

SHOW ME THE WAY TO SAN JOSÉ

● Boston guitar stranglers the PIXIES have weathered a year of touring their remarkable 'Doolittle' LP with only a mountain of porn vids and a forest of funny fags for company. JAMES BROWN risked life and limb when he entered the Earthquake Zone to see Black Francis and the gang 'rock' San Francisco. Pix-tures: DEREK RIDGERS

For Joey Santiago, Pixies' lead guitar slinger, Los Angeles was one of those nights when you go out thinking the world's your oyster and come back knowing it's just a lump of phlegm coughed up from the back of your throat.

After the show Joey was sitting in a darkened room having taken acid and he couldn't find the door to get out. So he just sat there and sat there, making pictures in his mind with the dots he saw in the darkness.

"It was such a heavy dose that the following night I was still really afraid, really hoping my fingers behaved," he remembers.

At the same time, out on Sunset Boulevard, two hoods had picked up a cab, taken it high into the Hollywood Hills and shot the driver's brains all over his dashboard for a mere \$70.

The next morning the Pixies rolled back onto the freeway and left Joey behind, struggling with his laundry and arguing with the hotel maids. He'd made his own Do Not Disturb sign with the stinkfinger and (according to drummer David) "voodoo shit, crosses, and goat's heads bleeding onto the ground."

Joey had to get out of the hotel, across to the airport, and up to San Francisco, an acknowledged and active earthquake zone, it was then that he realised how much he had done out on the road. Just how unreal touring really is.

OF ALL the rock LPs released in 1989 the Pixies' 'Doolittle' was undoubtedly the most innovative and inspiring. And since its release in the Spring, the band have been travelling the globe stinging all with their devilish sci-fi pop.

At the Palladium, Los Angeles, they quelled the corporate HYPER-YAK of the attendant music industry with a guitar sound that soldered Bo Diddley to Lee Ranaldo. In San Francisco they played a beautiful theatre in a slum and spent the evening kicking stagedivers out of the limelight. In San José they alarmed the Mexican security when they began playing their guitars with beer bottles.

What went on in between is proof that even the self-styled coolest band in the world can experience meltdown when they spend too long checking in and out of hotels and hangovers.

Viewed from the outside, the reality and fantasy of the United States seem inseparable. One nation under a Burger Führer with a foreign policy that's backed by a forest of missiles, and channel after channel of poor quality TV.

And then you get out there and you realise how relaxed the place is, and you feel guilty for all those jokes you made about Mac the Texan Tourist and a bacon slicer. And then you spend a few days in a tin bus with the Pixies on the coccyx of their world tour and you start to think that maybe you were

right after all.

Up in the back of the luxury bean can of a bus, Charles, aka vocalist Black Francis, is wondering whether or not he's been confronted or startled by anything he's seen on the so-called 'Fight or F— Tour', named after a Fear song.

"We're either at a gig or in a bus, what shocking is going to happen? I'm just a dimwit, I don't see those spiritual things," he reckons. "America is just The King of the Bland because there's so many people here, the way people speak to one another is disgusting. They're so rude. Not everywhere but in a lot of cities."

"In England so much is understood without having to say anything. If you hear somebody order a cup of coffee you can tell where they're from, you cannot do that here... Ah, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm just stoned."

No, not stoned, mused. Mused beneath the lifestyle of spending up to 16 hours a day trapped in a Burgundy coloured coach called 'Excalibur', destination 'Doghouse', and an exterior decorated in Roger Dean-style landscapes and swords.

The influences on tour, Charles tells me, are "Nintendo games, comics, and records." Kim watches *Evil Dead*, *Nightmare On Elm St*, and the 'Eye Scene' from *Zombie*, and drummer David drops for the six hours of porn on board. "The Tracey Lord Story, man she was ugly when she was young but she's a knockout now."

