

THE CATALOGUE

FOR THE INDEPENDENT MUSIC TRADE

May 1990

Number 81 £1.50

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ULTRA VIVID SCENE

Kurt Ralske refuses to tell Richard Boon what he does in bed

Kurt Ralske is a very smart young man, currently, he tells me, softly, over the phone, "wearing very little."

This admission is prompted by the difficulty your reporter experienced in contacting him through the receptionist at Montreal's Manoir Lemoyne hotel, whose denial of Kurt's existence necessitated a call to obliging tour manager Drew Waters ("They're always doing that. Here, hold on, he's right across the hall, I'll get him. No... he might not be wearing anything. Try this other number").

This 25 year old, partly clad, native New Yorker (b. June 15, 1964, fact fans) has a rich and diverse musical pedigree; from his teenage studies in Jazz Improvisation at Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he switched from trumpet to self-taught guitar, through to his involvement with no wave, jazz, hardcore and pop outfits in New York, latterly with Crash and Nothing But Happiness, recording on the independent Justine label (licensed in the UK to Remorse, currently deleted). A background which more than equipped him to play all the instruments on his 4AD debut album as Ultra Vivid Scene. Now, Ultra Vivid Scene is a group, with an album, Joy 1967-1990, scheduled for release this month.

Joined by Byron Guthrie (drums), Anne Hollis (bass) and Collin Rae (rhythm guitar), we're speaking as Kurt is leading his combo on their first ever tour, 21 dates across the US and Canada supporting Ian McCulloch.

"It's pretty fun, so far. For us, it's sink or swim, never having played live before and now we're in front of one, two thousand people a night. It's going well, the learning never stops."

And what has Kurt learnt so far from the group and live situations?

"It's a totally different discipline. It's fun. Live, it's immediate, direct. Making a record can be very intellectual, at least for me it is; live it's blood, guts and sweat. Sparks fly. In recording, I like to have total control. Certainly I did on the first album. With the group, now, it's nice to be able to make mistakes and have accidents. Happy accidents. "But we're not a democracy yet. You can't be, with only one person writing. I prefer to think of it as a benevolent dictatorship. But live, the group doesn't sound like the record at all. I think it's boring to see a band just duplicate a record. It's better to take chances, try a couple of different things each night. That keeps it fresh and exciting. Obviously you can't do it for a whole set, just a couple of songs. There are so few groups who risk any improvisation or interplay live.

"In the 60s every group did. These days there's, you know, like Jane's Addiction. You can tell they're feeling it out as they go. And of course there's the Grateful Dead." Turning to the new album, Joy 1967-1990, Kurt opts for a track-by-track run through, after a fashion. Having had his worked tagged by NME's Stuart Macoane as "resonating with a most becoming vibe of suicide, hangovers, madness and weariness", he hides his intentions behind carefree use of this now widespread media cliché assessment, careful to keep his observations musical for the most part. The album title first?

"It's deliberately vague. I like the way it sounds like a catalogue or a compilation. It's a collection of songs, but it could be something written on a tombstone, for a girl called Joy."

IT HAPPENS EVERY TIME: "That's, uh, rock'n'roll... I'm not sure about that one. Let's move on."

STARING AT THE SUN: "That was inspired by The Byrds, and maybe The Beatles' Revolver or Rubber Soul, but somehow with a 90s feel."

THREE STARS: "A little sex. The title means nothing. Now I see lots of products in stores with 3 stars. People have suggested it's like the Trinity, but people should read their own meaning."

SPECIAL ONE: "That's Lou Reed. It's the most poppy. It's a suicide boogie. It features Kim Deal on additional vocals, courtesy of Elektra Records. I like those 60s' pop records with girl vocals. But Kim is never a backing singer. She's upfront, on stage, now and always. These existential questions... sometimes they're fun."

GREY TURNS WHITE: "It's dance music for the obese. I like that because none of the sounds seem like they belong together, the 60s tremelo organ and the feedback guitars."

POISON: "An introverted late night number that may or may not be about drugs."

GUILTY PLEASURE, with the refrain 'I found my sweetest treasure here in guilty pleasure': "Could be another S&M number. It's a big production number, very lush."

EXTRA ORDINARY: "That's the most retro sounding to me. 'You say you're not like all the rest/but you are' - it's about ambiguity, one of my favourite things in the world. Perfect ambiguity, hopefully."

"If you're going to make pop music there's only certain things that can be done"

BEAUTY #2: "I stole the title from Warhol. But it refers to titles on the first album. I liked the idea of calling a song #2 without there having been a #1. Featuring BJ Cole on pedal steel guitar."

THE KINDEST CUT: "One of my favourites. A very emotional little ditty. It's another little desperate S&M undirectional kamikaze number. 'The curse of tenderness' in the lyric is when love triumphs over desire and desire has to go take a cold shower."

PRAISE THE LOW: "When I was working on this I was listening a lot to The Beatles. I liked the idea of inserting one song on the album in a different genre, like George Harrison used to do with those Indian-sounding songs. Hugh Jones, our producer, had access to some Renaissance musicians, so we went for a medieval English folk sound. 'The Low'... it's the feeling you get that everything you think is right is wrong and you have to try to do something about it. It's about realising that your particular morality is merely making you stupid."

