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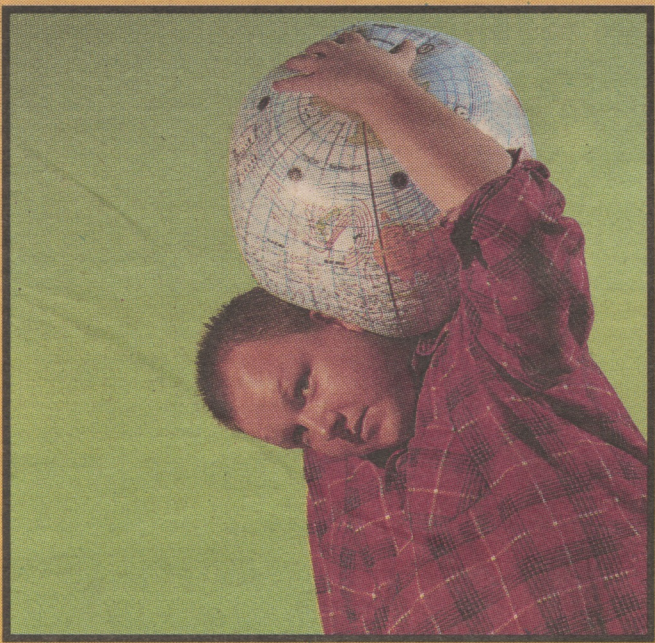
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IT CAME FROM PLANET GIRTH

The Pixies on top of the world

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Carrying the weight of the world: globe-trotter Charles 'Black Francis' Thompson

● The PIXIES are the ultimate crossover band — official — grabbing the ear of everyone from Syndrome pop kids to the chairman of the British Institute Of Architects (fact!). ROGER MORTON settles into the passenger seat for a ride through the mind of CHARLES THOMPSON (aka BLACK FRANCIS), a world populated by UFOs, aliens, cacti, CB radio and the QE2. Pix(ie): STEVE DOUBLE

"O the passenger/He rides and he rides/He sees things from under glass/He looks through his window side/He sees the things he knows are his/He sees the bright and hollow sky/He sees the city sleep at night/He sees the stars are out tonight/And all of it is yours and mine/And all of it is yours and mine/So let's ride and ride and ride and ride."

'The Passenger' Iggy Pop

In the yellow metal cage of a New York taxi, a thickset man in a lumber shirt is yanked through the demented network of Manhattan streets heading for Times Square. A twilight zone sky is closing down on the ego-mad architecture of Bad Apple City, and the guy slumped on the scum-resistant brown taxi seat is sinking into himself.

It had been a relaxed weekend. A few days up in the woods in Massachusetts, hanging out at his father's bar, buying birthday presents for his kid brother, and meeting 'n' greeting the family's new arrival, a Bull Mastiff puppy. A lot of pork had been eaten. Someone had slaughtered a pig, and, well, it had to be eaten.

But Monday had barged in on the weekend, and there was work to be done. Rock 'n' roll work. A late night drive to New York. A day of photos and more photos. And now some music paper writer jammed in alongside on the back seat of a lurching taxi, and nothing much to say. What do you say to these wispy English boys? Tell him about how you like to cruise the broad, concrete-cleaving New York streets, late at night, that's what. Tell him about the driving.

"Charles, you still got your Cadillac out in LA?"

"Yeah, I still got it, but I'm thinking of changing it. I want to get some kinda four wheel drive thing, so I can drive out into the desert. Drive out into Arizona and get up into the ghost towns. Cadillac's no good for that."

CHARLES THOMPSON has a lot of dust on his sneakers. Stardust probably. He was brought up in Los

Angeles, a reclusive type of a kid who, being neither athletic, nor a surfer, nor a Chicago gang member, didn't 'fit in' at LA City School. In English classes he'd write science fiction stories or poetry.

Out of school he'd be locked into his headphones listening to '60s music and giving rein to a "strong rock 'n' roll fantasy imagination and a strong sexual fantasy imagination". Before High School was over his family swapped coasts, moving to a seaside cowtown in Massachusetts, from where Charles would go to university at U Mass, Boston.

After six months living in Puerto Rico as part of a 'Spanish studies' phase of his course (archaeology and anthropology were in there somewhere too) Charles decided to head back to Boston to form a band with his mate Joey Santiago.

