

ALBUMS



ARE YOU BEING SURFED?

THE PIXIES BOSSANOVA (4AD)

ONE thing that's always bugged me about The Pixies is the universal acclaim for their LPs – how come no one ever gripes about the amount of obvious filler on them? I'm not disputing for a minute the sensual grunge power of "Gigantic" or the dramatic limb-flailing properties of "Debaser", but what about "Mr Grieves"? Or "Tony's Theme"? Now, "Velouria" has been trashed by the press and a backlash seems ripe – I wonder, if "Crackity Jones" had been the single that preceded the album, would "Doolittle" have been received with quite such glowing praise? What I'm saying is that a classic Pixies LP is a non-existent beast, they've always been too slack in the quality control department. And "Bossanova" isn't a classic either, but that's no excuse for premature grave-digging. Here's why.

Like the best moments of their back catalogue, "Bossanova" is a lunatic grab bag of Americana, the musical past of their homeland thrown *en masse* in a Kenwood Chef along with a few tacky tabloid stories, gorefest videos and the choice chapters from Black Francis' diary. In that respect it's no disappointment. Yes, like the single, it does sound more streamlined (I'd hesitate to call it commercial), but the tricks up its sleeve aren't exactly what we were expecting.

The cheap plastic planet on the cover bearing the legend "Pixies" portrays the album's feel as well as the Spanish dancer did for "Surfer Rosa": this is where The Pixies go plas-pop, where they develop the charm of a Statue Of Liberty snowstorm, and where Black Francis' vocals continue the mellowing evident last year on "Monkey's Gone To Heaven". By their fifth LP I reckon The Pixies will be covering Goffin and King songs, and Francis will be the new Scott Walker. Maybe not. "Bossanova" is interstellar surf music, its closest musical cousin is The B-52s' "Wild Planet". Some people are gonna hate this.

"Cecilia Ann" sets the scene. It sounds for all the world like a fuzzed-up Shadows, not unlike something Joe Meek would have concocted on Holloway Road 25 years ago. It's good clean fun. For crying out loud. And it's a sign – y' see, Hank Marvin would appear to be The Pixies' greatest influence right now. Hot on its heels, to give things an air of normality, is "Rock Music", brief and extremely loud. A heavy duty backing with a vocal not dissimilar to the sound of Porky Pig being disembowelled. One for diehard fans, I suspect.

The theremin is a musical instrument with a pretty cool history: its two previous major appearances were in Hitchcock's "Spellbound" and on The Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations". And now here it is making its spacey, squiggly presence felt in 1990 on "Velouria". I can't understand why the single has gone down so badly. It's good, close to being very good, but somehow the structure isn't quite right, the emphasis isn't strong enough on the chorus. But there's a heartbreaking Righteous Brothers classic waiting to burst out of "Velouria" – "We will wade in the shine of the ever, we will wade in the tides of the summer, every summer, my Velouria." Hell, that's marvelous. The song's real downfall is that it ends up sounding too much like The Pixies.

Black Francis is in more familiar, beautiful catastrophe form on the brief "Allison": "And when the planet hit the sun I saw the face of Allison." Neat, but too brief to be of much consequence. "Is She Weird" tries desperately hard to be and ends up as much as gaudy a self-parody as The Birthday

Party's "Junkyard" or a latterday Gary Glitter. Clumpy and uncomfortable. "Ana" is something else again, another dip into the Hank Marvin archives, this time with an airy twin vocal line and a definite California flavour: "She's my fave/Undressing in the sun/Return to sea/Forgetting everyone/Eleven high/Ride a wave." Note how the first letter of each line spells out "surfer" – cute, don'tcha think? "All Over The World", the lengthy song that closes side one, is one of those composite Pixies songs. This time it's "Velouria" minus the tear-jerk, plus a touch of "Something Against You" guitar-blitzen. It's passable.

"Dig For Fire" and "Down To The Well" are destined to be two of the more popular cuts on "Bossanova": the former has genuine power in spite, or maybe because of, the crisper production. The lyric is vintage Americo-freakdom, like a scene from "Harold And Maude", Francis scribbling some crazy-old-people character sketches: "There is this old man who spent so much of his time sleeping that he is able to keep awake for the rest of his years. He resides on a beach in a town where I am going to live." If The Pixies split, Francis could always turn to short stories. "Down To The Well" is grubby, with a minimalist chunky guitar line straight from an early Kinks single. For once, the vocals are psychotic, the sound is raw.

"The Happening" is not the Supremes' gem, but it's a gem nonetheless, another prose piece, this time starring Black Francis. He's driving around Salt Lake listening to stories on the radio about aliens landing in Las Vegas, and musing about ranches so big you can only see them from a plane. Its soft edges lead us into "Blown Away" which is pretty much a down-the-line love song, though a frustrated love, natch: "My lips are moving – if you touch my face do you hear my screams? I tried to say, but even in my dreams my words get blown away."

After those four fine tracks "Bossanova" trails off rather badly with "Hang Fire", a Pixies-by-numbers song in the vein of "There Goes My Gun", and "Stormy Weather", a sozzled, staggering, near-C&W song with a hefty as hell drum sound. It starts promisingly enough but never gains momentum and ends up like a dog (the monster on the cover of "Here Comes Your Man", no doubt) chasing its own tail. After three minutes or so it simply becomes boring.

"Havalina" is as peculiar an exit as "Cecilia Ann" is an entrance – the closest The Pixies have got to Radio 2 land. The title is repeated over and over in an exotic coo which the plucked, almost Hawaiian guitar flirts around. God, it's almost delicate. It's almost pretty. "Havalina" is probably the name of some whirlwind, or some infamous murder location, y'know... surely they're not going soft on us?

People don't want The Pixies to age gracefully, just as no one ever wanted The Undertones to turn 20. That's why "Velouria" got such a universal thumbs down. So "Bossanova" sounds slicker, more pop than past Pixies. Granted, the production may lack the mischievous spirit of "Surfer Rosa" or the shining confidence of "Doolittle", but the worst moments on "Bossanova" are the ones that sound like they could have been on the previous LPs. My major complaint is that it doesn't go far enough, leaving it as a transitional record between "Doolittle" and some, as yet unknown, Top 40/pop/stadium future. Fans of ear-busting guitar exuberance should look elsewhere, towards the homegrown talents of The Boo Radleys and Teenage Fan Club. "Sweet" and "pop" and "Hank" are watchwords in the Pixies' camp right now and this is no bad thing.

BOB STANLEY