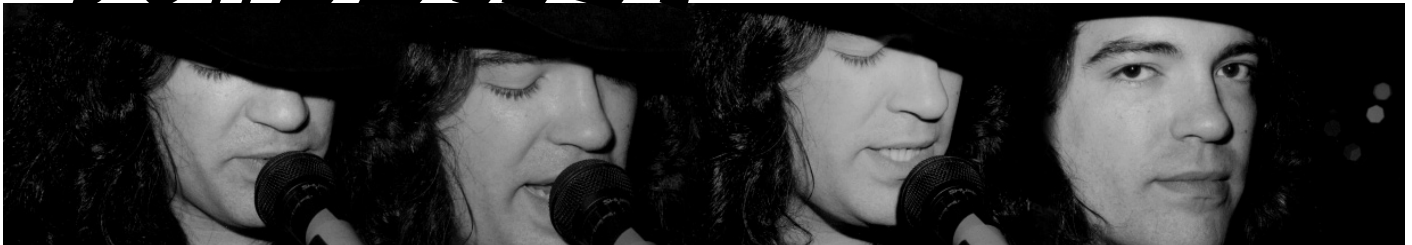

***Whilst Jon Auer is a block away buying
American cigarettes I'm trying to educate
the Pixies T-shirt wearing punter in
Portobello Road's Duke of Wellington.***

***'He looks like a rock star,' he'd said
as Auer, resplendent in Stetson,
left the pub. 'He is,' I replied.
'That's Jon Auer of The Posies.'***

'The Posers?' 'No, The Posies,' I say holding up the handful of albums for which Auer, along with Ken Stringfellow and a rotating rhythm section, is responsible. No glimmer of recognition from our supposedly enlightened 'music fan'. It's all so indicative of the success that steadfastly refused to embrace Auer and his band. An hour earlier he'd performed a solo in-store set that, boasting such masterpieces as Throwaway, Apology and Dream All Day, confirmed his place as a songwriter, singer and musician of the highest calibre. ¶ With the ironically titled Success, The Posies announced their demise as a unit. Auer's growing dissatisfaction eventually led to the split, one that will have broken many a heart, this writer's included. A legacy of five stunning albums and an abundance of B-side material would normally suffice but the Christmas 1999 release of a four CD box-set of previously unavailable tracks, demos and live takes should, hopefully, satisfy those of us for whom The Posies music has meant so much. Then there's the multiple side-projects and offshoots to consider. Plus, as I heard him telling a couple of fans post-performance, there's a Jon Auer solo album in the works. As good a place as any to start. I've been working on it basically all winter, he tells me. The Posies did their last European tour and, ever since then, I've been at home in my studio working on it. I've got about twenty songs; I've really put a lot into it. You were saying it was inspired by the break-up of

Jon **Auer**

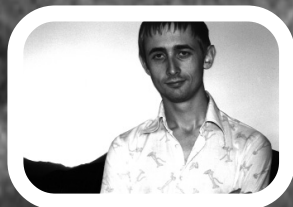


both the band and your marriage. Yeah, a lot of things. It was a big cycle and a lot of things ended. As cliché as it might sound, with the millennium coming and all that, life is changing in drastic ways and I couldn't help but notice that. It's just what came out. I've spent a lot of time writing – more than I ever have; cause to be honest, with The Posies, I never worked at it, it just happened. I'm really happy, I just gotta record it now. On his solo album, Ken covered Alex Chilton's Take Care and it struck me that he was addressing the song to you in light of the split. It's funny; you could say that about almost every Posies song; that an element of it was written about each other. He told me once that he wrote You're The Beautiful One for me when I wanted to quit the band a long time ago. You could almost read any song we wrote as to be to each other. We weren't like a typical couple of guys. We were really sensitive fellas growing up. We went to choir together; we learned to sing together. That's why we're so similar. But, as we got older, we realised that there's a lot of differences too. Given the longevity of the friendship, was the split amicable or something that you really didn't want to happen? I think Ken didn't want it to happen more than me because, for him, just being in a band and playing shows ... as long as that was going it didn't matter how people felt emotionally. For me, I gave it more than my fair shot. I did Amazing Disgrace, I even said 'let's do one more record' – Success - and that was probably way beyond what I should have put up with. But I'm glad I did it because I felt I owed myself and my friends, you know? Success includes some old songs, like Grow, Start A Life, Every Bitter Drop. Was it important to get these songs out? Did you think of Success as your swan-song? Absolutely. It was like 'let's just take twelve songs, some of them old, some of them new and do the versions that we want to do.' The new stuff I'm writing is the first record that won't have leftovers. Tell me what you can about the proposed box-set. We decided that we're gonna use as much stuff as possible that's not been heard before. You wouldn't believe how much shit there is. I finally went through all my dusty tape boxes. It's gonna be tough to decide. There must be, between Ken and I, ten or eleven songs that people haven't heard at all. The rest will be really cool demos where you get to hear where it came from and, beyond that, we're gonna use some bootleg live tapes, bootleg pictures. Ken and I will write the liner notes explaining ever song. It'll be a nice document. It's probably a source of frustration to you, but the unwillingness of a part of your fan base to accept the 'non-pop' side of

the band – those that want Dear 24, 25 and 26 – meant that parts of Amazing Disgrace - which for me is your finest record - were dismissed. Songs like Ontario, Everybody Is A Fucking Liar and Broken Record. It depends who you're talking to. When Frosting On The Beater came out Kerrang! magazine made it number 16 for the year. There's people who love the light pop and I've met more Goth girls who write me letters saying 'I've cried to Coming Right Along more times than you know.' Or How She Lied By Living. The thing about The Posies that makes us so good is that it's a mixed bag. It's only pisses me off when people say I must love The Shoes or The Raspberries more than any other band and how could I possibly like Iron Maiden or Motley Crüe? I love 70s rock as much as I like anything. I like jazz as much as I like anything. I'm a musician, I like music. There's all these cliques around power-pop that I've found and the only annoying thing about that is that



