

interview **Martin**
photography **Maike**

"I just want to say that I've got 12 hot cross buns between my legs." That was Rennie Sparks, one half of Chicago's Handsome Family, speaking as she climbed on stage at the 12-Bar Club recently. Quite what she meant with this fruity declaration is anybody's guess. But then straightforwardness isn't really the Handsome Family's stock-in-trade. Through The Trees is their third album of twisted Americana, a knock on from their more raucous earlier sound and - in losing their drummer somewhere along the way - nearer to a tight, minimal version, where dated folk melodies are exhumed, only to be pasted onto a surreal backing of ticking programmed rhythms and well, croaking frogs. Like the snapshots of Brett and Rennie stiffly holding their banjo and autoharp in some echo of the Carter Family meets the Munsters, The Handsome Family take what is traditional or archaic and update it with a twist of sinister comedy. A throw-back to what Greil Marcus once called, "the old, weird America."

The Handsome Family


You're on your way back from a few dates in Europe. How do you go down outside the States? Is there a fear that people just won't get it? Rennie} It's funny, we played in Germany about two years ago and I was worried they wouldn't get any of the jokes, so we wrote all these jokes in German for between the songs and I was saying them in this terrible

German, like, 'my-wooden-leg-is-filled-with-goldfish.' Took me an hour to get every sentence out. But they really got all the songs; it's amazing. People speak English everywhere; it's crazy. You almost wish they wouldn't. I think in a way people in Europe and in England seem to get our jokes better than Americans, because Americans are always like, 'ooh, that's weird.' Americans are so wholesome.

Brett} People who don't have a hard time with black humour really like us, but in the US there are a lot of people who just want this happy, sappy shit. When a song is kind of melancholy then it's just like, 'oh, you're so depressed.' Rennie} I always feel like people in the US get just sort of half of us. Either they think we're really dark or they think we're really goofy, like Ween or something. They don't see the whole; they can't really put it together. Either you're funny or you're sad. Brett} The thing is, the songs we're writing are basically informed by, like, traditional folk music, not really country music. I mean country music is pretty bleak for the most part but folk music is even more intense. It deals with the weighty issues of life. All these old folk songs, they're full of all these stories of people killing each other. Rennie} That's what we listen to mostly, so I'm sure it shows up. What do you listen to? Rennie} A lot of these old recordings. But I guess we listen to new music too. Brett} I have this CD player that takes 110 CDs. Rennie} It's actually the most exciting thing in the world. You never have to pick anything. Brett} You put 110 CDs in there and press random. It'll be like Barry White, Radiohead, Doc Watson, Led Zeppelin, John Coltrane. We listen to the gamut, y'know. Rennie} It's great,

