

I'LL NEVER FORGET Paris with Throwing Muses. We cruised the city in a battered, open-top Citroën, supped *soupe à l'ognion* in Les Halles, raided the parfumeries of the Champs-Élysées, touched base with the beatnik, goatee-bearded aesthetes who prowl Montmartre like alley-cats, feasting over pastries and *vin ordinaire* and discussing Derrida. I watched as the band played an open-air, moonlight concert deep in the grounds of the Parc Clemenceau before being carried shoulder high from café to café along the Boulevard St Germain, gorging riotously on snails and champagne cognac.

On the road in Europe? Yeah.

Right. Let's start again. On the road in Europe means fleeting glimpses of cathedrals from the back of a tour van through scaffolding and drizzle, and spending 98 per cent of your time in hotel lobbies waiting for non-existent taxis to take you to soundchecks you should have been at half an hour ago. At the

particular kennels we're boarded at in Paris's Pigalle, Billy O'Connell, Kristin Hersh's husband and manager, is philosophical. "I HATE Europe, I HATE this f***ing place! F***! F***! F***!"

Kristin, dandling her baby on her knee, remains serene.

During one lobby vigil, a bunch of ageing hairies and their suitcases bundle in. They look like they've never come off the road. Like a gaggle of elderly American tourists, they're loud, friendly and take an hour to check in. Turns out they're Moon Martin, journeymen rockers from the Seventies who are staying here, too. They're crestfallen when no one remembers them, even when they hum a few bars of "Bad Case Of Loving You" (that was them), but they recover quickly.

"So are you guys in a band?" asks Mr Moon.

"Yeah. Throwing Muses."

Mr Martin looks puzzled.

"Throwing Musos?"

"No. Muses."

Mr Martin looks blank.

"Muses. They're like spirits, inspiration," explains Mr Moon to Mr Martin.

"Oh! Cool! Check you out later."

own support band and went out in disguise under the name "Cabaret Merde", with manager Billy on lead vocals. Then, there were the interviews of the "Vy-are-you-called-zer-Throwing-Muses?" variety. One intense little fellow took a different tack. "Vot do you zink off der stagediving," he asks Kristin, "at zer Primal Scream gigs?"

"Er—we don't know, we haven't been to any Primal Scream gigs lately," replies Kristin, a mite fazed.

"But it is a problem, no?"

"Well, I—er—it happens with us, we're cool about it. It goes on, y'know, it's what they do."

"Yes," comes back the German inquisitor, his patience thinning. "But vot has this got to do with Primal Scream?"

Somehow, Kristin remains serene.

BACKSTAGE

in Paris. The rider is laid out. Fruit, biscuits, and, of course, a huge plate of diced carrot and two packets of cornflakes. Just what you want after four encores. Lemme at those cornflakes. Mind you, I don't see Kristin eat much more than a lettuce leaf in two days. She seems to feed

off her own serenity.

Of course, there's booze. "Help yourself, David, we'll be downstairs soundchecking." Riveting as soundchecks are, I take the more entertaining option of staring at the asbestos flaking from the ceiling. Asbestos, I kid you not. I didn't dare move for fear of bringing it flaking down on me like confetti. So I drink. The beer's a bit odd, but the wine's respectable and the tequila goes down a treat. Happiness is drinking a band's rider while they're soundchecking. Hours pass. The Muses, it transpires, went back to the hotel before returning for the gig. They ain't here yet. Myself and Coleen from 4AD are still in the dressing room, oblivious. What time is it? A Frenchman peeps his head round the door, eyeing us as we swig.

"You are Throwing Muses?"

"Er—no."

This, apparently, is neither here nor there. "You are on in 10 minutes," he informs us. Shift! No sign of the band.

Suddenly, after years of brilliance and struggle in the wilderness, THROWING MUSSES have infiltrated the national album charts. DAVID STUBBS hooks up with Kristin Hersh and her band as they blaze their glory trail across Europe. Pics: STEVE GULLICK

Throwing Muses are (l-r): Bernard, Kristin, David



THROWING MUSSES

ROADS TO RECOVERY

The hotel manager comes over and informs us that they have no room for our photographer, "Mr Steven Garlick". So we have to share a double. We'd smash it up if there was anything in it to smash up.

GERMANY was gruelling, groan the Muses. No nights off, playing to crowds infested by GIs still stationed over there who always turn up to any gig involving American bands and who heckle at the floorshow like it's a stag night. One night, due to a booking cock-up, they even had to pretend to be their

Well, I used to be able to play the spoons...