they won't embrace another part of what we do, like you said. It's just as exclusive as people saying they don't like pop music because they like rap. Is the Big Star tribute ever coming out? Hopefully. We did a great version of What's Going Ahn. I don't know if it will ever see the light of day. There's a new Big Star song that Ken and I actually wrote with Jody and Alex that'll be on there too. And how about a Big Star studio record? I wouldn't be surprised; I'd be there in a second. Alex would have to be into it. The truth of the matter is he's one of the greatest guitar players and the greatest singers and one of the greatest guys I've ever met, really. But he'd rather go read a book than deal with the Big Star hype, you know? I'm surprised by how many people I've spoken with have been so positive about working with major labels. Your experience seems to have been the reverse. You've talked of lack of support and promotion. They wouldn't even give us five grand to make a video. The problem for us in The Posies, since we're so diverse and there's two guys that sing they can't figure out how to be creative with it. I don't care 'cause I never had a day job but I still get to do what I want to do and I will for as long as I want to work at it. So I've got a career. That being said we were just as capricious and unpredictable. We went through three different managers, we had a hard time getting a consensus on things. What I'm trying to say is that the amount of talent that was in The Posies – you don't find that many bands that have that much talent and it's really hard to contain that and it's hard to promote that amount of talent. For a band with so much talent are you not bitter that you never got the recognition you deserved? No, I'm not. I was jaded for a while but it had nothing to do with not being recognised; it had more to do with dealing with major labels, more to do with a detached lifestyle, dealing with people you didn't know. But fuck, no man. I'm really lucky; I still get giddy from it. I might be driving in a van in the middle of the night and I might just look around and think 'Wow, I'm in the middle of a foreign country on my way to a rock show where people are coming to see me play and I'm getting paid for it.' I could be digging ditches, so that's my attitude. To end, do you have a favourite Posies record? Frosting On The Beater. My favourite tour ever was one of Europe opening for Teenage Fanclub for two months during Frosting On The Beater. We were young, we were on fire and it was awesome. I couldn't pick a better time in my life. Except maybe now.



The Divine Comedy

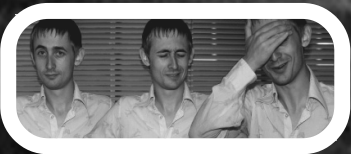
INTERVIEW mike
PHOTOGRAPHY paul

Fin de Siècle. It's one of those phrases, along with 'alma mater' and 'joie de vivre' that only trips comfortably off the tongue of a certain kind of person. The kind of person who has champagne and strawberries served to them in bed, before rising around two to spend a relaxed afternoon lounging in a smoking jacket, inhaling Gauloise Blondes through a cigarette holder and reading the diaries of Anaïs Nin with a sardonic smile. It's also the title of the new album by the Divine Comedy, a band whose oh-so-bohemian seeming frontman has worked hard to maintain the image of the witty sophisticate, to the extent that he's starting to fear becoming a caricature of himself. The image is, as he will say later, 'completely contrived' – a fact which he drives home by announcing that he's 'off to Sainburys once he's finished here' – and yet he's keen to keep the look alive, at least for the duration of this album (our photographer, Paul, has been told that he can only take head shots because Neil's not wearing his suit today). It's late in the afternoon; it's been a long day for everyone and now, as Christopher Morris might say, it's raining its arse off. I'm not to take too long. So ten seconds through the door, I've already apologised and promised to keep it short. I'm number thirteen; the one face-to-face interview, slotted in at the very end of a day of phoners during which, so far, twelve journalists from twelve different magazines have asked twelve sets of nigh on identical questions, to which Neil Hannon – for it is he – has had to come up with twelve sets of answers, carefully trying to vary the replies he gives in an attempt to keep the writers happy and himself interested. And he's terribly tired. I wish that I could promise to be more original than the others, but I fear that it may not be so.

Everybody always says to me, whenever I complain about anything, 'Well you asked to be in a band', you know, 'you asked to be famous' I don't get the logic of that personally. Do you not go along with the whole press routine then? No, I don't mind it – I think I have the absolute right to moan about it though. It's like, everybody moans about their job. Let's talk about the album then. What did you have in mind when you started work on it? I think I had more in mind when I was writing it than when I was *thinking* about writing it. I thought it would be more Kurt Weil, Jacques Brel, but in the end it turned out more Faith No More! So there was a plan from the start. There's this Brel album right – I don't even know if it's a proper album or whether it was put together after the event, but it's got this sort of... I was obsessed with this album for a very long time even though I couldn't understand a word of it, you know, and I was thinking there's ten perfect tracks on this and I'd love to just make an album with, like, ten perfect tracks. I'm not sure I'd go so far as perfection. *Fin de Siècle*, arguably, is a little more current affairs than any of its predecessors – it comments on the death of Diana, the futility of the troubles in Ireland, and the confusion of sexual politics – and yet it is a little less 'pop' than, say, *Everybody Knows (Except You)* or *Becoming More Like Alfie*. I'm not completely sure I get it from listening to the album, but the press material gets a lot of mileage out of the idea that you're moving in a new, darker direction, and admittedly some of the songs are a *little* less immediate than your more recent offerings. Do you feel that there's an overarching, darker mood to the record? If so, what does it say about what you've done before? Well I mean, a lot of the old stuff was pretty dark as well, in it's own way, but everyone looks