The trajectory of the Pixies' career has been well charted. The 4AD link-up and the Latino-punk of 'Come On Pilgrim'. The support tour with the Throwing Muses. The gut wrenching body violation of 'Surfer Rosa'. The solidifying reputation as Raunchy Surrealists coming out of the eyeball-slashing sleeves of Vaughan Oliver and the Lynch-pin chart friendliness of 'Doolittle's' anthems. The surf 'n' sci-fi flirting of 'Bossanova' and the ascension to Super Strange Stadium Status demonstrated on this summer's Europe tour, and at the Crystal Palace Bowl major wig-out.

Publicly the Pixies have gone far, turning their howling exorcism into a market force, affected by 'recessions' and scrapping for ticket sales with Donington Monsters. Privately, though, and for a long time before the Pixies screamed into life, Charles has been clocking up light years of his own crooked mileage. In mind and body the man has been going places.

It's five months since he was last at home in LA. After the Pixies tour ended this summer, Charles went drive-about in Europe, navigating by solo festival dates, or just drifting with the road. Even now, in New York, he's debating with his co-pilot girlfriend, Jean, whether to head back to LA the hard way. Overland. Burning rubber.

"I've been doing trips across America since I was three months old," says Charles. "I've been doing 'em ever since. Mostly just moves. My family has this funny habit of moving 3,000 miles to the other side of the country, back and forth between Boston and Los Angeles.

And now, being in a band, I do it all the time, criss-crossing America."

What have been the best trips?

"Well, definitely the last one I did in a car a couple of years ago was great, because I took mushrooms and went to Gracelands on Elvis' birthday. Actually it was really horrible because I was under the influence of drugs and there were all these sobbing people, crying at Elvis' graveside. Oh man! It just got so morbid.

"And Gracelands is not a big mansion, it's not big and spacious, it's a wealthy turn of the century country home, but it's claustrophobic, and everything's done out in, like, zebra skin, and there's all these people in dark glasses, and people with bloodshot eyes crying their eyes out. By the time we got to the graveside out back we were practically puking. It was horrible! Horrible! So we missed out on the Lisa Marie aeroplane. We just couldn't take it anymore. It's funny now, but at the time I was feeling really bad and swore I'd never do it again."

Didn't you fly on Concorde once?

"Yeah, that was totally fantastic. We had talked about it for a couple of months and then decided it was too expensive. But we ended up doing it and it was great. I was lookin' for UFOs the whole way, 'cause I was convinced, 'cause we were so high up. You could see the

ever get to space.

"I'm already mad that I started the Pixies instead of going to New Zealand to look at Halley's Comet about six years ago. Everyone was taking boats down there, and I got the OK from my dad. He was going to help me out. I got a camera, and I was... I'm not totally into astronomy, or at least, then I was only marginally into it. I was doing it because it was Halley's Comet and it only appears once every 76 years, and even if it wasn't that spectacular I just wanted to be around that atmosphere, people who were excited at seeing an object.

"But I backed out and said I'll move to Boston instead and call up Joey and start the Pixies. So I've always regretted that. It's classic. A classic choice. Rock 'n' roll, or Halley's Comet. And I took rock 'n' roll."

The release of the new Pixies album, 'Trompe Le Monde', makes it pretty clear that Charles never really gave up on comet chasing. 'Trompe Le Monde' has the best of both Pixies worlds. A noise-world that is right in your face, and an orbiting mind-world that is far, far out. A few songs on 'Bossanova' thematically shuttle-hopped into outer space ('Velouria', 'Allison', 'The Happening'). But 'Trompe Le Monde' is awash with the leakage from Charles Thompson's parallel universe. The one where he's Black Francis, stargazer, voyager, rocker



When worlds collide: alien wrecks fiend Charles

curvature of the earth, and the deep blue of space, and feel the heat on the window because of the friction, and the sound is all behind you 'cause you're going Mach 2. It was totally thrilling."

And didn't you come over on the QE2 once?

"Yeah. I first heard about that from when The Cure came over on the QE2 a couple of years ago. I thought well, if they can do it, I can do it. I probably shouldn't mention that I do these things because I'm sure some people think I'm the crassest f---in' asshole on the whole planet. But I just think it's interesting, no matter who takes it. It's just a form of travel, and I'm interested in travel and forms of transportation. I want to take Concorde not because it's expensive, but because I get to see the curvature of the earth and because maybe that's the closest I'll

and alien wrecks fiend.

Most conspicuously, 'Motorway To Roswell' (the finest songwriting moment the Pixies have had since 'Monkey Gone To Heaven') deals with the alleged cover-up of a UFO crash landing in New Mexico in 1947. But the interlinked obsessions of space, travel, aerodynamics and architecture are threaded through songs like 'Planet Of Sound', 'Distance Equals Rate Times Time' and 'Alec Eiffel' (as in tower).

