

THE WOLFGANG PRESS

PRESSING ENGAGEMENTS

4AD'S LONGEST-SERVING BAND TALK TO PUSH ABOUT 'KANSAS', THEIR NEW SINGLE INSPIRED BY THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION AND EXPLAIN WHY EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATION HAS SO FAR LED TO A LACK OF COMMERCIAL SUCCESS. PICS: PHIL NICHOLLS

"... I KNEW then that Kennedy was dead. And I walked over to his car and Mrs Kennedy was still there, in the back seat, just lying there, with her head bowed over, covering her husband's head, his blood running down her legs, her clothes and twice saying, 'They've murdered my husband.'"

The words of the latest Wolfgang Press single, uttered in an American accent strained with emotion, are barely audible. They tremble beneath layers of spikey guitar and keyboard notes, roll at odds with a mighty melodic bass, are jostled by gunk-ridden funk rhythms. They appear after the banjo plays "The Yellow Rose Of Texas", before the running out of breath, running out of shape. It takes several listens, each with an almost perverse attention to detail, for the grisly sense of the sample to be fully realised.

There are more instantly obvious clues in the accompanying video. Three people sporting face masks of John and Jackie Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald, cheerless grins fixed below peek-a-boo eyes, dance with careless abandon in a barn. The Wolfgang Press play alongside, their number boosted to four by the stony face of Edgar J. Hoover, head of the FBI, staring from behind the drumkit.

Of course, everything points to 22nd November 1963, to Dallas, to the assassination of the 35th President of the United States. Well, nearly everything. This second single to be released from the "Bird Wood Cage" LP is called "Kansas".

"Why 'Kansas'? Oh, that's the first word I had when we started the song and it just sounds better than either Texas or Dallas," says vocalist Mick Allen, suspiciously dismissively. "Anyway, the song's not actually about Kennedy or Oswald. I can't remember too well, but I think the original inspiration was a documentary on John Lennon and Mark Chapman. It's simply about assassination, the motivation and the kinds of things which might go through somebody's head when they intend to kill a powerful public figure."

So why choose specific characters for the video? "They're simply the most obvious vehicles to use. It's a bit of a joke really, the idea of JFK getting down with Lee Harvey in a barn, without the slightest suggestion of malice between them. Some people may even find it offensive. And it's a brilliant image of old Edgar Hoover sitting behind the drums, watching, just as he did in his previous existence."

"The song and the video are full of contradictions, little things which don't really tie up together," adds guitarist Andrew Gray. "The images don't have very much to do with the lyrics."

Indeed. There seems little point in asking why Kennedy has love and hate scrawled across his knuckles. Nor why, towards the close of the video, Mick has a piglet tucked under his right arm.

"Exactly," says Mick. "It doesn't matter to me if it doesn't make sense. Like with the lyrics, it's not a story — I've never been able to write that way — it's just fragments of thoughts, little bits and pieces here and there. The words aren't necessarily related to what's gone before or what follows and they may be grammatically incorrect."

"It's the same for all our songs, there may be several beginnings, no middle and one end. It's probably because of the way we write. I mumble and get sounds and then fit words to those sounds, building it up from there. For me, the sound of a word is as important as the meaning."

"Likewise the music," says the keyboard player Mark Cox. "If you learn about music, about chord structures, then all you ever know is that this has got to follow that to make it sound right. Because we're not trained, whole new avenues are opened up."

THE Wolfgang Press have always experienced an embarrassing difficulty in describing their music. After seven years and four albums, they say that it gets harder rather than easier. Today they claim that "it's a kind of soul music", which is hardly surprising. It's their stock answer to the stock question.

What kind of soul music?

"Well, it's patently not black soul."



What other acts do you think are playing a similar soul music?

"The Fall, Nick Cave."

"Bird Wood Cage" veers from the swollen, stretched, twisted throb of "Bottom Drawer" to the chaotic guitar scratch and scramble of "Shut That Door". Some songs are piled high with keyboard trickery, with electronic horns and choirs and howling dogs, others are stripped bare, down to the percussive bones. It's an LP which is whimsical and horrific, harmonious and aggressive, absurd and shrewd. It's obviously the intention of The Wolfgang Press to craft contradictions, or, as Micky says, "It's not so much an intention, it's more a fact of life."

Mark: "It's not pre-conceived, there's no formula, no method, but it is in our heads to try to do something different with each song."

Andrew: "And it doesn't matter to me if I think that the changes are for better or worse, it doesn't matter if I think that one of our earlier albums is a better album than 'Bird Wood Cage'. But, whatever the changes, there's always a stamp on our work, something which can be recognised as The Wolfgang Press."

"There's always a jarring effect, a feeling of, oh, you're not supposed to do that. It's like making a cake and leaving something really important out, or adding something, putting concrete on it instead of icing."

The Wolfgang Press have always made a conscious effort not to conform to the common, if inaccurate, perceptions of a 4AD band. They've often done so with a degree of delightful vindictiveness. It's the simplest explanation for why the sleeve of "Bird Wood Cage" proudly bears the picture of a toilet.

Mick: "I used to really worry about being

commercial. But if it's natural to us, then there's nothing wrong with it at all. Some of our material is almost easy pop."

"We also suffer from having never been hip. We've never been associated with any kind of movement. We've always been either one step ahead or one step to the side."

The band are about to tour the States with Nick Cave and are confident that they'll rekindle the positive response they incited there in 1987.

"This is our country and we wish that we could gain more recognition here. It may be partly our own fault, we only played here once last year and only once the year before. We intend to do more gigs soon and we're also determined to try to free ourselves from backing tapes. It would be good to be seen as a proper band."