The Divine Comedy



straight past that to the smoking jacket and the cigarette holder and all that bollocks. But I brought that upon myself. I suddenly realised that people would get off on that image, so we went for it totally, got the roses out and the champagne and everything. The image is pretty contrived, then. Oh it's totally contrived. I mean, I would never dress like that, for goodness sake! I have to say I'm a bit disappointed - I think it adds something. I mean, I don't mind it, it's fun to do, but it's had its day, you know. If I kept doing that I'd become a big cartoon. But having written songs like *The Booklovers* (from 1994's *'Promenade'*), do you think you'll have a problem moving away from the whole, kinda bohemian thing? Er, I don't know. I mean the previous albums to *Casanova*, I always wore a black suit and black tie, much like what I'm wearing at the moment - we'll, not *at the moment* but for the album - so really I went back to that for this album because I couldn't think of anything else to do. The reason I wore that in the first place was because I looked awful in jeans and a T-shirt and I wanted something that was so, sort of, anonymous that it would be less about me and more about the music. In the end it didn't really turn out that way and people just thought 'he's a natty dresser, isn't he'. It's funny, I was always a dishevelled wreck. You've had more than just a thing or two to say about the retro thing at the moment ('a bunch of retro crap'), but you still draw strong influences from past artists, and I'm sitting here opposite someone in a faded pink panther shirt... It's not that I have a problem looking to the past for ideas, it's the problem of bands taking one era wholesale and just reproducing it lock stock and barrel. Um, the only way music progresses, or any artform progresses, is by sort of cross pollination and mixing things up and finding something new out of that, and then that gets mixed up with something else and so on and so forth. Rock and Roll wouldn't exist if country and rhythm and blues hadn't got it together, so I'm just trying to take it all forward a little bit. With the title of the album you're obviously looking ahead. Do you really feel that we're on the verge of something momentous? No, it's the absolute antithesis of what I'm writing about. It's more about other people's angst really, and it's more about the end of the century being a good excuse to have a look around and observe. I mean, the only song that's really about the end of the millennium is 'Here Comes the Flood' and that's more about Hollywood's idea of the apocalypse. It interests me... I don't know if these big, huge ridiculous films are meant to scare us or whether they're trying to reflect our fear, or whether they're just scared *themselves*. The one thing I do know is that if there's one place on earth that's got anything to be scared about, it's L.A., because it's got nothing going for it whatsoever. That song seems to draw strongly on the sound of Broadway musicals... I mean, I hate most musicals. Certainly everything since '65, '70, has been just total balls, really. But that doesn't mean I can't use it. I'm not sort of touting for business with my albums, the albums are an art in themselves, and therefore I'm just using these ideas to illuminate what I'm trying to say. I'm not trying to say 'look how clever I am'. ¶ If I'm honest, I'm not fully sure what the *Divine Comedy* is trying to say. The philosophy behind the music seems to be built on contradiction: it is fiercely non-retro, yet it revels in its musical lineage; the pomp, the style of the band lending an air of bohemian importance, yet that image is window dressing. Neil Hannon may not be trying to say 'look how clever I am', though, from the music, you are free to infer that. And these inherent contradictions suggest that the new album is precisely what it claims, not to *represent*, but to describe or to observe: a confusion, a wit, a humour and an expectant desire for change that is symptomatically fin de siècle.

South London trio The Hank Dogs have recently returned from their first sojourn to the United States. An oft-delayed meeting has finally transpired and I've fended off the lapping tongue, scampering paws and wagging tail of their mischievous canine long enough to accept the offer of tea and ask for a few reminiscences from their Atlantic crossing. Lily implies her father was somewhat besotted with an automobile (Oh yeah, the Chevy Blazer ...), but Andy, quick to grasp some musical integrity, suggests that the prestigious slot at Seattle's Bumbershoot Festival opening for Joan Baez would top his list. Piano, Andy's partner and fellow acoustic guitar player, agrees. Definitely. The highlight of our whole career. Lily (accordion - percussion -vocals) concurs. It was an emotional moment when we walked on stage with her. It's with genuine warmth that the trio recounts their tale, Andy's joy still evident as he continues; They all stood up and carried on clapping. And we'd already got an encore, which was surprising because we were supporting a really big act, and then Joe [Boyd] came in the dressing room afterwards and said 'You really kicked some ass!' inducing a bout of laughter. And we felt so pleased really, because he was so proud of us, and, you know we were just full-on that night and the American part of the record company were there. / We achieved what we set out to achieve, really,

but even better, beams Piano. We wanted to get the record company on our side. It was like magic. / The American audience really liked us because they could see how much we enjoyed being there, says Andy, continuing to extol the virtues of our habitually derided

Western cousins. We like America so much, but we weren't sure how they'd react to Limeys playing their music and wearing Stetsons and stuff like that. I mean, when we went on stage at Portland - our first day there, our first gig and we were at this 5000 people gig with Jethro Tull - I said 'This is my first day in the United States of America', and they erupted! It's a reaction in stark contrast to the restrained politeness of their countrymen. You just don't get that in England, explains Lily, We've never experienced anything like it; to be a completely unknown support band, to walk on the stage and there's a roar... / Thing is, continues Andy, I do a little guitar bit in 'I'm an Angel', and they applaud in the middle of the song! / [The Americans] love it when you go up to the front of the stage, continues Lily, but in England, they kind of think 'oh ...' / ... you bleeding poser. ¶ The whole trip seems to have paid off for the group who, as I type, are a few days away from returning to the US for a full support tour with Ms Baez. But let's not assume that the Hank Dogs have been neglected by their compatriots. The respectful silence that provides the necessary ambience to a Hank Dogs gig is testament to that. Holding an audience so captivated would seem an easy task for this gifted trio. Yet it's a talent that's taken time to nurture. Before, when we used to go on with just two acoustic guitars and a couple of voices, it was really asking people to take notice of you, acknowledges Andy. But now, we go on and we really know it's a whole band up there. You feel confident going on with that sound. And if one person walks out of that audience, it's really unusual, even when you're a supporting band and no one's ever heard about you. I think we have a lot of confidence when we walk on stage that we can entertain them, and that's important. ¶ Given the shrouded history of the band - sketchy details exist, Andy's Sex Pistols connection seemingly at odds with the neo-folk emanating from his acoustic for one - the origin of their sound is a perplexing one to pre-empt. We were listening to new country music a lot when we first started, says Andy attempting to clarify its inspiration. You know, Steve Earle, Townes Van Zandt even people like the Waterboys or Clannad, stuff like that. And then I started playing more fingerstyle guitar and Lily - she's not exactly classically trained



