



AMERICAN GOTH HICKS

THROWING MUSES

Red Heaven (4AD/All formats)

YOU START to feel like Mickey Mouse as the Sorcerer's Apprentice in some indie *Fantasia*. Every time you chop up one of those marauding brooms, it magically comes back as two. And so on and so on, until there's hundreds of them, EVERYWHERE! Didn't there just used to be one Massachusetts college band on 4AD? How come it's now possible to see a different Massachusetts splinter group every night in a given week? And when's the Fred Abong solo album?

Throwing Muses were once the East Coast rad-fem option, Rhode Island's Amazing PJ Harvey Sisters of 1985. Now, of course, they're more like the garage Roxette, just the central visionary and songwriter Kristin Hersh plus drummer David Narcizo, stripped down for stark, economical, thinking person's *grunge lite*. It wasn't always this way.

Listening back to their earlier albums – the rough and skeletal 'Throwing Muses', the hot and sticky 'House Tornado' and the melodic but minimal 'Hunkpapa' – you find yourself slightly uncomfortable about the obstinate, small-time and wiry nature of the Muses' oeuvre. Occasional excursions into the let-go zone like the excellent 'Dizzy' and '91's catchy 'Counting Backwards' offered hope – but, as the group underwent its all-too-amicable disintegration, you wondered if they'd ever really break free of the graduate under-achiever tag.

The unprecedented musical strength of both The Breeders and, more recently, Tanya Donelly's irresistible Belly, seemed to knock further nails into the reduced Muses' coffin lid. And then this little baby arrived...

Whump! Disappointingly titled, and dressed in predictable post-modern hessian wallpaper, 'Red Heaven' could've been a major non-event. But, liberated from the restraints of a trad group therapy situation, Kristin sounds all at once happy with her lot and tremendously fired up. As hinted at by the sassy 'Firepile' and this is Throwing Muses' first no-fanning-about ROCK album. Stow those preconceptions about print-dress, storm-door twee-ism, this is a band hunched like gargoyles over its instruments, knocking 50 varieties of shit out of them. Just like every other 'alternative' American guitar band at the moment, in fact.

Aside from the hallmark croak in Kristin's idiosyncratic voice, 'Red Heaven' might be any four pug-ugly blokes in plaid from Chapel Hill, Seattle, Cruisers Creek or Hog Seepage, Arizona. All of its noises are worryingly correct for the times – the thumpo drums, the grating resonance, the buried melodies, the

sustained GRRRANNNNG-G-GGG! Anyone currently harbouring a distaste for the Superchunk/Sugar/Sonic Youth stranglehold on contemporary popcore will cry "Another one bites the dust" when they hear the once-sickly and wounded Muses taking it to the bridge. They should try to calm down.

'Dio' is the album's monument. A well-timed, meaty duet between Kristin and grunge archduke Bob Mould, it is as close to a power ballad as this resolutely careful genre gets. In truth, it is an indie Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes, and its sheer foot-down momentum will get you every time. 'Dirty Water', too, carries quite a punch, its dumb, jackhammer chorus nicely set in the sort of structured off-beat, quick-change-that-tempo-David cleverness we have come to expect from the manic Muses. Mini-instrumental 'Vic' could almost be a get-into-character exercise.

Aside from all the *de rigeur* hot rock action, 'Red Heaven' has a typically alluring, introspective lyrical slant for the student in us all. In true American style, it is a carnival of neuroses. Kristin's well documented head-spinning disorder presumably accounts for scary lines like "I can't relieve, believe the pressure in my head" and "I used to hear inside the wall/Now I don't hear at all", and a healthy death obsession is revealed in 'Pearl's' reference to TS Eliot's *Waste Land* ("These pearls on my eyes make me blind" is about drowning), but the closing stanza from the closing number 'Carnival Wig' might be the biggest clue to the album's true undercurrent: "I won't be afraid when my ears ring and my head spins/I'll be on your good side". It's a tribute to her husband/manager Billy O'Connell, domestic bedrock so it seems. A far cry from the maddening, Lynchian vignettes of yore, when Kristin wrote about spitting shells, dying rabbits, snail heads and Mexican cannibals.

So, this is an all-new, revitalised, clear-headed, uninhibited Throwing Muses. Not afraid to rock and all the more user-friendly for it. Only the see-through 'Summer St' gamely clings to the old battleplan, and sounds wishy-washy for it. A free (limited edition) live CD of Kristin live and unaccompanied at Maxwell's, Hoboken, galvanises this fear of the old Muses – reedy and too-earnest, it reeks of self-conscious, singer songwriterly, folk-club toss. Chuck that. Give us 'Dio' and give us madness.

For many, 'Red Heaven' will be the first Muses album, and that's fine. Their depth, weirdness and personality remain a tonic after the dour, workmanlike restrictions on a lot of our current indie-rock. Who's going to get excited when Silverfish split up into three new groups? Mickey Mouse. (7)

Andrew Collins