



HIS NAME IS ALIVE

SOMEWHERE OVER THE RIMBAUD

HIS NAME IS ALIVE may seem like a typically precious 4AD band, but writer Warren Defever claims that the Michigan band's critically acclaimed debut album, *'Livonia'*, was mainly influenced by Jimi Hendrix, Sonic Youth, Alex Chilton and breakfast muffins. IAN GITTINS reports.

*"I dreamed that one had died
In a strange place
They had nailed the boards
Over your face..."* — "How Ghosts Affect Relationships"

"PART OF THAT SONG IS A QUOTE FROM WILLIAM BUTLER Yeats' 'A Dream Of Death', you know," says Warren Defever down a crackly phone line all the way from Livonia, Michigan, USA. "I could relate exactly to what he wrote. I've said the same idea before, in my own words. I used to spend days worrying about dreams, until they began to affect my state of mind in my waking hours. I used to sleep more than I should. But it's not just a musical version of the poem, please realise that. That's the very last thing I'd do."

HIS Name Is Alive are a ghostly trio, now expanded to a five-piece. They're from Michigan and have just released the most crashing, gorgeous symphony of an LP so far this year. Called *"Livonia"* after the tiny village where shy 21-year-old Warren Defever masterminded the record, it's a moving, impossibly spiritual work. Defever's cryptic yet oddly simple songs, which often sound like they're formed from pure air, combine with the clear, haunting tones of Karin Oliver and Angela Carozzo to make a very rare, raw beauty indeed. Imagine hearing a beautiful stranger think. It's how His Name Is Alive sound.

Originally, the painstaking Defever made tapes in his basement room in Livonia, together with collegemate Karin and friend Angela, and sent them hopefully across the Atlantic to Ivo Watts-Russell, label boss of 4AD. He also formed a strange musical union with a friend Jymn called the Warren Defever Orchestra and terrorised the local area. He met Angela when the Orchestra played a musical version of *"Dracula"* on fuzzed guitars to accompany a play she was appearing in. "It sounded really gross," he admits happily.

Ivo became intrigued with their strange noises and began to investigate. While seeing a peculiar beauty at the heart of the wayward whispers of music, he also knew they were hopelessly uncommercial. Warren, an obsessive perfectionist, would alter each second of music until the whole was hopelessly overladen and overburdened. It was clear Ivo had to do something.

"Sure, he changed it all," says Warren cheerily. "My mixing was way too extreme, I'd lost my way. I'd just about given up with it. So Ivo made it more edible in ways I'd never even thought of. I

really like the way he pieced it together, it was so different. I only sent him nine songs, and now the LP has 12! I guess he just took it all apart and didn't put it back together again."

IF *"Livonia"* is alive with brilliant, transcendent moments, the most striking is the divine single "How Ghosts Affect Relationships" which recounts the story of a horrific nightmare where the protagonist sees her lover, apparently dead, nailed underground by menacing figures and watches in morbid fascination, unable to speak or offer help. Like so much of the album, it delves into the human consciousness and the menace of subliminal thought with bitter, existential savagery.

So why did Warren give this unearthly, alien music the name of the village he lives in?

"I've a kind of fear of going out," he offers. "All the record was inspired in my house, so *'Livonia'* tries to capture that idea. I try not to leave or go out too much. I always work here."

THE words, often abstruse and elliptical, seem to dig deep into your own personal nature yet also seek a strange, quasi-super-natural beauty. Is this accurate?

"The lyrics aren't always written specifically for the songs," says Warren. "In fact, none of them are. They're words, not lyrics. I write words everyday, so I've so much choice to find something appropriate to the music. Sometimes they may have been written weeks or even years before the songs. A lot of stuff is just written for my own discovery and enjoyment."

"I find it hard to say what it is I write about," he continues. "I never want to get too personal and let all my secrets out. I mean, is my life interesting to anybody but me? Why should it be? I write words that if I spoke in rhyme I might easily say every day of my life. They're thoughts that could be written in an essay form. I'm not sure why I write, but I get a lot out of it. I can even come across stranger, greater truths I hadn't noticed before."