- sings these purest harmonies. Having been privileged to hear some demos preceding the contract-securing 'Boyd tape', the country influence evident early in their development was soon superseded by the ethereal qualities emanating from Piano's narratives, Lily's haunting harmonies and Andy's exceptional guitar style. ¶ Joe Boyd's name has become synonymous with the finest folk music that Britain has had to offer, most obviously the enigmatic and tragic figures of Sandy

interview **Matt**
photography **Paul**

Denny and Nick Drake. It's a connection that has both flattered and bemused the Hank Dogs. I actually don't like that, that kind of weak, folk-rock, confesses Andy. It really is one of my least favourite kinds of music. Like Fairport Convention. We're always compared to Fairport Convention, but that's because of Joe Boyd. But, I suppose, early Sandy Denny stuff, you could say that we are like that, but it's that fiddle and drum thing, drives me round the bend. So when people say 'You're like Fairport Convention ...' we don't! Please! ¶ It seems the band are comfortable living up to the legend of Boyd. We just carried on as we were, really, insists Lily. Joe never made us feel [any pressure], did he? / I felt for Joe, because he's gone out on a limb and signed us, and we were the first English contemporary band that he'd signed in thirty years, says Andy. But I think we felt really confident that we were capable of making a good record. And, with Bareback, they delivered a genuinely timeless collection of modern folk songs, an album that defies the easy categorisation of its supposed predecessors. But it wasn't an effortless task; aborted sessions with Dave Mattacks and other production problems were overcome, the group able to retain their essence amid pressure to add more sounds and textures. Ultimately the additional instruments were played by close friends and not by the proposed session players. You can't play with people you haven't played with before, states Piano. They wouldn't even come and meet us, the day before, agrees Andy. We just felt; they didn't even know us, let alone our songs! How can we play with people like that? It's not what we're about. So once we got that out of the way, it was clear that we had to go in the direction that we wanted. The resultant sound is, it's fair to say, unique. And it feels so natural, so . . . right. Like theirs is an instinctive, singular thought. You can build a song, and it builds up, and it's suddenly got a shell around it, and that's it, that's the atmosphere of the song, says Andy. We spend a lot of time and let it grow, it's sort of an organic thing ... It grows, you give it space, and you don't say 'right, we've gotta finish this song today!' or anything like that. We've never had any kind of pressure like that. ¶ No less an authority than Keith Richards is among those who subscribe to the



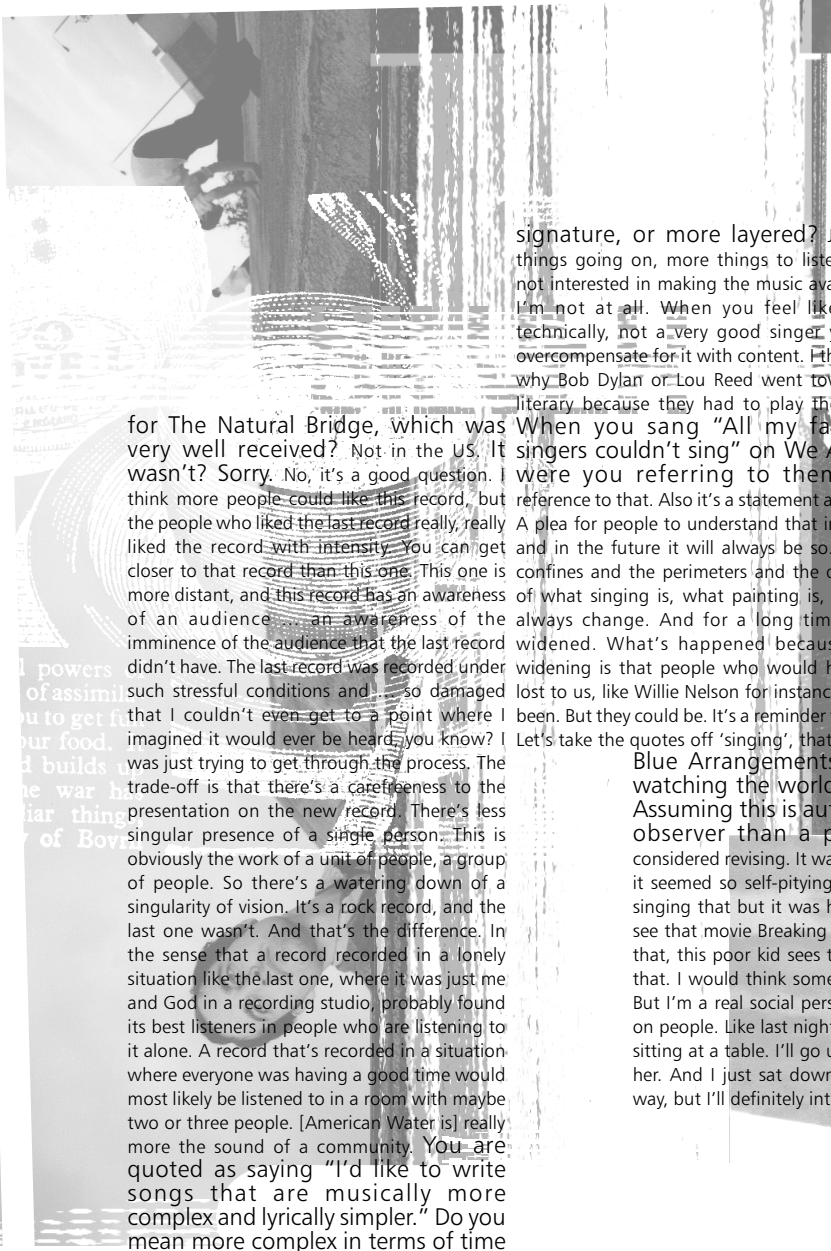
hank dogs
hank dogs

theory that great songwriters have a natural antenna that picks up songs that float in the ether - perhaps someone should tell him to invest in a new model - and the Hank Dogs would seem to be among those to whom a song's gestation and birth are intuitive. I'd just started writing a song, Piano begins, and I was getting quite excited about it - it had all these key changes - but it was not quite happening. But then, when I was in the bath, I got his melody in my head. And that whole other idea had just fallen away, and I had this one idea which I liked, and I just could not stop singing. And that, to me, is inspiration, no doubt. It's like a magical process you have to go through and something great happens. Andy nods. Let go of it, and let it arrive. ¶ Admittedly I entered the Hank Dogs world with reservations that any idyllic notion of their fragile, intangible music would be corrupted by the discovery of a battered 'Play Folk In A Day' paperback hurriedly tucked behind an embroidered cushion. However, their desire to avoid the pitfalls of 'da music biz' would seem to go hand in hand with an intrinsic ability to write and perform peerlessly affecting music.