Dope too has become an integral part of the mental diet. "I don't feel overloaded at all apart from I probably smoke too much pot," Charles states from behind a joint. "It's the worst for writing songs but it's a good way to pass the time when you're stuck on a bus. It's insane. We've had drives like Texas to California and the drivers are these thin guys from Alabama and they can stay awake for so long. They've done Michael Jackson, Barry Manilow, the Pixies. It's all the same, they just drive buses for bands. Nick Cave used to use this one."

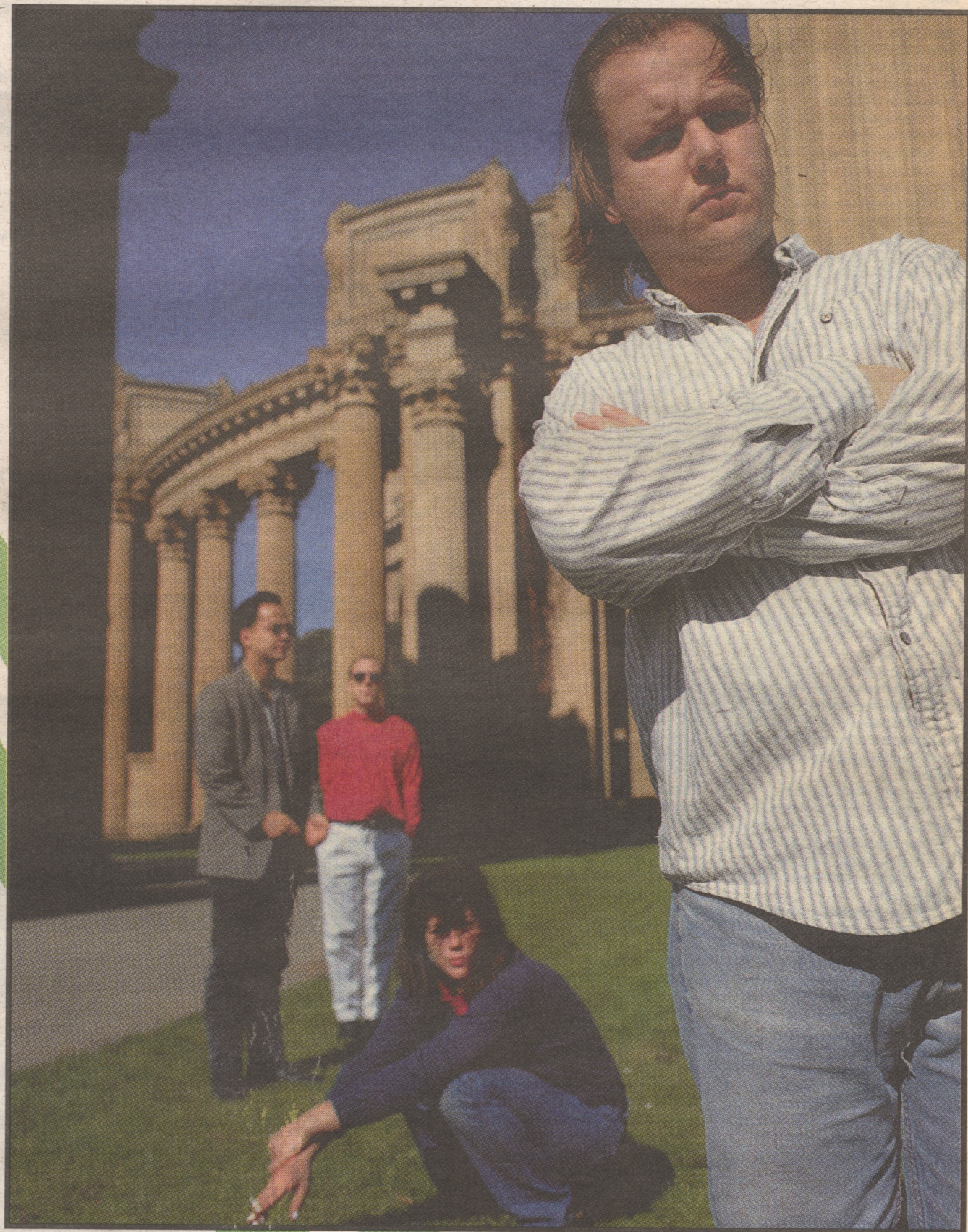
"It's not like drug abuse," muses Kim, "it's like medication and that's why we're so fresh."