The album title came from a random phrase thrown out by Charles' manager (it means 'Fool The World') which stuck, partly because it sounded pretentious. And as for the raw, aggressive and sometimes impenetrable nature of a lot of the songs, that's because 'Trompe' was originally intended as a quickly recorded 'punk' album, and when they got bogged down in

lengthy pre-production, they couldn't be bothered to rehearse the mellow surf songs. Charles might be far out, but the Pixies are far from laid-back. They sound, erm, angry. Why?

"I tell myself that I'm just contributing to the formula of rock music and just trying to be a shouter, because you're supposed to shout. But maybe there's anger. I can't deny I'm not angry. I don't know what I'm angry about. It's just anger. Anger that you wouldn't even express to anybody, that you wouldn't even try and explain even to yourself. Just a sort of pissed off feeling. I guess I've always had it. It's not a mean streak, just sort of self-pitying pissed off anger.

"But that's pretty everyman. I guess there's a lot of dudes out there that are kind of pent-up. I mean, I'm just like one in a billion."

"I feel really paranoid that others don't like me. Like, I'm playing a solo festival and Sonic Youth are there and I'm thinking 'Oh gosh! They probably think I'm dumb.'"

But usually there's a reason, like no money or no girlfriend, and you have both.

"But I didn't used to have them. I didn't used to have a girlfriend, and so maybe I just haven't realised. Maybe the emotional side of me hasn't realised everything's OK right now. Y'know, I'm still kinda, angry."

Are you deliberately keeping the Pixies abrasive and refusing to let the band 'mature'?

"No. I got nothing against getting more mainstream or even mellow or anything. It's just gotta be really good. If people could mature and end up sounding like Roy Orbison I suppose there'd be a lot of good records, but... Basically everyone just sucks. I dunno, I only been in a band for five years, so it feels kind of appropriate to sound however we sound."

CHARLES THOMPSON does not seem like an angry man. In Times Square we bundle out of the taxi into the human soup, and Charles stops to point out a giant video screen playing The David Letterman Show. The Pixies' singer is briefly fascinated by the TV broadcast from on high. Then we duck into the chrome and marble sanctuary of the Paramount Hotel and grab a table upstairs.

The man opposite doesn't smoke, doesn't drink (tonight) and doesn't seem angry. He seems civil, open, distracted, perplexed and bursting with language. His sentences balloon out in giant, rambling rushes, full of shooting star thoughts and abrupt subject changes. Mostly he starts with "I

dunno" and ends with "I guess". Occasionally, when in the grip of extreme speculation, his chin tilts up and his eyes roll around madly. He has none of the matey jocularity common to many touring rockers. Instead, he has a kind of bull-in-a-china-shop sincerity that stomps in cynicism and encourages the cultivation of fanciful ideas.

So, in the moonlit interior of his hotel, Charles puts down his knife and fork and prepares to leave gravity behind. Where does all the space stuff come from, Charles? I thought you might be bored with UFOs.

"Well, maybe it was guilt because the last album didn't have as much UFO or sci-fi imagery as people thought was there. There wasn't as much as you'd have thought by reading the reviews. I didn't think about lyrics at all with

this album. I didn't write any, and I was waiting and waiting, and then I kind of just said 'Yeah, f--- it. I'll just sing a bunch of songs about UFOs. Who gives a shit?' And I like those topics, and I wanted to get better at them.

"Then you start to think pompously, and you start to think you want to write a rock opera even though you know down deep you're not going to get away with it. It's not like it's a concept, it's just I felt free and relaxed singing about planets and space."

What is it about space rockets? Why do you like them?

"I don't think I sing specifically about a rocket, but of course a rocket is a symbol of travel beyond the planet, and that appeals to me."

I thought maybe you saw them as the ultimate rock 'n' roll form of transport, beyond a Harley or a Cadillac?

"Oh yeah. I think that's why something like Ziggy Stardust, at least at the time, seemed kinda cool. Or even 'Benny And The Jets', because that kind of imagery, if it's not too goofy, is like romanticising rock 'n' roll to the point where it's on the same level of a Western movie or something. You're taking it out of the present, and you're glorifying it to a thousand years from now, far, far away."

Have you come close to any unexplained phenomena?

"I guess I haven't, or at least that I remember. I physically was at a very real UFO incident, but I was too young to remember anything about it. It's only been recounted to me. But that's pretty intriguing. "And it's pretty weird that... I

was reading some UFO magazine a few months ago about this Peruvian guy who had some big UFO organisation down in South America, and he refers to the UFOs, the ships, as manta rays. And I've written two songs using manta rays as an image for UFOs, and I'd never read that before.