continues





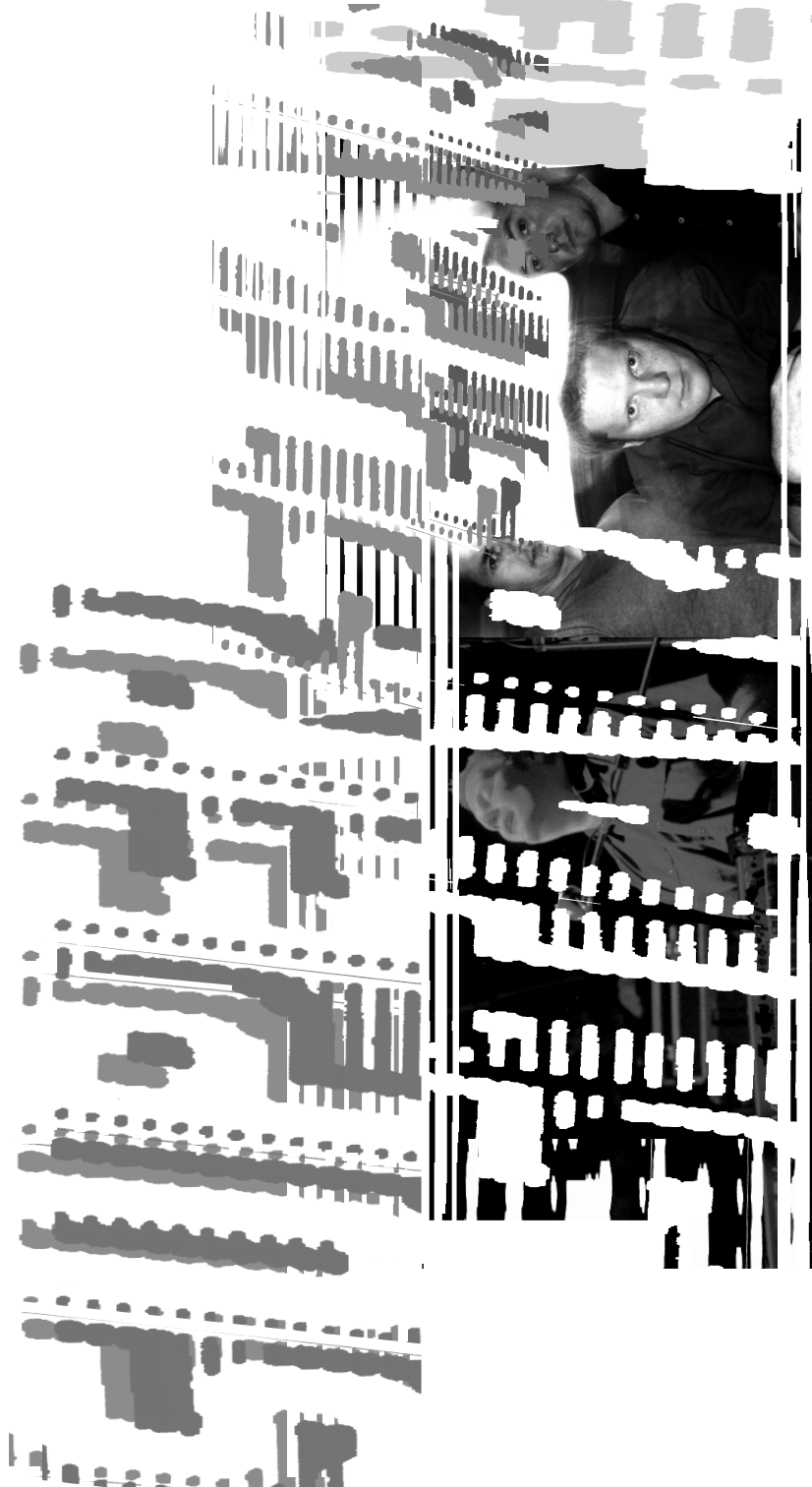
The Handsome Family

it's good for your head. Brett} And I love sound-effects records. Y'know, doors opening, keys in locks, stuff like that. Rennie} Chipmunks chewing nuts, that's my favourite. When I'm really feeling blue that's what always cheers me up the sound of a chipmunk chewing a nut. It works. You've said that you couldn't really play when you started out. Rennie} I think most people start out that way, they just don't want to admit it. Brett} I was writing songs and just doing solo stuff on four track, sending it to record companies, that's a waste of time. I was sick of it, so I taught Rennie how to play bass. I switched to guitar. Rennie} I had the rhythm of an electrical storm. I remember at our first practice that was your comment. Brett} Oh, so bad. Rennie} The wounds are still healing. Brett} And my best drinking buddy, I bought him a drum kit from Sears for \$80. We were in the laundry one day and I was like, "can you do this?" [pounds the table] And he did it so I was like, "okay, you're the drummer." We rehearsed a little bit until we could get through about six or seven songs and we just basically made a lot of noise. Rennie} We would say, "yeah, we're just a noisy band." But underneath the noise really we were a Country band. Brett} Even though it was so bad, it was this fantastic mess. And it was hilarious too; just watching these three idiots on stage make fools of themselves and play these Country songs real noisy. I wish we still sounded like that. Rennie} It seemed like at the time there were so many bands that were so earnest, so serious. And maybe there is a place for that but I just felt there's got to be some other way to approach this and I think we eventually got to this place where now we can be serious because we're not being serious about ourselves, we're being serious about the songs. We don't take ourselves seriously but we take the songs seriously. Something definitely clicked into place when I saw you play live. Do you feel misunderstood? Rennie} Yeah, but I think it's okay. The recordings are one thing and the live shows another. I think it is ridiculous to stand on a stage and have people look at you, so there's something inherently comical in the whole thing. Brett} We make fun of the whole situation, it's a farce. Rennie} And I don't want people to be worshipping us or something, the point is the songs and we're just like buffoons who happen to be playing the songs. Brett} That's why I love using the stupid machine too, like these sequencers, it totally deflates the whole rock thing, and it really deflates the Country thing. We really pissed a lot of people off when we started using the drum machine. Rennie} It forces you to focus on the lyrics and the melody. There is something about this recorded background that works for us because it is so stark and unemotional. When we had a live drummer it was really easy to just hide behind the drums and if you had a song that wasn't so good you could just rock it out and it would be fine. But this way if a song doesn't work it's clear and you really have to re-write your songs and hone them down. You never wanted to go back to a traditional band set-up, with another drummer for example? Rennie} I always wanted a drum