"This medication has a bad side effect of memory loss for me," says David pulling back to reality.

AND YET, out of this pissstank of trash, the Pixies manage to syphon nightly performances of razor sharp music. Outside the Warfield Theatre on the infamous San Francisco Tenderloin, notorious Cali-novelist Armistice Moped is noting a grime-necked tramp with a brown plastic leg fighting a drug urchin for a greasy polystyrene box of fries.

Inside the venue, healthy young Cali-punks bounce around the deep shagpile-lined corridors babbling about the band and the week-old quake. The Pixies get their first stage trespasser during the fourth song 'Hey'. Charles disposes of him immediately. Later he says:

"You see these really wimpy stagedivers taking ten minutes climbing up onto the stage and then they gloat in their stupid



"People can't even be responsible for what music they listen to. Another example of what bland, lazy, mediocre motherf—ers we all are" — Charles

drunken moment. It competes with my act."

Bathed in lime-green light, the band coil the set tighter and tenser by the song. Kim's silken sicko-baby vocals on 'Gigantic' stand out as a moment of brutal beauty. Four bright young hand-grenades as cool as you like, they combine all the basics of raw power, stark poses, and short sharp hits and licks. Joey's guitars hang in the air, dancing on their own screech and wail. Clouds of dry ice cloak the band, leaving them smouldering like pyres.

This is the only sort of reality the Pixies have come to gauge themselves by. When Charles

talks about music, he talks like a conceited prince who knows the future is his. A combination of confidence, youth and arrogance makes him sound both smug and inspired depending on how much slick American banality you can tolerate.

Strangely he has little to say about Pere Ubu, Dead Kennedys, The Cure, The Fall — all possible reference points. He thinks Sonic Youth would make good soundtrack music and sees doing cover versions as "a bunch of work for a song you didn't even write". If he had to pick a hard-rock band to rate it'd be AC/DC and he's been chuffed that David

Bowie, Henry Rollins, The Mary Chain and Mick Jones have bestowed compliments and attendances upon him.

Charles talks his mind with confidence when it comes to music.

"There are levels of coolness. When we started we didn't want to be Led Zeppelin, we didn't want to be boring. I like the idea that pop music is something that has to be conquered. We heard that people played guitars fast and shouted, so we thought we'd do that. It's all totally hybrid and fake, but I mean that in a good way."

"I wouldn't want to be mediocre. I've got my own little neurotic way of puttings songs together, based on my own rules. They're not necessarily original. We don't have any good lies for this band."

"Some bands are just shit," he continues delicately. "They don't have any good ideas, their songs are too long, it just seems obvious. Our records aren't the greatest records ever made but

we do have a concept of what is and isn't good. There's some bad shit released and people eat it up."

"I don't blame MTV, I don't blame the record companies, people are responsible for their own tastes in music. That's how stupid people are, they can't even be responsible for what music they listen to. Another example of what bland, lazy, mediocre motherf—ers we all are."

Hardly surprisingly Charles dominates Excalibur's CD player. Scattered around the smoke-filled cabin are little stacks of compact discs in floppy sleeves. Charles pushes through them and pulls one out.

"Sometimes I like to slip two CDs back to back in one packet, like The Birthday Party and Miles Davis here, they compliment each other. In this pile I've got The Ramones, Beach Boys, Birthday Party... I can listen to both Ricky Nelson and The Bad Seeds and appreciate them both, it doesn't

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matter which record came out first. It doesn't matter so long as I get enjoyment out of it.

"When I was at college with Joey I listened to cool '60s stuff like Donovan and The Beatles, obvious punk rock stuff like The Jam and Iggy Pop. When there's six guys living together and one can play a guitar like I did... we used to do this Jam thing. I figured out the guitar part to 'That's Entertainment' and I'd do the verse mumbling these words in an English accent and then all the guys would go 'THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT!'"

