

MM 16.2.91

FOR YEARS I NEVER UNDERSTOOD THE APPEAL OF

Throwing Muses. For years I stumbled around trying to get a fix on them, trying to pin down their elusive appeal, attempting to disseminate their components in a futile search for meaning. I was looking for the reason and the rhyme, when, frankly, they were the very last things I should have been looking for.

For years I never understood the basic rule to appreciating their highly disturbed music: Throwing Muses' very appeal lies in the fact their beauty can't be pinned down. You just have to take them on faith.

THIS scene occurs just as we're about to leave for Glasgow for the second date of the Muses British tour. I'm sitting in a hotel bar supping tea, talking to Kristin Hersh, singer with Throwing Muses, when she glances over at my notes and spots the word FASHION!

"Oh yeah," I offer, "that's this whole theory I'm working on: there's no such thing as a good artist, only good listeners."

"Wow," she says, "that's a good one."

Yeah, for art to work it must have the right people to appreciate it; even the coarsest of textures can spark off the most inspired of reactions in the receiver's mind. Surely, the fact that certain sequences of chords and notes and sounds, stumbled across at random, spark off reactions and images in the mind of the recipient has nothing to do with those sequences and everything to do with who's listening?

Kristin begs to differ: "The idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder doesn't hold for me, because I know ugliness surfaces from beauty so often. This is going to sound terrible; but people don't have a clear image of the simple fact: beauty is truth. You can fool people as all I mean, I guess."

But how do you know when you've written something of worth?

"I didn't used to," she replies. "I had to see whether it would last, if it kept working. If it began to date too soon, I'd think, 'Oh I got in the way of that one, I did something dumb'. Now I pretty much know when the truth is coming out and when I'm getting in the way."

I think I understand. False beauty is dependent, largely, on fashion. True beauty exists anyhow. Beauty is beauty inviolate, unchanging. And for any kind of art to be worthwhile, to be anything more than the sort of passing fancy with which we in the media amuse ourselves with, day in, day out, it has to possess that sort of truth.

Suddenly I feel like Levin, the hero of "Anna Karenina", who spends nearly 830 pages looking for a solution to the spiritual quandaries which have troubled him since birth, "the struggle between reason and heart", only to have the answer revealed to him in one simple phrase. Spooky, huh?

"THE Real Ramona", the fifth album from Throwing Muses is the clearest indication of Kristin and the Muses' inner beauty yet. In his review a few weeks back, Chris Roberts compared it to an ice-skater, but frankly, I haven't yet witnessed an ice-skater who is unsettling, joyous, distraught, soothing, infectious, often at the same time. Margot Fontaine would be closer. Margot Fontaine skating across the ice on the Hudson in '66.

On the surface, "The Real Ramona" (the title comes from a Thirties postcard Kristin discovered one day in an old junkshop) seems more relaxed, more at peace with itself than some of their earlier offerings. It doesn't appear to possess the homicidal intent of their startling debut, say, nor the often rampant morbid wildness of "House Tornado"; its songs glisten with a sheen that puts most pop pretenders to shame. Doubtless this is a reflection of Kristin's desperate search for peace of mind among the torment she was going through at the time: recorded last year at the height of the world dumping on her, it must have been a welcome escape.

But, really, the pop sheen is just the very fragile surface. Scratch underneath for even one second and you could find *anything*. It's like what "Twin Peaks" could be, if "Twin Peaks" was anything more than just empty surface gloss with no content whatsoever (dumb comparison). Just look at the songs.

EVERETT TRUE enters the Muses' goofy, spooky world in order to find out how hamsters, Hollywood, yoghurt and highschool yearbooks all helped to make their new album, 'The Real Ramona'. Pics: STEPHEN SWEET

There's the unbearably poignant wordless tribute to Kristin's son, Dylan, whose refrain seems to be echoed in the final glorious stadium sway of "Two Step", and the single, "Counting Backwards", which was inspired by a hypnotism technique.

There are Tanya Donnelly's two sublime moments of pop perfection: "Not Too Soon" (called "The Pop Song" by the band, it was originally started upon 10 years ago and has been reconstructed so many times, the band also named it "The Frankensong"), and "Honeychain". Both of these are *obviously* better than anything The Bangles or The Go-Go's have ever achieved in the same direction. Then there's the frighteningly obsessive "Lee Ellen".

The record also features the Muses' new bassist, Fred Abong. But it's not that important (as far as you can call a completely new individual unimportant); Fred carries on more than steadfastly from where Leslie left off.

"THE Real Ramona" was recorded last year in Hollywood among

an apartment complex full of actors doing voice-overs, the cast of "Ghost Dad", heavy metal bands and centre-fold models, pushers and high-grade hookers. Half the time the Muses couldn't figure out what they were doing there.

"It was like living on TV," Kristin recalls. "But it made the album come out of a microcosm, which was important. It helped to have this really boring, numbing world with only one type of weather around us, because then the album was the biggest picture we saw."

"This album sounds more like us, it's more free-spirited," Tanya adds. "But it's always strange recording, because you have to take a song which changes for you every day and say, 'This is its definition,' this is what's going to represent it forever. Sometimes you'll do something really cool to a song live and you could kill yourself for not recording it."

THROWING Muses write the scariest and the goofiest songs, often at the same time. You know that feeling you get just before you switch the light on in your flat and wonder if there might

be something lurking there, and you're never too sure whether there was, even though you never discover anything? That's Throwing Muses. Four regular guys who create, perhaps, the most regular music in the world.

And because it's so regular, it can be very, very frightening, like all those dumb-ass movies which involve childish nursery rhymes and spooky close-ups of dolls and the like.

