impressive thing he had ever seen. Charles already owned a record, one that he'd sneaked into his room – a copy of Donovan's 'Mellow Yellow', hidden at the back of a cupboard. By the time he reached puberty, Charles' collection had extended to ten records – nine of which were by The Beatles.

His early school years provided much of his musical experience. He sang with The Boston Folk Song Society ("An East Coast intellectual thing, like a Woodie Guthrie concert only with kids") and often toured the local schools ("leading the pupils in song") with his favourite teacher Mrs Nustat, a plump lady who played folk guitar. But it was during playtime that he would eagerly talk about forming a rock band with his friends. The band was to be called White Stag.

White Stag never happened. When he was 12 years old, Charles decided he didn't want to be a drummer anymore – he'd discovered the guitar, and, throughout the subsequent years, rarely put the instrument down.

When Charles left school, he found work loading trucks to earn some extra money before he started college. It was at college, in Boston, that he met another guitarist, Joey Santiago, and together they formed the rock band he had always talked about – the Pixies.

Several weeks ago Black Francis announced, without a hint of remorse, that he'd killed off the Pixies. The end initiated a new dawning. Their demise sparked the rebirth of a tired songwriter, inspired, re-energised and with an eponymous solo album of comparatively mainstream pop. He urges us to forget about the past and listen to the future. His future. Black Francis' calling card now reads: 'Frank Black – Solo Artist'.



Self-confessed boring bloke Frank Black

'Frank Black' started as an offshoot project (like Kim Deal's Breeders) during the autumn of '92, when Black Francis locked himself in a Southern California studio with a handful of his favourite records. When only one cover version survived, The Beach Boys' 'Hang On To Your Ego', and the rest were ditched in favour of 14 brand new compositions, it became the eagerly-awaited sixth Pixies album. 'Frank Black', however, is not a continuation of previous glorious efforts, but an entirely different attitude and approach to music. It's purer, more mature, more streamlined and less hazy than any record the Pixies ever made.

"Yes, I do think it's more accessible," he agrees, eyes sweeping the museum corridors in search of tastier specimens. "But not in the way other people try to make accessible music. This is more general, more pop. And more controlled, too. I didn't blow my ears out for six hours a day with a lot of Marshalls. I mean, I'm taking full responsibility for that, I'm not blaming the musicians I've worked with in the past. I'm the one that usually turns 'em up, 'cos I'm a sucker for it."

For all the screaming tantrums and sinister overtones that characterised the Pixies, 'Frank Black' is a step towards mainstream acceptability. He

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He's a slumberjack and he's OK – Frank models the latest in bedtime sartorial elegance

much you can accomplish just by saying you will accomplish it. Like I said, 'Well, this cannot sound like a Pixies record'. If I try to imitate that, I'm just gonna get a lot of flak for it. I'm not interested in that, we had to make sure we go as far away from that as we could.

"I thought, I'm gonna sing on this record, I'll practise or take vocal lessons. I didn't do either, I practised less this time than I ever did with the Pixies. I did them at the last possible minute, like, 4AD are flying in to LA in two days and there's no vocals, and they wanna know what they're giving me all this money for. So I whipped the vocals together. I'm not saying I farted out the vocals or anything – I worked hard – but I didn't take the vocal lessons that people were accusing me of taking two albums ago just because I didn't scream like a f—ing banshee. It's like, sorry, I don't wanna be annoying my whole life. This is music after all; we're allowed to sing. So it's frustrating when people give you shit for, like, singing. I hate that."

Maybe people thought you couldn't really sing?

"Well yeah, maybe I couldn't."

**RENOWNED IN** certain circles for his abstract, nonsensical lyrics, famed for his UFO obsession and tagged a surf music fanatic, Black Francis has wilfully steered away from his stifling reputation. Apart from 'Parry The Wind High, Low', which is about a boring UFO convention and has a bit of old-time screaming at the end, the rest of the songs on 'Frank Black' reek of intent: whether it's the bizarre recounting of a sad story, 'Brackish Boy' ('By now you know that he was f—ed/By now you now he had no luck/He was smashed head on by a giant truck'); or his ode to The Ramones, 'I Heard Ramona Sing' ('I had so many problems/They walked right in and they solved them'), a romantic accolade about the time he left for Puerto Rico to study Spanish armed with a Ramones tape and a Walkman. It was them, apparently, who helped him through the hard times.

