

● Sex, drugs, death, religion, alienation. These are the things that KURT RALSKE's dreams are made of. But far from being a jacked-up, self-glorifying drama queen, he and his ULTRA VIVID SCENE are the genuine pose-free psychedelic pop article, says Roger Morton. Vivid colour shot by A J Barratt.

Suicidal junkie pervert Messiahs in shiny leather boots are two-a-penny in rock. It's the oldest cliché on the rock block.

They crawl out on stage, making a noise like a razored baboon on crack, conspicuously tap their forearm veins, slice up a few melons, and then proceed to have tearful, oral sex with whatever religious icon they've managed to borrow for the night.

Christ on the cross is best, but Virgin Marys, Popes or donkeys will do. Then they swan off back to the hotel for a beery slap up meal and a game of pool.

Nine times out of ten, when you get a taste of that particular combination of sex, smack, saviours and slit-wrists in your nostrils, you are about to be cheated.

Just occasionally, however, you come across someone who can dip into rock's rag bag of old tricks and come out with something dignified, non-historical and yet still powerful. Please allow me to re-introduce you to Kurt Ralske, singer, musical mainstay and wary spokesperson for Ultra Vivid Scene.

A mid-twenties, New York born Jewish Catholic, Ralske studied jazz improvisation at Berklee College Of Music, Boston. In the early '80s he knocked around with New York experimental bands and then in '86 he moved to London. In Stoke Newington he squatted, plotted and got involved with the My Bloody-Primal-Loop and Mary Chain set at Douglas Hart's 'Speed' club. Having secured a deal with 4AD, he then returned to New York to record what would become the spring '89 indie scene stealer, UVS's 'Mercy Seat' EP.

Two things were remarkable about 'Mercy Seat'. One, Ralske played all the instruments. Two, it was an immense, churning blur of fuzzed guitar and wasted-angel vocals which dealt with "the serenity of death" and didn't make you want to snigger. The first eponymously titled UVS LP, also put together by Ralske alone, was as gorgeously, uncompromisingly tranced out.

Last year Ralske started putting a band together which has now coalesced into Kurt, Byron Guthrie (drums), Anne Hollis (bass) and Collin Rae (guitar). The first collaborative UVS record, the 'Staring At The Sun' EP, came out in April, sounding poppier but no less intense, and now (after US dates with Ian McCulloch) Ralske and the band are touring the second album 'Joy 1967 - 1990'. Now why does that read like a tombstone?

In a London hotel lobby, Ralske buries himself in a leather chair. His lips are not blue, his pupils are not pin-sized, there are no syringes poking out of his top pocket. He is small, polite and talks like Andy Warhol's illegitimate son. "I actually had some sort of a perverse sex dream," he says, matter of factly, when I ask him what he woke up thinking about. Well that sounded normal enough. Then he started

SHOOTING UP THE DAISIES



Casket case Kurt Ralske

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to talk about the new album . . .

"IT'S A pretty much ironic title. It's not a very joyful record really." **What was uppermost in your mind when you were making it?** Ralske: "Mmmm . . . I think . . . I was thinking a lot about classic '60s pop songs, and why they're so much better than the music you hear today. That's one thing. I was also trying to keep a grip on my sanity, but that's nothing unusual." **That's your normal state?** "Erm . . . Yeah . . . But I had more fun making this record than the first one. The first one was sort of

do or die. I was alone in the studio for that, so I would say to myself 'If this vocal take doesn't work I'm going to go to the bathroom and eat a hundred aspirins.' " **Was it really that serious?** "Yeah. I sort of felt like I was trapped in the recording studio and had to record my way out of it. If I didn't manage to do it, I'd never be able to leave." **You've said that although the new album sounds more optimistic, it still doesn't offer any escape or redemption.** "Well, you can be very depressed and very desperate, but at the same time it carries the seeds of

something new. If you're just going along and everything seems OK, then sometimes that's a much worse state ultimately than if you're seemingly depressed. Sometimes what people consider bad states, depression and despair, good things can come from them." **Are the songs basically expressing common or garden alienation?** "I don't think that's such an unusual state. Maybe it is. I kind of step back from the songs and I look at them and they're kind of dark, some of them. I mean, there's five of them or so on this

record that are about suicide . . . huh, huh . . . I didn't plan it that way. I didn't say to myself 'Wow! Wouldn't it be cool to do a record like that'. It just happened that way." **There is an emotional paralysis in songs like 'Poison' and 'The Kindest Cut' which seems integral to Ralske's music, a kind of lack of commitment to anything.** "Well you could say that, and I do think that life isn't only about running out and drinking and having fun. That's an important part of it, but that's only part of it." **I mean I never had any screaming passions in front of the**

microphone, but catharsis doesn't have to be just going loud. It can be emotional and quiet. The record doesn't hammer people on the head and tell them what they should think and feel about it. A UVS record is a much more subtle experience, something that maybe asks a little bit more of you, but can give a whole lot more in return — some kind of faithful pet, huh, huh, huh."

RELIGION, WHEN it rears its thorny head in Ralske songs, is certainly never held up as a way out of emotional quicksand. The symbolism is never straightforward shock-rock tactics. On the fold-out inner poster images for 'Joy', Christ on the cross is up-staged by a rubber car tyre.

"I like religious imagery, because it's so easily twisted around. There's so much of it and it's really easy to make it ambiguous. You look at it and you think 'Oh, it's religious imagery', but also it might be something else at the same time."

Ralske is not about to pretend that he's breaking new ground with UVS, but at least he has a more thought out attitude to plugging into the '60s than most. **Could 'Joy' have been made in the '60s, or is there anything that makes it current?**

"It's hard not to be conscious of history and I don't think that's a bad thing. I think some of the best music made now is conscious of history, of the fact that people have been making pop records for 40 years at least, and I think with what I do there's a sort of self-consciousness that makes it ha, ha . . . 'now'."

HAVING BEEN told last year that the syringe in the sleeve photo-montage for the first UVS album had been provided by Kurt himself, and given the addiction imagery used in his songwriting, I asked Kurt how far the first album had been heroin linked. Ralske's air of studied detachment slipped a little.

"Are you asking me if I've ever taken heroin?" **OK. Have you ever taken heroin?**

"I don't think that's anybody's business. I don't think that a record is made better or worse by knowing about somebody's personality."

"I'm not interested in building any myth about me, about what a sleaze bag, or what a wimp I am. That's not why I'm doing this."

The first UVS single 'She Screamed' concerned itself with a girl who took so much Ecstasy she almost grinned herself to death. The most recent, 'Staring At The Sun' was, according to Kurt, to do with drug-type obsessiveness.

"Drugs as a metaphor, I like that a lot, because I think addiction is a really common phenomenon. Not only drug addiction, but you can be addicted to a person or an idea or a feeling. It's most obvious in someone who has a heroin addiction but you see people doing the same kinds of things in all sorts of situations. Most people's attitude to love is basically like that."

Do you ever think that despite your best efforts you might still be looked on as a weird, introverted psycho?

"Yeah. That's OK. Maybe it's all just a big act. Maybe I'm faking it."

For once that isn't the case. Hit me with a flower if this isn't the genuine pose-free article.