They make it with a minute to spare. Onstage, they've put out lampshades and Christmas lights, a "down home" touch that is, of course, fetchingly surreal.

"Manic Depression" gives way to "Counting Backwards". These days, The Muses' strength pours out of them, rather than consuming them. Back in 1986, Kristin Hersh cut a pop-eyed, possessed figure onstage, playing like green stuff was shooting out of her belly. Today, she sways gently, nursing her guitar like she's rocking it to sleep,

all the while filling the air with scalding, cascading, electric noise. No laddish leaping about or theatrical fretboard wrestling. Silly boys. "Fish" takes us to boiling point but it's with "Pearl", their "Stairway To Heaven", that the joint convulses. It's Bastille Day. Then, hauled back for five encores, Kristin brings the concert to a perfect, pulse-stopping close with the solo, acoustic "You Cage". For one, frozen moment, it's like no one in the place is moving or breathing. "Thank you, goodnight." Silence. Then the French go apeshit. Conversation afterwards is blighted by post-gig tinnitus. Great gig, Kristin.

Kristin: "What? Great gig, David."

David: "What? Grey pig?"

Bernard: "Say, how come there's only apple juice left in the fridge?"

Kristin: "What?"

David: "What?"

WE land up in Ghent, a beautiful, Belgian medieval town that smells of shit. We, however, are at the Holiday Inn, whose premises are so vastly, aridly hygienic you could store nuclear waste in the rooms. It's there that I get to gas to Kristin over a gassy Belgian beer. So Kristin, you've cracked it. "Cracked it? Cracked what?"

Struck gold.

"Gold?" Kristin throws bemused looks at me.

Er—the new album seems to be something of a success. For one brief, giddy, mad summer's week in late August there it was at Number Four in the national album charts. There we were, in Red Heaven. Momentarily, it seems like no one's told Kristin the news.

"Oh! Yeah, we got a call in LA to tell us we were Number Four," she draws, embarrassed, not at all keen to crack out the champers. "And they faxed us the rundown. Genesis. Neil Diamond.



INXS. Throwing Muses! Believe me, that juxtaposition in itself is enough to give us a pretty clear perspective on all this."

Kristin Hersh is the least enthusiastic of entryists.

"Everywhere, there's this sinister and all-pervasive attitude that you're trying to break through, that you're trying to get a hit. That that's what it's all about. Now obviously, if we were trying to do that, we've done a pretty bad job. Till now, at least."

KRISTIN'S EMOTIONAL HISTORY

'THROWING MUDES' (1986). Their stunningly combusive, eponymous debut. "We were 19 at the time. I was pregnant with Dylan. It's weird for me, because my voice was HER voice. I literally turned into this evil other person, and I was so terrified of it. 'I can't let her in to where the baby is!' — and you can hear that. But, every now and then, 'I'd' come back. I didn't listen to it for years, but now I hear it and it's fine. I was screaming in tune, I was learning my craft. I can turn 'it' on now and feel great strength, but then it was very difficult."

'THE FAT SKIER' (1987). Less "electric" but raw and intense. "I don't know where the fat skier is from," wrote Kristin. "She's like a thought that one would think is too pregnant to be graceful. But one would be wrong..." "We seemed to confuse people because we were like the women you met every day. A lot of this 'women in rock' is just them saying, 'Huh! I can act like a man if I want!' Well, how feminist is that? We worked with Mark Van Hecke from The Violent Femmes, we got this raw acoustic sound. I love the cover."

'HOUSE TORNADO' (1988). Furiously opaque, but lazy critics finally waking up to the band complained it was "impenetrable". "I now see that as the most perfect record. It's so much itself, it's so intricate, it's small, it's completely feminine. Cyclical. The last chord of the last song, 'Walking In The Dark', fades back into the first chord of the first song, 'Colder'."

'HUNKPAPA' (1989). The Muses' attempt to be penetrable that, in spite of the brilliant "Devil's Roof" and "Bea", doesn't quite come off. "Yeah... the songs could have been a little better. Our whole heads weren't in it. We were trying to be nice. And there's no place for nice."

'THE REAL RAMONA' (1991). A post-traumatic return to form for Kristin but, by now, line-up changes were in the throes of wrecking the band.

"I just didn't wanna be there any more. We were going nowhere, it was just getting thrown back in my face. Throwing Muses had come to mean something to people, and they copped an attitude about it instead of listening to the music. And if you really love your children, you kind of don't wanna put them out there in that hostile atmosphere. There were just messes everywhere, and I felt that I'd better go live in the world for a while. Unfortunately, that'd be pretty difficult for someone like me who'd be mediocre at anything else I tried! Now we're back, and I feel 17 again. The thrill without the naivety!"