"The most abstract song on this album is 'Los Angeles'," he explains between long slurps of water. "All the lyrics are pretty linear, they may get a bit riddly a couple of times but, in general, all the songs have a topic – more than I've ever done before."

'Los Angeles' is also the most immediate track on the album. It's not about the riots – that would be too much like a real-life drama for a lyricist like Frank Black. In fact, it concerns a small town in South Patagonia overshadowed by the larger South Californian state, a subject which obviously bothered him. My favourite is 'Every Time I Go Around Here' which, with its stunning dual vocals and sleazy overview, is the kind of sing-a-long ballad which could go on forever.

"Oh good, you're only the second out of 200 journalists to even mention that one. I'm glad, because to us that was one of the more quality tracks. Eric Feldman (producer and one-time Captain Beefheart collaborator) liked my material, so that helped. We never really fought because he had mostly good ideas, but he gave it 110 per cent."

Frank's tinted glasses are perched precariously on his shaven head. With every slight movement they inch down his forehead. But he's so enthralled in the discussion of his new album that he fails to notice. Despite the quality of his own penned material, the first single to be released will be the Beach Boys cover, 'Hang On To Your Ego' (which appeared on 'Pet Sounds' as 'I Know There's An Answer'). Even Beach Boys purists will be thrilled with this stark, almost raunchy version.

"It was hard to do. It's a cruder version than the more popular 'I Know There's An Answer'; there's less harmonies, the vocals are sloppier. The first time I did it, on the John Peel programme, I did it really fast and that version was inspiring enough for me to try and do an even better version. But because I'd been screaming so much – or maybe doing too many interviews – I

sings (beautifully) where once he would yell, groans instead of growls and soothes where once he would unnerve. Inadvertently, he manages to blend early Bowie with the uplifting wit and spirit of The Might Be Giants... Beware: your parents might like this record.

It sounds like you approached this album from an entirely different angle, Frank.

"Oh yeah, at least the putting together aspect of it. And because there are less people around, it's a little more craftsman-like. Y'know, I can do this shit now, I guess it's a little more cocky, I feel more pompous about what I'm doing, but you wanna feel like that when you're making a record. This one's different because we used a lot of computers and big orchestra sounds – but not the writing of it. I did that the same old way."

He staggers towards a sign which states: 'Dinosaur Exhibition This Way' and turns to flash a toothy grin. "You can buy me a coffee first, then we'll go look at the dinosaurs." Two coffees and a mineral water are laid gently on our crisp white tablecloth by a smart waiter. We're sat in the museum's cafe, separated from the exhibits by a thick trailing cord. It's painfully quiet, more than any library, so that even the chink of silver against china reverberates noisily around the stone walls before trailing off down one of the labyrinthine corridors. Two students whisper quietly to each other on another table. Even the waiter walks on tiptoes.

"YEAH, THERE'S SOME SINGING ON THIS RECORD," shouts Frank, his drawled accent ricocheting clumsily off every wall and reaffirming the view that Americans do everything bigger and louder. He continues, undaunted by the excruciating silence. "It's amazing how





**He's cute, he's chubby, he lives in LA and he likes surf music: he's the new Brian Wilson, or something**

couldn't reach the key that I could a few years ago, so we dropped it to a lower key.

"We did it different, we always said we were gonna do it like The Who – y'know, a real rock band version – but by the time we got round to it we were already a month late, so we just did it, Joey played some great rock guitar on there and we were very happy with it."

But doesn't it worry you that the British charts are already clogged up with cover versions?

"Well, I kinda learnt about that when I came over here, people told me that it's all covers right now. I'm sorta worried about it, but I'm also kinda glad because I hear that 'Pet Sounds' was their most popular record here – it was the least popular in the States (Are you sure? – Ed) – so maybe it will do something, I hope so."

Are you aware that it will probably reawaken all those apparent similarities between you and Brian Wilson?