Is part of your motivation a yearning to build a better, more complete personal world?

"Sure, I think so," says Warren. "I agree with you, but I don't know what more to say. Am I happy? Well, I kind of think the better things get, the worse they get. I used to be hyper-lacemic, in fact I still am, so I ate four or five times more carbohydrate than I needed to every day. No, I never really put on weight. But for the last year, I've been doing yoga every day, putting my personal

life together."

So were you a shambles when you recorded *"Livonia"*?

"Yeah, I guess I was, but that makes sense, I think. I never think writing or recording comes from a good feeling or a good place inside you."

FOR the sake of some critical balance, I also talk to Karin Oliver, the college friend of Warren whose beautiful cathedral-cloister tones give such alien resonance to His Name Is Alive's splendours. She's shy and wary of talking.

What does she think of *Livonia*?

"Oh, it's very suburban," she emphasises. "I've only been there

to record. But Michigan is like that. Apart from the big cities like Detroit, it's pretty homey."

Does she ever feel strange, singing Warren's singular, unearthly words of spiritual lack and loss?

"I think Warren thinks about things most people don't think about in life," she says. "We've done some new songs and there's a lot of pain there, while *'Livonia'* is very spiritual. But no, it feels very natural singing Warren's words. I met him at college in my first year, and he was always carrying around a black notebook to write down ideas he had. That's what I noticed first."

So what's Warren like? There's an awkward pause down the line, followed by a sigh the size of Michigan.

"Oh, I dunno," says Karin. "I used to date him and now we're really good friends, so it's hard to say. He's a really nice guy. I guess most people would say he's shy. Is he intense? Yeah, sometimes he's real, real intense. Often, I'm very moved by what it is that I find we're doing. I can be moved to laughter or tears."

IT'S inevitable that some will look no further than the 4AD imprint on *"Livonia"* before pegging His Name Is Alive as typically precious, over-precocious poseurs assembling self-conscious would-be high art. I reckon we can take it as read they're far more than this. Yet does Warren feel they're a typical "4AD band"?

"No, and I worry how many people will think that," he says. "I guess people hear us and think Cocteau Twins and This Mortal Coil and think we're a typical 4AD band, but I fear they're missing things. I think they're missing stuff like Jimi Hendrix and suburban lifestyles and me waking up and having muffins for breakfast, going to school then coming home and watching cartoons. It's all in there. To me, a lot of the guitar stuff on *'Livonia'* reminds me of Jimi Hendrix, Sonic Youth and Alex Chilton."

"I think people see the really obvious links, but miss the other ones," he continues. "We'll always get certain comparisons. People miss the violence in what we do. I think it's for the same reason that when people talk about Throwing Muses they never mention Little Richard, which strikes me as a really obvious connection! I don't know if I'm trying to exorcise my demons, or find a new approach to attack them," he continues. "I try not to think about that too much. I've worked out all the old demons over the years, but then there's always new ones."

"But a search for beauty is a big part of this. It's maybe, oh, half of it. There is beauty involved, but it's not only that. It's a big metaphor, but it's a juxtaposition of two things — this gentle end of things, and then the opposite side of the scale, the complete destruction of the universe. I like hearing guitars explode and acts of violence and that's the reason for all the feedback we use!"

Does there have to be this violence, this jagged edge in the harmony? Is it like the man Yeats says, a "terrible beauty"?

"Yeah," says Warren, "there has to be a terror involved. I figure that's just the way it needs to be."

WARREN Defever says he's already written the second His Name Is Alive LP, and recorded much of it, but is having doubts now because "nobody likes it besides me and even I'm not too sure". He also says they will tour over here if sales of *"Livonia"* merit it. If they don't, we are a nation of hopeless philistines. His Name Is Alive are the stuff that dreams are made on.

The album *"Livonia"* is available now on 4AD.