David Berman} Let's say you're a manic depressive or something and six months of the year you're manic, and for six months of the year you're depressed. Let's say it's split up in, like, one-month blocks – this is hypothetical – and you don't know when it's going to happen. You'll see about two months of mania, a month of depression, three months of mania, blah, blah, and you don't know what's going to happen. But you're writing songs all along. You set up a recording date for three months from now, and you have no idea when you go in whether you'll be in this complete mania or this complete depression, this hypothetical person. Those are two different records. If there's a parallel universe then, in one of them, he's in a manic phase and interprets his song and then he goes into the other universe, plays in his depressive phase and he interprets his song. Two different records you know, but we can only live with the idea that there's one. The one you have down, you know. And then, even after that, even after the record's done, well, there are all the other sequences, you know? The idea for a minute, as a fan, that there could have been this other sequence that was better. It would seem like it was a failure or, like, it hadn't reached its potential. The same principle applies to the listener, too. The mental and physical environment when you first hear a record colours your future perception of it. There is a multitude of variables. Which may affect whether you'll ever hear it again. And the second time it could've been something that really, you know, changed you. If music can change somebody. Obviously your lyrics are the primary focus of your records, but American Water's instrumentation is much more of a factor than your previous material. Did you set out to prove you're a musician as well as a poet? Definitely, yeah. We even

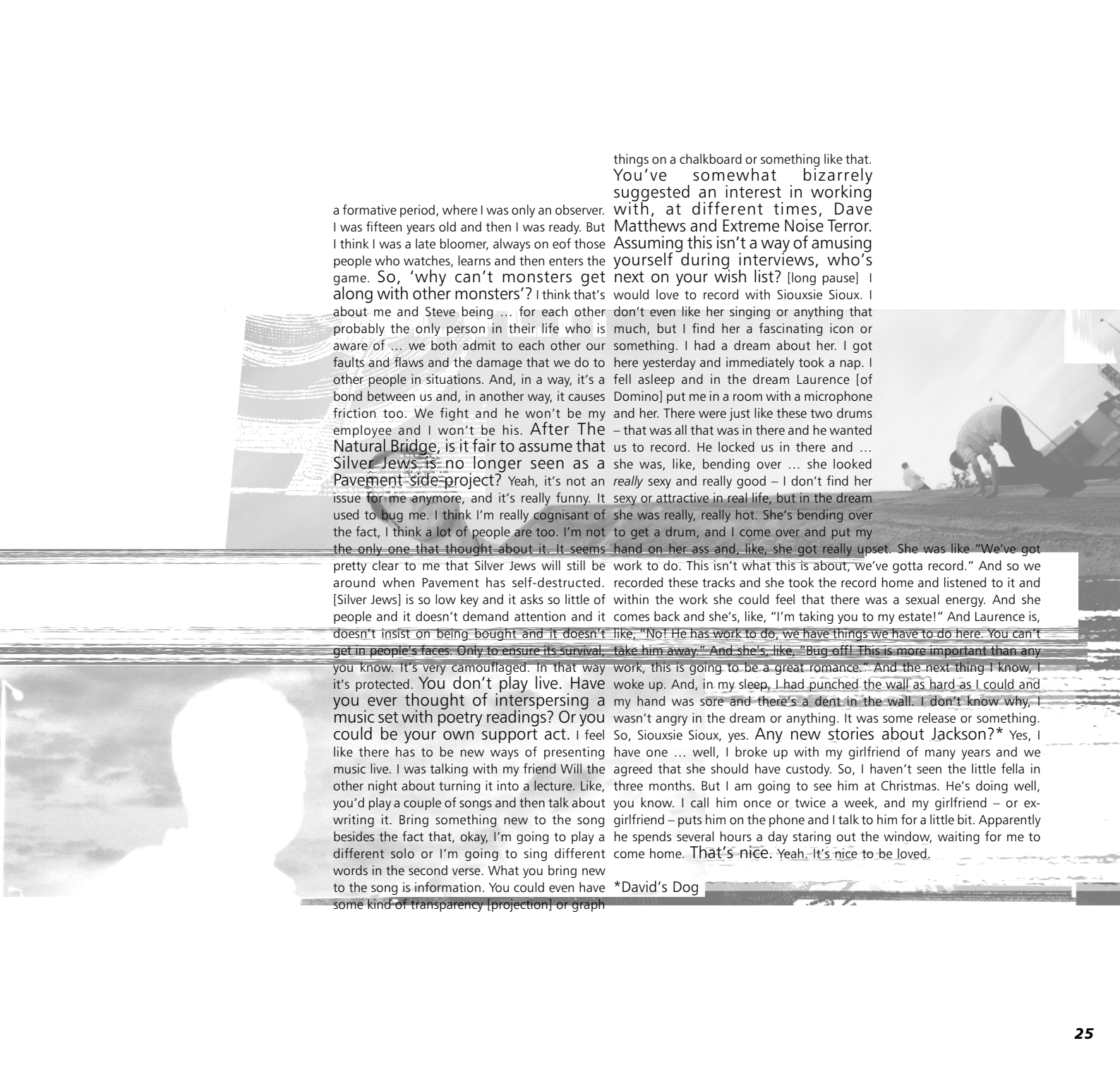
had an instrumental break. I didn't know that was going to happen. So you didn't go into the studio with a plan? No, it was only because the band was so good you know? And we practised a lot. We practised for eight straight days, three hours a day, and the songs ... I was like, this isn't going to be one of those records where the music is a pedestal for the singing. There's other things in here and let's let them happen. I'm happy with that. Certainly with The Natural Bridge you were lumped in with many others among the alt.country genre that sprung up, or was invented. American Water is less easy to categorise. Was this a direct reaction to being pigeonholed or would this record have turned out the same regardless? I don't think we have to do that, especially because people don't think of us that way in the States. I'm not saying that I wouldn't react to a pigeonhole ... I would, I'm not above that. But, in this case, it wasn't that at all. If it sounds good it's going to go in that direction. Before it all happens, there's just the songs. Just put the people in the room and see what they do with them. I want them to write their own parts. I mean, I'll guide them, like 'I want you to play this piano like it's your first day back after a 12 month term in Vietnam. And you're broken and you're shattered.' That's the only way I can talk, you know? There was a big screen TV in the studio, right where we were playing. I'd put on different things and pick a channel for the song that seemed like it was going to give it the proper ... push. Would your lyrics adapt in the studio, depending on musical mood shifts? Yeah, you tinker when you're in the studio. We were doing Send In The Clouds and there's a line 'Seventeen doctors couldn't decide whether I should be allowed in the game'. We were doing a take and Steve [Malkmus] is trying to fuck with me and he kept singing 'gime' like in a Jagger way, or something. And these verses I want us to sing exactly together, [he's] going to be a little lower in the mix, but I want us to be singing the same words at the same times, in total sequence. So we have to decide whether it's going to be 'game' or 'gime'. And we sat there for twenty minutes talking about it and then, finally, have us swayed into 'gime'. Some days I wish I'd said 'game'. In the fickle world of music, do you expect a similar level of praise for American Water as you received