"Well, I don't think it ever really occurred as an original thought, it was me saying 'on my new album I really like surf music' and then it was 'here he is, Black Francis, surfer from LA!'. The same thing with the whole UFO thing. It was like, well, my songs usually don't make sense but a couple of them do now, one of them's about UFOs and then it's like 'Here he is – Wiggy Stardust!' Y'know, y'can't live it down. And this is small stuff, y'know? It's not like we're talking about the royal family, politics or a cure for cancer, it's small, small potatoes, it becomes part of your legacy. So the Brian Wilson thing; they

think it's cute, he's chubby like Brian is, he's from LA and he likes surf music – it's a natural segue."

Would you prefer to be anonymous, the genius behind another face?

"That is my dream," he gasps, like I've just reminded him of his greatest ever thought. "To be behind another face. Something like Milli Vanilli excited me, and it wasn't like that was anything new; having the secretary from the record company do the vocals is an old trick, but I was excited by the videos, this trickery. Maybe you'll only get one or two Frank Black records outta me, 'cos I see myself getting behind another act in the television medium. No artist has ever tried to become a video artist. When videos stop looking like they're just shat out and television becomes more popular – in the near future I hope – there will be a new dawning of these karaoke stars, that are two-dimensional and don't necessarily exist but are like big comic book characters. They'll have music but not a tangible medium, something more artificial. I would love to be involved in something like that..."

**SOMEWHERE IN** that last speech he lost us, the student, the animals and the waiter. He heaves a long sigh and sits back in his seat, mulling over his dream. It is very quiet again. Peace is restored.

Do you have to have peace when you write?

"Yeah, but I can do it with my wife in the room, I still have my own space even when she's in the room, but I couldn't actually do it with other people."

Are you actually married to Jean?

"No, but I've known her for so long, for the sake of convenience in certain situations we sometimes call each other that, instead of going into the technicalities of the relationship."

Are you going to get married?

"I suppose, yeah, but neither one of us are into big family get-togethers, we don't want anything like that, so it seems better reserved for some spontaneous moment on the Trans-Siberian Express or something."

need somebody'. But y'know, I feel like she is a loner and I'm a loner and we both think we're pretty good."

**MATURITY HAS** hit Frank Black twice and they're both going to cost him money. Firstly, his new album is indie suicide and, secondly, he's bought a house. A big house on the outskirts of LA. Both are major investments for a small, self-confessed boring bloke. Frank doesn't disclose much information about his personal life, in

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She goes everywhere with you, doesn't she?

"Yeah. She can be very critical – in a good way – but to be honest, I haven't given her that much to criticise."

Are you the type of person that needs someone, or are you a loner?

"Well, I suppose if you're alone and you're happy then you're a loner, but if you happen to be with somebody and you're happy, then you think 'Oh, I

lyrics or in conversation, preferring to sit quietly in the middle of the scandal he's created with the Pixies, clinging to the little mystery that he has.

"I like people to mystify me, make me into a rock 'n' roll character, because that sells records. There's not many mystifying aspects to me anyway, so every time I do an interview I think, 'Oh God, more demystifying, here we go, the boring truth'."

So that's why your songs are so general, so far removed from real meaning?

"My songs have meaning, they're just well hidden because I don't really want to talk about them."

Has much gone wrong in your life? "Enough."

Do you use any of that in your songs? "No."

So you're pretty optimistic?

"Yep."

Why?

"'Cos that's what gets me through the week. I prefer fun songs. I prefer fun movies. I prefer escapist entertainment."

What are you escaping from? "From this place we call Earth."

If there was an opportunity to start life on another planet, would you go?

"Yeah. In a wink. Without even thinking about it."

Who would you like up there with you?

"Like-minded people, people who would want to go to Mars. I'm not going to worry about what they do or what kind of people they are, the fact they said yes is enough."

Frank Black pushes his shades back on top of his head and nervously taps his feet. The prospect of dinosaurs, fossils and the chance to continue his 'Good Enough To Eat' challenge has become too much to postpone any longer. He politely waits for me to settle the bill before darting off in search of the monsters, losing himself in the crowds. No-one recognises him... but then again, he is a new person...