LIGHTNING "A little ditty about emotional suicide. Maybe about the beauty of destruction, or the possibility for self-renewal via destruction."

Returning to that NME tag, certainly justified by his lyrical preoccupations, Kurt claims to be comfortable with it. "I try not to take any of this crap to heart. I have a life and a vocation, there's bound to be an overlap. I'm thankful when the press get it right and make a connection. I'm more thankful when they get it wrong."

However, Kurt is on record (Melody Maker, May '89) as insisting that his personality and personal life has nothing to do with his work. Surely an implausibility, if not an impossibility?

"Well, obviously the work has to do with certain things I feel, and that's OK. But it's not when people want to know what I had for breakfast or do in bed."

So what did he have for breakfast?

"I haven't had it yet."

OK... so, what does he want?

"A virgin's blood," he laughs.

Kurt's latest collection of songs is marked by the economy and clarity of lyric that distinguishes the classic pop song, a simplicity of rhyme and structure that simultaneously compresses content while suggesting a resonant association of ideas. It's a neat trick and a fine accomplishment, achieved by few writers in the pop idiom. A brevity exemplified by the first-named of Kurt's heroes on 4AD's official Data File, Hank Williams (others are Miles Davis, Marquis de Sade, Suicide, Tom Waits, Velvet Underground, Jesus & Mary Chain).

"His seems to me to be the most perfect music imaginable. Great songs, great sounds and great integrity. Before pop stars, before videos, he was born a star. Chet Flippo's biography (Your Cheating Heart) was a fun book, though he, too, talked about what Hank and his wife did in bed although no-one else was there. The desperation in his voice is just wonderful. I don't aspire to that, but that integrity is an ideal I hold. It's impossible to speak so clearly because the world's so complicated these days. You can't just pick up your acoustic and do it. You have to pick up your Roland R8 or Atari 1040 and whatever you can manage.

"But, words that sound like they fell out of a box are the best ones, like some of Iggy Pop's. If you can get that simplicity and mean something, it's the best. Lou Reed's OK and John Cale similarly, but he's often pretentious. I live in fear of being seen as pretentious.

"Anybody, apart, that is, from Bon Jovi, could be seen one way or another, but if 'pretentious' is used to mean 'self-conscious', I would be guilty, I guess. For me, 'pretentious' means people who are in love with the smell of their own body odour, who feel that just because they did it, they're communicating.

"95% of what gets done these days is meaningless. I have to try especially hard to say anything at all."

On the road reading comprises the Led Zeppelin biography, Hammer Of The Gods, and Rimbaud's Illuminations; soundtrack is those old favourites, The Byrds and The Beatles, Madonna and Led Zeppelin. Is Kurt aware of how accurately his tastes conform to the now trite cliché of the classic outie rock'n'roll avant-gardist, a commonplace since Patti Smith careered onto stage with her raving intellectual enthusiasm for deviants and heroes, from rock and poetry?



Kurt Ralske (pic: Kevin Westenberg)

"Ah, Patti Smith would have been Madonna if she'd stayed in New York!" he laughs. "But, really, there's a lot in the records that speak for themselves. Obviously, I have to be aware of history, we all do. All the bands that are doing any interesting stuff have a definite consciousness of what's gone before.

"But the task is, to inject integrity, humanity and personality into it, to breathe life into sterile boundaries. If you're going to make pop music there's only certain things that can be done.

"I believe that what the artist feels privately is important to the world, but for the artist to make it, they have to use the language the world uses. But, you have to broaden that language by inventing your own syntax, by metaphor, as it were, for metaphors in common use. Then things get interesting." And to what does that process contribute?

"Well, change, I guess. Though these are strange times we live in. Nothing is natural. There are very few inspired people and very few things to inspire people. Change doesn't seem as possible now as it once did, in a way. Though things are changing. But if Eastern Europe wants nothing more than McDonalds, then there's no difference."

And, after the endless promotional round of interviews that constitute the work of popularising the pop artist's work, what is the question Kurt would most like to be asked?

"Ah... you got me on that one. I can think of a lot of questions I wouldn't like to be asked..."

But then you wouldn't say what they were.

"Right!"

Isn't there anything you would like to be seen to have said?

"Uh... How tall is Thurston Moore?"

Kurt Ralske is a very smart young man.

DISCOGRAPHY

She Screamed	3 track 12"/4 track CD	BAD806(CD)	Aug '88
Ultra Vivid Scene	14 track LP/15 track MC & CD	CAD(C)809(CD)	Oct '88
Mercy Seat	4 track 12"	BAD906	April '89
Something To Eat	free promotional 7"	AD908	July '89
Staring At The Sun	2 track 7"/4 track 12", MC & CD	(B)AD(C)0004(CD)	April '90
Joy 1967-1990	12 track LP, MC & CD	CAD(C)0005(CD)	May '90