Charles quits the camp-fire reminiscing and comes back to the present.

"I'm too lazy to have role models. It's too hard to be media wise because rock 'n' roll is too old. It's all been done before, what the hell am I going to say or do that doesn't come off like a cliché? I don't want to sound like I'm kissing your ass saying how the British audiences are better but there is something about the pop culture there that is cooler."

WHILE CHARLES can still fire out an opinionated rant about the state of the world, the Fight Or F— Tour has clearly left the other three members less in love with the rock 'n' roll life. Charles had described the band almost predictably as being "not close in a heavy emotional way" but as "a team, like soldiers in this predicament together".

When I ask Joey — who looks like a slim handsome Filipino John Belushi — about the dangers of such a surreal lifestyle, he kicks back in his seat and slips from daze into diatribe:

"You're hitting the point there. When you meet your friends especially, you notice how different you are. Everything from your clothing to the places you like to hang out. The other night a friend of mine said, 'So Mr Rock Star how come you haven't been keeping in touch'. And I thought 'Sod that! You haven't written to me either.'"

"I'm less tolerant of talking to people afterwards now. Jeez! It's boring. When you go out you see people looking at you, why don't they just come and say 'Hello'? I've felt like doing a Jesus And Mary Chain-style set some nights, one of those 15 minute ditties."

"I had someone's panties thrown at me at one concert. They landed right in front of me and I thought about that Tom Jones show we saw in Manchester. I thought, 'What the f— is that? Why the f— did you do that? C'mon'. It was funny."

What was Tom Jones like?

"He's God!" fires David.

"He had a really good light show," reveals Kim, proving how conversationally numb musicians can become.

"In Baton Rouge," remembers Joey, "There wasn't a barrier in front of the stage and the most obvious thing to do is to push up and the security had these electric zappers, cattle prods, it got out of hand. Charles threw the guitar down and left. It was brutal treatment. These people had chaps on, sunglasses, moustaches, clubs. It was wild."

"Outside afterwards I

overheard these people who'd been stood at the back moaning that we'd walked off stage," adds Dave.

Charles' memories of the night are particularly contemptuous:

"They were just off-duty cops who'd never worked a rock show before and they were just waiting to hit somebody. They were just hicks as we call them. We stopped the show and said, 'Tell those guys they can't beat everybody up'. To their credit they did stop roughing people up. I don't want to get into, 'Oh man, the cops are evil, the cops are bad, they're against the kids in rock 'n' roll.'"

Which isn't surprising because, although Charles is the bee's-knees at song-writing and can hold his own when it comes to music talk, he is unprepared to rock any mainstream boats when it comes to politics. Nothing in particular seemed to inspire this rant against the people who fight censorship in rock.

"People make a big deal about the PMRC and, although Jello Biafra had to go to court on the pornography charges, he won in the end. It's just some senator's wife who has nothing to do. She wants to rate rock records, so what? If a private citizen wants to somehow use the consumer to put pressure on record chains to stop marketing explicit material then there's nothing wrong with that. I don't give a shit, it doesn't alter my life any."

"There are so many more things in the world to scream about right now that are more important than censorship in rock 'n' roll, which is virtually non-existent."

After a while of listening to this you end up deciding that if Kerouac and not Brett Easton Ellis had written *Less Than Zero*, Charles would have appeared as some talented but stupid Bohemian kid. It goes on.

"If art galleries aren't going to show exhibitions that are sexually or racially sensitive what are we going to do? Make a war on creative censorship? Sit around and talk about it, write articles about it? Sing songs about an evil wave of creative censorship? There's all sorts of creative censorship that goes on, that's why we have scales. Some notes were deemed OK, others weren't."

What?

"I tend to enjoy offensive lyrics, it's interesting trying to hear someone trying to be offensive," he finishes.