for The Natural Bridge, which was very well received? Not in the US. It wasn't? Sorry. No, it's a good question. I think more people could like this record, but the people who liked the last record really, really liked the record with intensity. You can get closer to that record than this one. This one is more distant, and this record has an awareness of an audience... an awareness of the imminence of the audience that the last record didn't have. The last record was recorded under such stressful conditions and... so damaged that I couldn't even get to a point where I imagined it would ever be heard, you know? I was just trying to get through the process. The trade-off is that there's a carefreeness to the presentation on the new record. There's less singular presence of a single person. This is obviously the work of a unit of people, a group of people. So there's a watering down of a singularity of vision. It's a rock record, and the last one wasn't. And that's the difference. In the sense that a record recorded in a lonely situation like the last one, where it was just me and God in a recording studio, probably found its best listeners in people who are listening to it alone. A record that's recorded in a situation where everyone was having a good time would most likely be listened to in a room with maybe two or three people. [American Water is] really more the sound of a community. You are quoted as saying "I'd like to write songs that are musically more complex and lyrically simpler." Do you mean more complex in terms of time

signature, or more layered? Just more things going on, more things to listen to. I'm not interested in making the music avant-garde. I'm not at all. When you feel like you're, technically, not a very good singer, you must overcompensate for it with content. I think that's why Bob Dylan or Lou Reed went towards the literary because they had to play their angle. When you sang "All my favourite singers couldn't sing" on We Are Real were you referring to them? It's a reference to that. Also it's a statement and a plea. A plea for people to understand that in the past and in the future it will always be so. That the confines and the perimeters and the definitions of what singing is, what painting is, whatever, always change. And for a long time they've widened. What's happened because of the widening is that people who would have been lost to us, like Willie Nelson for instance, haven't been. But they could be. It's a reminder to people. Let's take the quotes off 'singing', that's all. On

Blue Arrangements you sing "Sometimes I feel like I'm watching the world and the world is watching me back". Assuming this is autobiographical, do you feel more like an observer than a participant? That was something I actually considered revising. It was actually hard to write that and sing that because it seemed so self-pitying. I'm very down on self-pity. I had a tough time singing that but it was honest to the character of the song. Did you ever see that movie Breaking Away? Cycling movie? It was supposed to be like that, this poor kid sees this society girl... I would never say anything like that. I would think something like that but I would never say it out loud. But I'm a real social person and I would even go so far as to push myself on people. Like last night I was in a bar – a pub – and there were two girls sitting at a table. I'll go up to any woman in the world and start talking to her. And I just sat down and said 'Hi, I'm David'. That's not the English way, but I'll definitely intrude. There was a certain time in my life, probably




a formative period, where I was only an observer. I was fifteen years old and then I was ready. But I think I was a late bloomer, always on eof those people who watches, learns and then enters the game. So, 'why can't monsters get along with other monsters'? I think that's about me and Steve being ... for each other probably the only person in their life who is aware of ... we both admit to each other our faults and flaws and the damage that we do to other people in situations. And, in a way, it's a bond between us and, in another way, it causes friction too. We fight and he won't be my employee and I won't be his. After *The Natural Bridge*, is it fair to assume that *Silver Jews* is no longer seen as a *Pavement* side-project? Yeah, it's not an issue for me anymore, and it's really funny. It used to bug me. I think I'm really cognisant of the fact, I think a lot of people are too. I'm not the only one that thought about it. It seems pretty clear to me that *Silver Jews* will still be around when *Pavement* has self-destructed. [*Silver Jews*] is so low key and it asks so little of people and it doesn't demand attention and it doesn't insist on being bought and it doesn't get in people's faces. Only to ensure its survival, you know. It's very camouflaged. In that way it's protected. You don't play live. Have you ever thought of interspersing a music set with poetry readings? Or you could be your own support act. I feel like there has to be new ways of presenting music live. I was talking with my friend Will the other night about turning it into a lecture. Like, you'd play a couple of songs and then talk about writing it. Bring something new to the song besides the fact that, okay, I'm going to play a different solo or I'm going to sing different words in the second verse. What you bring new to the song is information. You could even have some kind of transparency [projection] or graph

things on a chalkboard or something like that. You've somewhat bizarrely suggested an interest in working with, at different times, Dave Matthews and Extreme Noise Terror. Assuming this isn't a way of amusing yourself during interviews, who's next on your wish list? [long pause] I would love to record with Siouxsie Sioux. I don't even like her singing or anything that much, but I find her a fascinating icon or something. I had a dream about her. I got here yesterday and immediately took a nap. I fell asleep and in the dream Laurence [of Domino] put me in a room with a microphone and her. There were just like these two drums – that was all that was in there and he wanted us to record. He locked us in there and ... she was, like, bending over ... she looked *really* sexy and really good – I don't find her sexy or attractive in real life, but in the dream she was really, really hot. She's bending over to get a drum, and I come over and put my hand on her ass and, like, she got really upset. She was like "We've got work to do. This isn't what this is about, we've gotta record." And so we recorded these tracks and she took the record home and listened to it and within the work she could feel that there was a sexual energy. And she comes back and she's, like, "I'm taking you to my estate!" And Laurence is, like, "No! He has work to do, we have things we have to do here. You can't take him away." And she's, like, "Bug off! This is more important than any work, this is going to be a great romance." And the next thing I know, I woke up. And, in my sleep, I had punched the wall as hard as I could and my hand was sore and there's a dent in the wall. I don't know why, I wasn't angry in the dream or anything. It was some release or something. So, Siouxsie Sioux, yes. Any new stories about Jackson? * Yes, I have one ... well, I broke up with my girlfriend of many years and we agreed that she should have custody. So, I haven't seen the little fella in three months. But I am going to see him at Christmas. He's doing well, you know. I call him once or twice a week, and my girlfriend – or ex-girlfriend – puts him on the phone and I talk to him for a little bit. Apparently he spends several hours a day staring out the window, waiting for me to come home. That's nice. Yeah. It's nice to be loved.