"Then I was reading one of those goofball books about Area 51, the airforce base in Nevada where they supposedly have the alien bodies and ships on ice. I read in this book that it's known in UFO circles as The Ranch, and I've got this song called 'The Happening' where the opening line goes 'They got a ranch they call number 51', and I'd never heard of this place referred to as The Ranch.

"I know they're stoopid coincidences that don't really amount to a lot, but a grin can't help but crawl across your face. It's kind of fun to think 'Well, gee! They're f—in' with my mind, man!' I know! Down deep, subconsciously, I know!"

The Pixies have some elevated fans these days. There's Bowie covering 'Debaser' from 'Doolittle' as part of the Tin Machine set ("He invited me in to a rehearsal," says Charles. "And all I could think was 'Well, I hope they're gonna get the chords right!'") Then Dennis Hopper name-dropped the band in a magazine recently, and on Radio 4's dozy *Desert Island Discs* show the Chairman of the British Institute Of Architects picked 'Here Comes Your Man' as one of his top tunes to be stranded with.

Charles has spent a fair part of his time in public belittling his own songs. "Baloney" he calls them, "Doodles". On 'Trompe Le Monde' he regards the interconnections, where a song about aerodynamic space research on the Eiffel Tower — 'Little Eiffel' — links in with 'The Navajo Know' — a song about "The Mohawk Indians doing high steel construction without safety lines and the Navajos taking their peyote and flying around like an eagle above mother Earth" as little more than a crossword.

"I don't know if it's for people buying the records or just my own enjoyment," he says. "The main thing is that it just *sounds* good. The subject matter really is meaningless."

Yet high-flying architects, ex-Starmen, psycho actors and anyone with half a brain are considerably more likely to be turned on by Charles' 'baloney' than a bunch of songs about foxy chicks (not that he doesn't touch on that area — see 'Subbacultcha'). Charles' parallel universe is central to whatever Pixies are. I tell this to Charles and he says: "I suppose you're right. I suppose I have to agree."

But he doesn't look convinced. Even if Pixies albums are no more than garbage cans for the space junk of Charles' wandering mind, at least they're resonant garbage cans. That's quality junk the man jettisons.

"HAVE YOU seen that movie about the life of Fassbinder, where Fassbinder's played by a woman and this woman's given a cactus and she comes towards the camera at one point holding this huge cactus in her arms and her arms are bleeding and she's hugging the cactus and saying: 'I tried to love a cactus?'"

Charles has spotted a cactus. In a photographer's studio just around the corner from the dead CBGB's, he's being framed with the world, or at least a globe, on his back, but Charles would rather it was just him and the cactus. He seems to know a lot about cacti.

"Rickie Lee Jones has this cactus that she takes into the studio when she's doing vocal takes 'cause she thinks it helps her sing. She has a cactus roadie to

carry it... They're actually really nutritious, cacti, in fact a lot of desert areas have more nutrients in a given area than less hot places."

We discuss cactus smuggling. Big business, it is. Then Charles puts on a tape of Iggy Pop's 'Lust For Life' and tells us how to hypnotise chickens. Then about hunting for frogs with a flashlight and then about painting turtle shells with nail varnish.

You'd have thought Charles would have been a popular guy at university, but that's not the way he sketches it. Boston was a rude town full of drunken college students, and the smug bigotry of the hip "liberal hippy-dippy types" disgusted him. Some of those feelings crop up in the words to 'U-Mass' on 'Trompe Le Monde'.

Of course, nobody in rock is going to tell you that they are, or ever were, part of the herd (Hey! I'm an individual!). But Charles seems particularly unattached, caught between down-to-earth values and pie in the sky dreaming, between the backwoods and the stars. It's not even that he feels particularly comfortable in 'the rock world'.

"I feel, like, really paranoid that others don't like me. A real 14-year-old mentality that you can't get rid of. Like, I'm playing a solo festival in Belgium and Sonic Youth are there and I'm thinking 'Oh gosh! They probably think I'm dumb'. It's like even though I reject that kind of thing, and I have spent most of my life rejecting it, there's still part of you that wants to be part of the club, even though you know deep down that it's stupid."

Have you ever felt that you've belonged anywhere, that any kind of organisation of body or opinion was for you?

"Well, I always liked what Samuel Beckett said: 'My books mean nothing. You should just read the words and the words mean what they mean'. And I always liked it that Sun Ra said he was from Venus or wherever. And I liked it when I read an interview once with Pere Ubu and they said that their music was like getting on to a public bus and everyone's little thoughts that they were having in that bus, 15 people sitting in that bus and all their little dreamworlds and their thoughts, and that's sort of what Pere Ubu was."