machine. I always hated playing with a live drummer because it was just so rock and such a cliché. The rolls into the chorus and the crescendos and then the build up...no matter how crazy your song is, it always becomes something that you've heard before, it creates this structure for songs that doesn't leave any mystery. Brett} When the drummer quit we had three shows that I really wanted to do, so we were like, 'oh, we'll just do it as a duo without the drummer.' And then we practised and it just wasn't coming together. So I got a little Casio keyboard and plugged it into the PA and we played along with it and we're like, 'wow, that's kinda cool.' Rennie} And just because it's not supposed to be that way, because Country music has no business having this sequenced stuff behind it, that's a good enough reason to do it. YOUR lyrics remind me of Flannery O'Conner's stories. Do you tap into any lyrical tradition as well as a musical one? Rennie} I've read too many books. Brett} Rennie has a Masters in Creative Writing. She's a journalist and short story writer. She won't toot her own horn, so I have to toot it for her. Rennie} I think my stories are much more personal and I don't like them as much because they're too much like, 'me, me, me.' When I write songs it's much better, it's much more like somebody else. Brett} I used to write all the lyrics, like the first record is almost all my lyrics, but I just kind of dried up and got sick of writing lyrics. And especially this record the lyrics are great, because Rennie's a writer. Most people who write lyrics, most people who are in rock bands; they're not people who really have a way with words. Rennie} But I think there's some damn good lyrics in the body of music. Even a song like Amazing Grace - and I think about that song all the time - those lyrics are so simple but they're so timeless and so transcendent. There's a very basic primordial thrill to it. Brett} In Ancient Greece words and music

were inseparable, Greek poetry was incorporated with music. There was something else that didn't have words but they didn't really qualify it as art. Rennie} The Greeks knew their shit. And the Greeks also knew that every good tragedy needed some comical turns to it and every good comedy needed a tragic twist to it. These are age-old truths that we're trying to tap into. AS sinister as a lot of the traditional folk is - like murder ballads - there's a sense of black comedy to them as well. Rennie} It's a weird comedy though, because we do the same thing. There's that Carter Family song about Freida Bolt, a story of a girl who was taken up into the woods, and then her boyfriend shoves her in a hole and covers it with rocks and leaves her there and she's just, like, screaming in the woods and nobody hears her screams and then she dies. And it's horrible. But it's so surreal that you have to laugh, and then you feel terrible laughing. It's about sex and about just what it feels like to have sexual desire for people. I mean, it's funny when you desire somebody, it's ridiculous to, like, want to have sex with somebody but it's this crazy thing that just overpowers you [laughs]. You do feel like throwing somebody in the river when you want to fuck them.





INTERVIEW matt PHOTOGRAPHY paul

being on Creation, pals with Teenage Fanclub etc. I think we sound like Superstar. I do think we have a very distinctive sound. And I also think that