*David's Dog

elliott smith





I've known Elliott for a long time. And when I first met him I thought he was a talented musician – but I know a lot of talented musicians; I never thought he was the MOST talented or anything. But he's just pushed himself and grown as a musician pretty intensely over the years and I've been able to watch it from close range and that's extremely instructive – musically – but it's also gratifying to see a friend and associate pick himself up like that and get a wider recognition.

That was Sam Coomes of Quasi reflecting on the success of his friend Elliott Smith. A man who, at the time of the following conversation, was awaiting the major label release of XO and was coming down from the adulation bestowed upon him following the Oscar nomination – and subsequent performance in front of millions of his song Miss Misery from the Good Will Hunting soundtrack. Just as the CWAS star entered free-fall, Smith's was about to break through the stratosphere. The meeting was very low-key. Minutes before our formal introduction – Smith resplendent in figure-hugging Commodores sweatshirt offering a hand and a simple 'Hi, I'm Elliott' – Paul and I had been wincing in the Universal Records lavatory unaware that our subject was busy in the next cubicle. You probably didn't need to know that. A relocation to a local eatery later, over coffee and cokes, we begin.

XO is, ultimately, a pop record. Do you think it will surprise people who have you tagged as an introverted singer-songwriter? It's just another thing to do and if it disrupts the little definition, all the better. You said you didn't want to make the same record twice and you clearly haven't. Will this be an ongoing philosophy? If I can't do that then I'll probably have to quit. I don't know where I'm going but that's best, though. You play piano on the record, any chance we'll see you play one on stage? Very little. Most places don't have a piano and also, if you sit down at a piano, that calls up Billy Joel or Elton John. But that's a good reason to do it, just to try to blow that up. But, who knows? So, you're major label property now. Was the Dreamworks deal the culmination of a bidding war, like your friend Mary Lou Lord? No, there wasn't a bidding war. I didn't want there to be one. They get really ugly and people's feelings get hurt. No, I was in a band that broke up [Heatmiser] and we were on Virgin and they had a claim to me after that. So Dreamworks bought me out of that. I couldn't stay on the label I was on either way, so ... You'd already started on the follow-up to Either/Or before the deal was made? I was making up songs for it but I thought it was going to be on Kill Rock Stars again, but that wasn't possible. There was no pressure from the label to make this a hit? No interference? They came by every week or so and seemed happy and went away. They didn't put any pressure on me at all. There are no singles planned for the US, which is unusual. I don't hear anything on it that's gonna sound appropriate next to stuff they play on the radio. I didn't think about it when I was making the record. There are no 'No Name' songs on this album. Is it the end of a trend? Well there's a couple of Waltzes on there, but I thought I'd give the little device a break. I hear you've been listening to a lot of British music lately, The Kinks, The Beatles? Yeah, I've liked that since I was a kid. But trying to have more instruments like that than before. There seems to be a hint of the Beach Boys on Bled White and I Didn't Understand. Any direct influence from them? No, I didn't think about the Beach Boys. I liked some songs on Pet Sounds but it took me a while to come around to them because of all their songs about cars and surfing. It's a little too all-American for me. But they're really musical. I like that. Your first two London shows were both solo and acoustic. You seemed a little unsure of the response, asking if everyone was OK. I almost always ask the audience if they're OK. I don't really know what the point of asking them that is because I can't do anything about it if they're not. I never used to talk, I used to be too uptight to talk at shows but now I do a little bit. It just makes things a little bit... more... normal. They were fun shows. I had no idea there'd be so many people as that. I thought there'd be like 10 or 20. And no one asked for Miss Misery. We sense you're uncomfortable playing that song. I don't really play it anymore. Right now it seems like it belongs to... it's associated with a weird parade of celebrity. I'm just gonna let it rest in peace at the Oscars. Excuse the weak link, but the song Pictures of Me talks of 'flirting with the flicks.' Was that a reference to your work on Good Will Hunting? No, that song was more about seeing people on movies and TV do really shitty things... Somebody can do something good or bad and, of course, you can too. So it's just about it being a drag to be reminded constantly what assholes people can be to each other. It didn't come off sounding like that I guess. It sounds like I'm tired of having my picture taken. You said after playing Needle in the Hay, upstairs at The Garage, 'this next song cancels that one out' before playing Say Yes. Discuss. Well, Needle in the Hay is, for me, the darkest one and it's a big 'fuck you' song to anybody and everybody. Whereas Say Yes is, like, a love song and my mood was completely reversed. Say Yes was written about someone particular and I almost never do that. I was really in love



with someone. It's a pretty hopeful way to end the album. Why are there no lyrics to Cupid's Trick on the sleeve? Because they weren't very good! [laughs] I couldn't remember Rose Parade is in Portland and I was supposed to describe it accurately but made them up when I was in a state and they didn't make any sense later. They also weren't there because that song isn't about the words; it's about the way around, making 'em make more sense but it just killed it. I just left 'em. What are you singing on the chorus? That's why I didn't print the lyrics! [laughs] It sounds like 'sugar me up', is it 'sugar something'? Yeah, but I can't say because it's too stupid. I have no idea what I meant by it. At the time it made perfect sense but now I just don't want anybody to know. Besides your own solo work and Heatmiser, you've played and sang on records by Mary Lou Lord, Pete Krebs, Birdog and Lois. Do you consider these people your contemporaries and are they part of a 'community'? Yeah, they're all friends of mine. We all lived in the same part of the country at the time. But none of the five of us live in the same place anymore. Do you imagine continuing with similar collaborations? It's fun to make music with other people. Especially now I'm not in a band. Are there any similar projects unreleased at this time? Jon Brion [ex-Grays and collaborator of Aimee Mann, Eels, Jellyfish etc] sang on a song that will be on the next record and I might do something with Beck sometime, but no definite plans. How would you gauge the influence of your environment on your writing? You've spent time in Dallas, Portland and, now, New York. I don't know. They're all different places and you can't live there without feeling different. New York's a lot more manic but I don't feel more wound-up there.