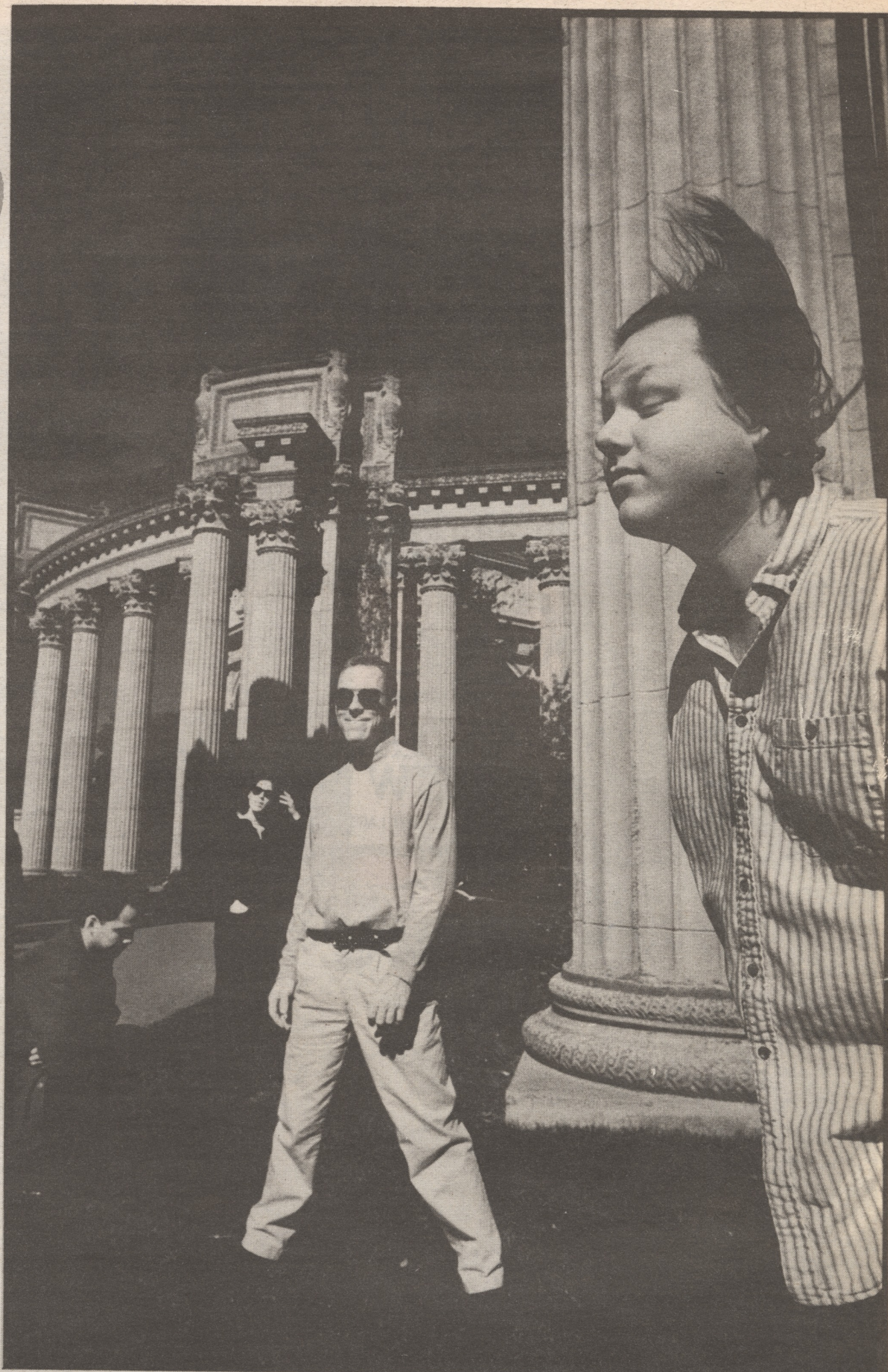
You'll be interested to know that as a boy one of Charles' favourite records was 'Puff The Magic Dragon' by Peter, Paul & Mary. Draw from this what you will.