We're sitting with Superstar frontman Joe McAlinden in the Air Studios canteen. What have you been recording? We're on a search for George Martin. Saw him eating his soup over there. No we've just started recording our next album while we've got some time. It's not going to be out until probably April. What we're doing is recording the album in two stages. We're doing this week and then a week in November to finish. Songs that were recorded in this half could possibly be the singles. It's going well. We had an orchestra in yesterday which was pretty good fun. Are you arranging the parts yourself? I'm working with a classical arranger. Pretty interesting as well. You're classically trained. I'd assume that helps. I think a lot of people use strings and stuff to fill out their sound. But I'm a classically trained violinist and saxophonist as well and I know what woodwind and brass and strings can do and how they can sound and how you can use different textures. The arrangement that we have done is very classical and it was classical players we got in – not the pop section with the turtle-necks! So, yeah, I was brought up learning classical music and [long pause] I can't shake it! Superstar, the song, has turned up on two of your albums, a single and now Rod Stewart has covered it. Is it your signature song? I think it's a song the record company are more proud of than me [laughs]. I think the reason it was a single was that it was getting more radio play than if it was on the A-list. At that point we had record companies ringing us up saying 'We'll put this out as a single for you, it's gonna be a number one.' And there's a good chance it would have been, you know. But it would have been one-hit-wonder time, you know, because there was no fan-base or anything. So we decided, 'no'. I said we should just put it on our first album. We've had five 'singles-of-the-week' in the last nine months and we've only released three singles. Work that one out! You've had to overcome some pigeonholing,

the press wasn't ready for what we did with Palm Tree. The emotional aspect of it and I think they shied away from it and a lot of them didn't understand it so they kinda dismissed it. It's a natural human instinct. The great thing is people are discovering [Palm Tree] all the time. How do you react to the Queen comparison? There's a big gap in the market there, Freddie's gone! They did do some really good stuff around Night Of The Opera. I'm not saying I'm a Queen fan. I mean Crazy Little Thing Called Love, it's a killer ... *is it fuck!* And the Fanclub connection? I hate it, I hate it. Me, Norman and Gerry grew up together. We were friends before bands. I was in a band with Norman before the Fanclub called The Boy Hairdressers. We grew up listening to a lot of the same types of music. I think it's just really lazy journalism. I let Norman hear Palm Tree when it was finished and he said to me 'that is such a distinctive sound. It doesn't sound like anybody else.' I'm just trying my best to sound like me. **Is your fan-base geographically defined?** We've deliberately shied away from Glasgow 'cause they're a cynical lot. A lot of gigs we were playing to friends all the time and – no disrespect, they've been fantastic – you get fed up playing to your pals. They give us a real honest reaction. I want to stand on stage and see a face I've never seen before. **The Japanese have a soft-spot for you.** The last time I was in Japan there was a display in this really big record shop and it had my name on it with 'The Godfather of Scottish Pop'! And there was all the records that I'd played on. It was pretty impressive! I'm quite popular over there, everyone thinks

I sing like an angel. We went over with Eugenius around the time of Greatest Hits Volume One and played three sold out nights in Tokyo. Apparently we were the first band to be asked to Japan without a full album. Fifteen hours to the other side of the world and a room full of people who look cooler than you! I remember spending ages packing my case and then walking on stage looking like a fucking tramp! **After Creation, you signed an ill-fated deal with EMI America.** The worst record company in the world. I sat down with the band and said 'Look, I really think if we stay with [EMI] we're going to be in big trouble, we'll probably die a death. So, it would mean giving up our wages and that.' [Mimics disgruntled musician] 'What, no money?' I was completely shattered. That night I got pissed on Vodka and wrote Superstar. It's not a love song. Did I sound like Johnny Rotten then? So, me and Jim were left stuck in that contract for a year and a half. If you take that time out of the equation I've only been doing this for about three years and in that time I've put out two mini-albums, two full albums and we're doing a third one. Pretty good going I think. I'm proud of everything I've done. **Are you ready to work with Brian Wilson now?** I don't want him riding on the crest of my wave, no chance! Ha, ha, ha! I dunno, he needs someone to show him the way. **And your thoughts on Rod Stewart's version of Superstar?** There are a few good things on [his album]. Superstar does sound like Rod Stewart singing Superstar. My take on it is that probably one of the top five best known singers in the world heard one of my songs and covered it. It's a compliment if someone's wedding band did it.