"And I always liked the association with the abstract and the kind of hopelessness of the people that said 'I don't know!' People who said 'I don't know! I'm confused!' Or the people that refuse to connect with reality at all, people that just said with a big smirk on their face 'I'M FROM SATURN! DEAL WITH IT!' I don't know if that's an association, or a group of people, but I like the non-committal thing about those kinds of people."

So you won't be backing George Bush's re-election campaign?

"Not as Black Francis. I wouldn't be backing whoever his opponent is either. I mean, I suppose I am a private citizen, Charles Thompson, and if I decide to go to a voting booth then I will, but that's got nothing to do with the Pixies, or Black Francism or rock 'n' roll."

"I wouldn't want to step up on

some kind of podium, basically, because I don't feel well equipped for the debate. I don't feel well read, and I don't feel educated. Maybe some people would see that as really wimpy and weak, but erm, I dunno. For lack of a better way of putting it, I just don't consider a lot of reality, and a lot of discussion about reality, to be very rock 'n' roll."

Do you feel that being involved in rock music is essentially

worthwhile, or is it all just ludicrous?

"Well, it's totally both. This side of me says, or course, I'm a soldier in the Army Of Rock, and I'm here to spread the word about rock music and the guitar and the riff. But then the other side says it's a subculture and it's weak and egotistical. It's totally both. This is total bullshit. This is total f—in'

baloney. This f—in' means nothing in the long run. And on the other hand it's the most precious thing in the whole world."

Charles indicates that if he had to step off the planet of sound, he'd probably step on to the planet of vision. At least, he'd like to be involved in something to do with "broadcasting". Not as an actor, because "every f—in' movie I've seen with a rock star in it has sucked". But maybe something to do with directing and movies. It is, though, a vague fascination for

Charles, connected somehow with the capsuling of life in home videos, the developing of TV phones, and weird shit on the radio.

"The whole concept of broadcast is really a cool thing, even if you're just driving around some big city with your CB radio in your car, and you can find some f—in' crazy guy broadcasting his own station, like WKRAZY. Some guy going 'WAAAAAARGH! HEY!' into a CB radio with no one listening except maybe... me."

If sometimes Charles sounds like he's lining himself up as musical director for the next David Lynch enterprise (zooming in on America's crazies) then it's only coincidence. Attempts to understand Black Francis and the Pixies in Lynchian terms are not favoured by Charles.

"I wish I'd never said anything about David Lynch because, although I was excited by his films three or four years ago, I then couldn't escape it. It was like 'Oh! The David Lynch Of Rock!'"

Black Francis cannot be explained, like all the best things in pop. But half the fun of it is stumbling across those beautiful clues. Like Charles' business card with the printed legend 'BLACK FRANCIS: ROCKER... Weddings, Parties, Anything'.

And the glimpse of his youth that comes in the story of lying in his darkened room in Massachusetts, with the headphones on, listening over and over again to 'The Passenger' and watching the car lights flicker on

CONTINUED ON PAGE 61



PIXIES

FROM PAGE 35

the ceiling. Charles says he just liked the chord sequence. But I'd rather not believe him. *"So let's ride and ride and ride and ride . . ."*

"I've got a CB base station in my apartment which I bought to do vocals with at the studio, broadcasting from my car. You can hear some pretty cool stuff on CB. Once, at about two o'clock in the morning, driving through New Mexico I heard these two American Indians talking to each other, right across a valley in the middle of nowhere. People talk about the weather, where the cops are parked, talk about their vacations. You hear some real classics. Like 'Yeeeah. I gonna git me one o'dem brunettes. I don't trust none o'dem blondes . . . Dey got a psychology about 'em'.

"And there's talk about buying and selling drugs, and whoring, and stuff like that too. But also just talking about, like, how beautiful the sky is. One day I was coming up from this Mexican border town, and I knew there were a few trucks out on the road, and it was about seven in the evening in the summer, and still light, and the sky was beautiful. A few big, classic, dramatic Arizona clouds and a big rock bluff over here on the right, and just this view all around. I had a Channel 19, which is the main channel, and there was complete silence. And I picked up my CB and I said 'Boy . . . That sure is beautiful'. And there was a pregnant pause, and then the response comes over the radio. 'Yeah . . . Sure is.' That was great."

I met someone once who seemed to have fallen in love with the American road system.

"Well, I do relate to that. Every time I go to Europe and rent a car, I don't go and see a f—in' thing. All I do is get a map, and get to the next place. It's weird, how you can get lost out there."