For Kim, the eldest member of the band, the experience must be the most trying of all. Out on the road with 11 men, the bassist who wears glitter eye shadow and clearly loves performing, tells me: "I'm not that much older than I'm motherly. If they respected me more then I could mother them. I know of this band that get demerits if they're late. They get fined by the tour manager. I'm not telling you who it is. Isn't that weird? My sister saw *The Song Remains The Same* and dropped acid and came back and told me about it, that made me want to be in a band."

IF WE were keen, lenient people who loved the Pixies' music too much to overlook Charles' strange personal reactions to life, then we could hoist the blame on the current colourful confusion of American life itself. In New York there is a man who is making the headlines by being pelted with big black grapes from half way up Trump Tower and trying to catch them in his mouth.

Reagan himself is now a Hipper-Gipper; his recent brain surgery has left him with a surf-punk crop. In Haight-Ashbury, anarchists put up revolutionary posters with Cellotape. One guy predicted the San Francisco earthquake by the amount of lost pet ads in the newspaper.

In Los Angeles, as our guilty photographer is so keen to point



The monumental Pixies

out, people are being gunned down with state of the art machine-guns in Compton whilst the Californian Highway Patrol are busy booking tourists for jaywalking in West Hollywood. One of the most popular tours in the same city, Graveline, involves a visit to the house where The Manson Family slayed Sharon Tate. Such chaotic kitsch runs like a vein through US life but cannot be used as an excuse by reactionary pop people.

Anyway, Charles and the Pixies don't need excuses. On tour and record the band live in a state of fantasy, a state that is only disguised by the very economical brilliance of their music. There's no pomp to a Pixie-tune — as Charles has said he plays by his own rules — but there's definitely fine structures to his music.

All the band members have their own distant grasp on reality but they'd just as soon be washed in the waters of hip escapism. Joey for one would like to be an actor:

"It's not an ego thing," he claims, "it just seems like an interesting thing to do. I'd like to

go down to the Philippines and say 'Hey, it's me, Joey Santiago from the Pixies. Give me a script, I want to be in a movie.'"

"If you had the choice of a fantasy right now," Kim asks me in her deliciously exciting voice, "what would you do? I'd like to be vice-President. I'd just like to see how the power structure works."

"Jesus, you're crazy," retorts David. "I'd just get me a girl and go somewhere far away."

Financially David would like the Pixies to be as big as U2, and that's something Kim's keen to agree with: "If we do this stuff anyway, we might as well be on Lear Jets."

"We want to be the best and the coolest," decides the drummer, whose two excellent vocal tracks on 'Doolittle' should be adapted into the set, "but we'll have to knock down Rush first."

For Charles, the fantasy is less sarcastic. The last books he read, three years ago, were by Kurt Vonnegut and Samuel Beckett. He explains why his lyrics are self-contained stories and situations:

"When you don't have anything

"We want to be the best and the coolest but we'll have to knock down Rush first." — David

to say rather than sing typical love songs which is fake, I feel nothing when I sing. All those T-Rex records and Doors records and Donovan records and Beatles records. There's so much stuff there that's about nothing, at least nothing to the audience. They have all sorts of interpretations."

They only exist for the songwriters, for the rest of us it's just there for the imagination. In the future I'd like to make some more authentic hardcore music and some more authentic classic rock music."

If there's sadness to this mighty fine band then it's in Joey's cynical questioning of America's relationship with the world. When he was a kid he remembers all the churches in the Philippines playing Beatles music loud for 24 hours straight on the day the Fab Four announced their split. Today he knows so little about America

he has to ask me:

"Am I right in thinking people come and ask us (America) for help or do we just do it? I don't know a lot about foreign policy."

Ironically since this interview America has intervened in the Philippines' power struggle.

The finest reality the Pixies offer anyone is their ability to make exhilarating and stimulating music. When Joey slings his guitar up high over his shoulder and cuts up the air with his wired breaks; when he slashes through 'Where Is My Mind' pummelling his strings with a bottle; when 'Bone Machine' rattles an audience and the band prowls that holy space between the amps and the head-high mic stands, bathed in aqua lights, and playing their guitars like only the Pixies can...

Then, that's when the Pixies' reality becomes the only reality that really matters.

