



# LOVING THE ALIENS

## THROWING MUSES BAND OF SUSANS

GLASTONBURY FESTIVAL  
SOUTHAMPTON UNIVERSITY  
BIRMINGHAM HUMMINGBIRD

SOME BURLY skinhead is making an extremely rude gesture in the direction of Kristin Hersch. I feel like nutting him, but he's twice my size. Dunno what he's complaining about: Throwing Muses are in splendid form and minor obstructions won't deter them from re-shaping our inner psyches.

It's the first date on their 'Evil Weirdo Tour' and already they're redefining rock's use of the bass/drum interface. It's also Friday and Glastonbury is teeming with curious thrill seekers, outrageous hippies and people skiving off work. Everything's running late 'cos of a five-mile tailback in these environs.

The year is 1968. Some people are having trouble warming to the Muses because of the strangeness and indirectness of their recorded canon. But that's just water under the bridge. After all, unlike some of their 4AD labelmates (Wolfgang Press, Cocteau Twins) this isn't the sound of elephants wanking in the wind.

Like that famous Rockwell painting of two rural types holding up pitchforks, Throwing Muses are American Gothic personified. Think kindly of that term for a moment. Strangely spun tales of lives falling apart at the seams, futile sexual endeavours, drug parties, domestic life, cross-breeding, chance encounters and pure hate come alive before your bemused eyes. And the musical language that shapes these themes is resolutely iconoclastic— weird chord progressions, improvised finery, guitars played in matrix formations. The overall effect is otherworldly, alien but not alienating. There's humanised caring in here. Everyone always babbles on about coming straight from the heart yet this band just gets on with it, leaving everything open for the listener's interpretation.

'Dragonhead' and 'Bea' stand out. The former showcases Tanya Donnelly's sorely underused voice, while the latter comes with the usual Hersch psychobabble but runs a twist on an age-old tale: "I don't speak I ramble/My kid was a gamble/I just wanna own something/young dirty street." And this is only the beginning. I'm beside myself with joy.

Backstage, later, Kristin complains of being homesick. They've just finished an American jaunt with New Order in which the disco crowds were slowly but surely converted. Still, nothing was as much of a struggle as the time they played Birmingham, Alabama, when the promoter refused to pay them and got the whole audience to chant "gang bang" throughout their set.

SOUTHAMPTON IS the arse-end of the universe, another college town pretending to be 'with it' but in reality an abode for outdated values and quaint customs. We meet up with The Rude Kids, four unemployed urchins who've taken to following them around from



city to city, sleeping rough, hitch-hiking and understanding the nascent trials and tribulations of guest-listing it. They're superfans but the Muses think of them as friends and familiar faces, enough to keep out the chilly English spiritual clime.

Throwing Muses laugh an awful lot. They're hardly the serious, introverted types they've been portrayed as. Kristin is straightforward and funny; Tanya would be an airhead if she wasn't so aware; Leslie is tough and silent; and David is the brunt of most of the jokes—the token male member. We discuss the closed-mindedness of The South ("They still hold the Civil War against us"), Volcano Suns, Mission Of Burma, Verbal Assault and other Boston-based hardcore groups, Miami ("just like *The Loveboat*"), New Orleans and manna from heaven. Why did they change their style for the most recent LP, 'Hunkpapa'?

"It's not a change so much as a paring-down," says Kristin, "condensing... We wanted to make sure that what we did was available for participation without any explaining (laughs). We have a conviction that it can be participated in without alienating anyone stylistically. I think the substance is the same."

The imagery seems quite extreme (more laughter) and it's sometimes tough to find out what you guys are on about.

Kristin: "That's cool too. If it's gonna be an inkblot, that's alright. Each person in the band has their idea of where it's coming from, but honesty isn't always something I claim to understand."

We discuss the previous day at Glastonbury—which they weren't satisfied with—although being with the Pixies was supposedly like going home to Boston. They think the event was cool despite them rather having sat in tents and frolicked in the dirt

than play. They also espouse the vegetarian ethic although Tanya eats bugs and Leslie says she'd eat bullshit but not the bull. What's their philosophy on a day-to-day basis?

"You're asking us at the end of a four-month tour," retorts Kristin, "so right now it's try and eat, sleep and not speak to each other. Maybe it'll degenerate into us writing songs about life on the road—long lonely nights, etc."

Well, there must be lots of amusing anecdotes from life on the road. Drunken drug orgies and bestiality, TVs thrown out of the window, the whole deal...

Tanya: "Yesterday, someone was telling us about a guy who used bags of Wonder Bread in warm water. How would you put this? He soaked the bread to get it mushy and then put his dick in it. And Dave said 'Why did he do that?' No one believes us when we say 'He's just one of the girls'."

I tell them the story of a friend, who shall remain nameless... He gave this dinner party for some people he didn't like, so he got a frozen whole chicken, scraped the guts out, masturbated into the chicken, cooked it, then served his 'friends'.

"Wow, that's incredible," says Kristin. "You see we couldn't really do that. We could maybe get Dave to do it. Or maybe we could hold a chicken leg up, y'know, for a while. Touring should be a fascinating cultural experience. But anytime you try to leave the house a lot of men scream at you. I'd really like to talk to some men and find out why they do that. Do they think you're going to walk up and say: 'Your dick is probably pretty big. I think I like you. Would you scream again?' It's such a big problem."

Leslie: "Some people say it's because guy's genitals are on the outside so they're more extroverted, they express themselves more. We're more inside."

SATURDAY NIGHT's set is an earth-shatterer. As a latecomer to the Muses world I can't claim to fully understand or appreciate them, but there's something here that goes beyond words, beyond bitty little exposés on life and death. They start off slow, then get fierce suddenly, as if adrenalin found its way into charged nervous systems.

The dance propulsion that backs several numbers should not be ruled out. And Kristin's body-language is the most expressive I've seen this side of David Thomas. Heads bob up and down in unison. The hardcore following chant stupid, philistine things and are treated with mild disregard. 'Vicky's Box', 'Colder' and 'Mania' tower above everything with yarns of sex and sedition putting many a namby-pamby pretender to shame.

Beforehand I'd caught a re-arranged Band Of Susans, struggling about, one member short. Bruce Gilbert from Wire wasn't available as a replacement so they re-arranged things to suit a four-piece. More abrasive and more jumped-up, sometimes verging on the heavy metal end, it was a shambles that had its moments, notably the coagulated, senseless wraiths of guitar-based noise in 'Which Dream Came True'.

Band Of Susans throw spanners in the works, as unique in their