Tell us about Rose Parade. The Rose Parade is in Portland and I was supposed to describe it accurately but the point of it wasn't to describe the Parade. It was supposed to be an allegory for any pompous parade or self-congratulatory venture, sort of like...

The Oscars. Yeah, for example. **Was the Oscars performance a very long two and a half minutes for you?** It seemed like it was happening in slow motion. It was really weird. It wasn't bad but it wasn't something I'd want to do again. But it was kind of fun in its way. I was prepared to keep a lot of distance from Celine Dion. I thought she'd blow in with her bodyguards and be a weird superstar to everybody. But she wasn't like that at all. She really disarmed me and won me over. But it's a weird situation. **Did you ever consider the likelihood of that situation when you were writing Miss Misery?** A couple of people, joking around, were like 'Miramax wants you to write a song for the movie because you can't be nominated for an Oscar if the song came out on a record before.' And maybe that was their motivation, but Gus [van Sant] wanted me to write a song for the movie because he thought it would be nice. People were joking 'you'll be playing this on television'. It was a total shock. **Was there ever a time you thought you wouldn't do it?** Yeah, right at first. I thought 'I don't think that's a good idea.' But they said if I didn't sing it... like Richard Marx! **They might as well have put a gun to your head.** It was like, 'Well, then again... I could do it! I'm no big reader of Russian literature but does it have as much of an influence on your style as more obvious sources like environment and personal experience? Yeah. My life

is kinda boring so it's good to read. It makes my imagination grow. **One writer compared your lyrical style to Chekov.** Chekov?! That seems a little grand. I can be kinda redundant like Dostoyevsky! [laughs] I dunno. The thing that I like about Russian novels is there's a lot of characters instead of just one or two main ones. In fact there can be so many that it's difficult to remember them all. It's like a kaleidoscope of people and it makes me feel how I feel when I can write a song. If I get stuck or get bored I usually go read for a couple of weeks and then try again. A bunch of new pictures. **What's the story behind the tattoos?** This one's Ferdinand The Bull [lifts sleeve to expose upper right arm] It's a children's story about a bull that loves to smell flowers. **The significance being?** Mainly I just wanted a bull on my arm [laughs]. It was between this and the Schlitz Malt Liquor bull, which I almost got at the time. **Thank god I got this one. The what?** [he writes it down] And the other arm, it's a map of Texas. I didn't get it because I like Texas, kinda the opposite. But I won't forget about it although I'm tempted to 'cause I don't like it there. **And where do you get your eclectic assortment of T-shirts?** I got this one [the Commodores Tour design] on Canal Street in New York. I dunno, if they're a colour I like and they're only about \$3 or \$4 I'll pick 'em up. I need some new ones. **Is this your first press-only trip?** Yeah, I've never gone anywhere just to do press... great; I'll talk about myself for four days straight. Put me in a fine mood.



Françoiz BREUT

OK, so fey Damon (the Y chromosome portion of your Damon And Naomi) offered us his handsomely appointed dressing room for our chat with Françoiz Breut, but for some reason (no doubt our terribly English over-politeness: "no, really, it's okay") we're crouched on the cold concrete of the Dingwalls corridor. Rock and, indeed, haemorrhoids. ¶ Françoiz's eponymous debut album was released in July 1997 on the French label Lithium and has since been picked up by Bella Union - the label established by Cocteau Twins Robin Guthrie and Simon Raymonde - and given a UK release last October. Meshing the slow-picked, hypnotic guitar of Nico's Chelsea Girls with brushed drums and shifting organ tones the album has the studied cinematic cool of a nocturnal rendezvous between Portishead and Tindersticks. On the cover Françoiz is pictured backed against a wall with an expression caught somewhere between fear and laughter. It's a look I recognise as she squats opposite me in the corridor, grappling with my Del Boy-esque display

of French ('par-lay voo oone biere?') and, along with Dominique A - her partner in crimes both musical and conjugal - valiantly tolerating my line in non sequiturs. It's her first visit to these chilly shores, into which previous insight has been gained via late night listening to the John Peel show, tuned in via her home town of Cherbourg, and it's one of very few live gigs. I think we have done not enough concerts, she says. On one hand Dominique has his own successful solo career to attend to, while Françoiz is also a new mum (and an artist: check out the sleeve illustrations). All this means they've played out only twice in the past year, the first of which was, incongruously enough, as part of the Austin-based South By Southwest conference. Does this lack of gigs mean that Françoiz does not enjoy playing live? I like very much, she's quick to respond. But I had a baby. We made the last concert in the U.S.A. and after that [the baby] was just too important. Dominique is preparing another record and it will be that I am playing with him... She turns to Dominique and finishes her sentence in French. He continues, Françoiz said that as I am doing my own music she doesn't want to do music with other people without me. While most of the record is sung in French, two of the tracks - Everyone Kisses a Stranger and My Wedding Man - have English lyrics. Did you ever consider recording the whole album in English? A lot of bands sing in English, Dominique says. But people prefer to hear music sung in their own language. Dominique namechecks Calexico and Tarnation as influences, adding that his and Françoiz's tastes differ. As the dominant musical mover and shaker of the

outfit, he wrote the record in its entirety, both music and lyrics. Did this come out of a conscious effort to write from Françoiz's perspective? Sure. It's for Françoiz. I try to write something for her, specially for her. Françoiz chose the songs she liked. I write some songs and she said, 'yes' or 'no'. Step by step, that's the way the record had been made - without thinking about it. Françoiz gave me the musical directions, the lyrical directions. I know her well enough to know what she can sing and what she'd like to sing, he laughs. But it may be that I make mistakes.

interview **Martin**
photography **Paul**