"We do seem to be cool again but then we do pay our dues..." sighs Kristin. Talk of midweek chart placings is fine and dandy but, as a veteran of many boardroom battles with her American record company, she's aware of the vast, dumb bullshit you have to eat to be BIG, big, Mr Big big.

"Music press people — no disrespect, David — always draw up these battle-lines between bands. I was supposed to be against Tanya and Belly, or anti-The Pixies. Believe me, it truly isn't like that. As far as we're concerned, we're all in it together, fighting the same shit, the same mediocrity!"

"We just wish someone would shove this stuff down people's throats instead of that candy-coated garbage. Luckily, people like Jane's Addiction, Nirvana and The Chili Peppers can do well but, so far, you're not really allowed to have your own sound and do well, which is very offensive to me." There's R.E.M.

"Sure, and they've kind of taken us under their wing. But even R.E.M., a great band, have these pop singles like 'Shiny Happy People' which aren't really representative of them. I come up against that in America. It'd be nice if Warners cared. It'd be nice if they knew how to pronounce our name. Actually, there are some great individuals within Warners and we're enjoying working with them. But I wish their machinery would turn on more easily."

IT'S clear that the Muses have learned how to turn on their own machinery. Right now, they're gushing. They've opened up,

broadened their scope, apparently late in the day. It's customary for bands like the Muses, having made such a blistering and accomplished early start to their musical lives, gradually to taper off, abandoned by the likes of us with our preferences loaded in favour of the shock of the new, their fires dampened by the wearying effort of having to repeat themselves time and again for the benefit of those who weren't listening, who never will listen. That's how Kristin felt after the "The Real Ramona", whose thickets of fury were revered in here, ignored out there.

The same old story.

"I'm just realising now that I was real bored before everything got thrown up in the air, when Tanya left (to form Belly). And you don't realise how bored you are until you're not sitting still any more. It certainly doesn't have anything to do with Tanya, it was my fault. To base a band around my, um, emotional life, and then to remove myself from that band... I had to get kicked in the ass before I remembered how to turn it all on again."

And now, success of sorts. An Indian summer. Or maybe it's next spring. What's changed?

Well, with the new line-up, the Muses' sonic topography has altered completely. Gone are the knotty, traumatic chord-changes, the small, obsessive, inward tussles. Now the Muses are a great, open-ended rhythm section — Narciso's octopus drumming, Bernard Georges' rolling, funky bass. And, over it all, looming large and serene is tiny Kristin.

Unflappable Kristin.

"Yeah, I guess so. I think it's to do with... having a lot of things happen to you. All these catastrophes stuck in me and now they're exorcised. In life — I don't wanna think that they're exorcised from the music."

For sure, Muses' songs, as ever, remain resolutely unresolved, in a

rather than, perilously, tear her apart (enthralling for die hard fans, not nice for Kristin). Credit for this is also due to husband Billy, who helped her out of her bipolarity personality disorder, confronted the hostile voices shooting in and out of her head, and helped turn them around to work in the music's favour. Now the Muses are turned around on the world.

"I think I went back into the business because songs didn't care whether I had a band or not, they just kept coming anyway and they were just so beautiful! It's like

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whether or not to take Ryder out on the road or keep him in a closet. No way! He's so beautiful and he matches the world!"

Ryder is 18 months old, Kristin and Billy's son, and he's with us on the road. Our conversations are extremely cordial but limited — he grins at everything and everybody with a joyous cry of "Dat!" This is

gonna sound so glib and soupy that I almost daren't say it, but it seems that Ryder is a toddling metaphor for the rebirth of the Muses.

"In a way, I guess so. I do feel very similar about them, because I lost my first band and I lost my first son in a sense (a custody agreement means that Kristin is unable to take her six-year-old son, Dylan, out of his home state). I feel very similar about Dylan and 'House Tornado'. Dylan is very dark, and has very sad eyes that are turning in on his brain, the very definition of introverted. And Ryder is so incredibly social, you can't walk down the street without people talking to him."

Just before we leave, Ryder takes his first, awkward

step before collapsing onto a lobby sofa. Then the Muses load up and bowl off out of Ghent, through the drizzle. Coming your way.

'Red Heaven' is out now on 4AD



state of constant deadlock. "There's no such thing as a love song or a hate song, because there's no such thing as love without hate or hate without love." But Kristin has learned to make this source of conflict work for her