But often it's way more psychological than that: Throwing Muses always seem to be hinting at what lies on the other side of madness. Perhaps it's just that there's so much depth to a Muses song, so much emotion, you find yourself falling, with no guide-ropes to help you. Hell, I don't know, maybe the Muses can tell me what scares them.

"Tell you now?" Kristin asks. "Everything! Before I had Dylan, nothing scared me, I didn't know what fear was because I wasn't afraid of death. Now Billy (her husband/manager) can scare me, the band can scare me. That's it, though."

So it's people you care about.

"Good answer. It's one thing being scared of your child dying, but that's not fair because that's selfish. What's worse is if I died and I wasn't able to take care of him."

"Probably my greatest fear is of boredom," she continues. "Not of anguish or terror or anything like that. If I was bored with my life or my family... can you imagine being bored with a person? It's about the worst thing you can do to them."

"A lot of things scare me," says Tanya Donnelly, pop goddess and guitarist supreme. "I'm afraid of sudden death, being cut off. I want to participate in my death and it frightens me it can be taken out of my hands. I'm afraid of chaos, although it's kind of reassuring to know it's just chaos out there, and that you don't have any responsibility."

Do you get scared by all these people who feel so intensely about the Muses?

"When they want to be part of us, yes," Tanya replies. "I don't understand the impulse of wanting to get inside something else, but it doesn't happen to me so much as Kristin. I feel very protective towards her, especially as she's now with child. I'd like to put her in one of those hamster balls and roll her around."

WEIRD. Only half-an-hour before, in the tour van on the way to Glasgow, Kristin, Billy and I had been talking hamsters. Kristin told us a story of how this little hamster of hers had rolled all the way down the stairs in its hamster ball and gotten stuck underneath a water cooler, never to be retrieved. For all she knows, it's still there.

So it's strange Tanya should use precisely that metaphor to describe her feelings towards her half-sister. Mind you, Tanya and Kristin's family are meant to have a strong psychic strain running through them.

Tanya looks a little scared when I mention the coincidence, but goes on to explain: "Oh, that's my mum - it's mainly that she has strong intuition. She gets these really strong feelings and she'll know when something's gone wrong with us. A lot of it is just mom stuff."

Hell, I don't know. Americans probably talk about hamster balls all the time. Certainly Tanya can talk enough psycho-babble to touch on similar topics every other hour. She agrees.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm on double-speed and everyone else is walking through mud. I don't like it, because I find I don't edit things, I

don't have that natural editing... *piece!* I do have a tendency towards emotional psycho-babble, but I wouldn't say it's my favourite topic, it's more because I can't help it."

EARLIER this year, in one of the most startling interviews ever to appear in the music press, Kristin revealed to The Stud Brothers that for 10 years she'd been suffering from a personality disorder - bipolarity - whereby she'd hear voices in her head. Did she feel exposed in any way, vulnerable, after seeing the interview in print?

"You come to expect interviews being very personal," Kristin explains, sipping at her tea. "I have two lives, one musical and one personal. You work at the music for years and when it

comes out all the personal life comes out and you forget that happens. But I ask for it, it's my job."

And her job is to create intensely personal music. Hence people are likely to be far more interested in her personal life than, say, the singer with The Farm.

"I've spent 10 years trying to deal with two different worlds at the same time, knowing that everyone else just saw one of them. I spent my whole time trying to seem normal. Thank God I had my songs, but that's what turned me that way in the first place."

Okay. I promise not to dwell on this - you must be fed up with it by now.

"Yeah, right," she laughs, self-consciously. "I keep seeing all these little magazines with articles on us, talking about bipolarity disorder, child custody - hey, I only talked about that one

afternoon, it's not really what the album is based on! Can we talk about the band for a while?"

For sure.



HERE'S where I chuck in the democratic question, by way of showing you kids out there what regular Joes the Muses are, and also to prove there's more to them than just two half-sisters, who may or may not be vaguely psychic, strange, but certainly talented.

What do you think about when you're on stage?

"Stupid things mostly," says David. "Playing drums can be very hypnotic, so it's mindless sometimes, while other times you think, 'Shit, I should have washed those shorts, cos now I won't have anything to wear tomorrow... what's next?'"

Kristin: "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Sometimes I'll find myself figuring out what I have to do at the end of the tour - making grocery lists, stuff like that - and the songs just keep going on, but for the most part there's nothing there, except for the song."

Tanya: "Last night I was thinking how the audience looked so sweet. They were so happy and excited, which is a strange thing to look at, unrestrained happiness. It was really nice."

Fred: "I think about not f***ing up and how goofy I feel playing in front of all these people, when a year ago I was studying."



RIGHT now I should be running all sorts of stories past you in order to make you realise what a well-versed and literate bunch the Muses are (they are). So let's talk about beds flying out of hotel windows in Dallas and strange American pop stars wandering the streets of Glasgow at three in the morning on the lookout for a party. "Shhh," they go, "Be werry werry quiet. We're hunting parties!"

Perhaps we should mention that Tanya keeps her highschool journals

sealed with masking tape, but every time she comes across them they still make her want to pound her fists against the wall. Or maybe we could fit in a mention of the film the Muses wrote the title track for ("Matter Of Degree"), and how they can't get the rights to it back, and mention how Kristin was once asked by a book publishers to write a book in the style of Nick Cave, an idea she treated with the scorn it deserved. And let's talk about deconstructing knock knock jokes ("There's no door!") and how all the Muses ever seem to eat is yoghurt and peanut butter.

We could discuss how dead birds are completely the grossest things to handle (apparently they'll also give you a surefire disease), and talk about the live show.

But you all know how I feel about that, anyhow. So let me give you a sample of my state of mind after their Glasgow show: dumbstruck.

"The Real Ramona" is out now on 4AD.