It's the
last interview
of the last day of a

short press trip for Lou Barlow, Jason Lowenstein and Russ Pollard – collectively Sebadoh, or, as the title of their new album suggests, THE Sebadoh. Russ, the newest (and youngest) member is flicking through CWAS #3 as we stroll in. Which is nice. His exclusion from the interview room can mean only one thing – it's Guitarist magazine. For reasons you needn't know the CWAS posse is extended to five for the purpose of this interview, a fact reflected on the bemused face of Jason Lowenstein as he makes his way to the Gents. It's just the one interview, right? ¶ So, The Sebadoh, is this the definitive article? That's what I thought when I first heard it, says Jason, that's why I thought we should rename the band. For me, this is The Sebadoh – not that anything before it was belittled by that. / I always liked the way people called us 'The Sebadoh,' adds Lou Barlow, or people would say 'So, your band, Sebadoah. So, you're in the Sebadoh? The reason for the change? It's definitely a band album. It was just Russ, really offers Lou, by way of explanation. All the theories we had about music could be played out now. Not that Bob Fay was a bad player; he couldn't quite make what was in his head come out of his hands. Barlow is in press-mode and he's having fun with this. Russ is a very textured individual, he laughs, and he's been very tolerant considering all the times I've lost my mind during the process of making this record. And then, as an afterthought, Plus he always likes to sing when he wakes up! Russ is modest about his recruitment to (let's face it) indie's finest. Jake and I live in the same town and had some mutual friends. I was there, it just worked out. / It's almost criminal, interrupts Barlow, that we can get away with shifting the band members so drastically and it still feels right. The injection of youth seems to have added extra zest to the band. And Jason gets to act parental; a role previously left to Lou. Here we go on tour, Jason, laughs Barlow, mimicking a nostalgic, elderly relative, Oh look! I played here in 1972 with Dinosaur before you were born. The banter continues and I'm sorry if it doesn't translate well on paper. When do we eat? Uncle Lou? / Would you like a shake? I could buy you a chocolate shake if you like. Ah, let me tell you about Dinosaur,

interview **Matt** and **Tracy** photography **John**



ho, ho, ho! / Would you Uncle Lou?
What was it like – was J that mean?

/ J was a very mean man... he was very difficult. / I'm surprised we ever had Christmas. Trust me, that's funny. Lou talks about the first single, Flame. I wanted to write an anthem about being afraid to be free. he begins. Everyone's always 'I'm free! Yeah! I can do what I want!' I wanted to write a song that said 'I can't complain, I'm wrapped up in chains.' A song about being happy to be tied down in a relationship. Happy to be in your room, like 'I'm not going outside.' It's a total response to the 'extreme' generation. I'm not going snowboarding; I'm not doing that. I'll do what I want. Flame, like playing with fire. But I wanted the song to be ironic, 'cause you can't escape that stuff – it will come and get you. Which is all far too serious, Uncle Lou. To end, what's the biggest lie they've told a journalist this trip? That our hair's our main attribute concludes Russ, without missing a beat. Boom, boom.

Let's start with a dumb question. After eight years living in the U.S. do you feel like an American? Dumb answer, I haven't really lost my accent. But do I *feel* American? Before I went to America, I pretty much listened entirely to American music and when I got there I found that America had a much longer memory for the acoustic guitar. Because when I started playing in England it was largely forbidden to play an acoustic guitar. And, I think, being an average, middle class ... I could have been Al Stewart 20 years ago. There was no room for that. Suddenly, in America, there was. And people said 'He's kinda like Elvis Costello, kinda like Ray Davies, Richard Thompson, Robyn Hitchcock' and that made me prick up my ears and think 'maybe I can make a go of making music over there'. But, now I live in America, I find myself largely listening to English folk music. Stuff like Bert Jansch and Nic Jones and that's been very influential on me. Before I went to America I listened to Phil Ochs, Tim Hardin, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen. I think my tastes are as Catholic as they can be. You were featured on a double 'San Francisco' compilation recently. Do you recognise any community there, a San Francisco sound? I'm not sure there *is* a community. There's an okay community in San Francisco, but I wouldn't say it's the tightest-knit musical community I've ever come across. I mean, I know a lot of people who make music in San Francisco and number some of them among my very best friends, but I don't think Chris Von Sneidern is on that compilation. He, as far as I'm concerned, is the most exciting person making music in San Francisco. Prior to the release of *Awake*, there was talk of you using samples and loops for the first time and you expressed a desire to work with Money Mark. Yet the resulting record is, in effect, a pop record. The worst thing was everybody started doing it. It got to the stage about two years ago where you could imagine Bryan Adams going into a studio saying 'Let's have some of those loops! That'll be fantastic!' But, funnily, working with Money Mark – I can't believe you heard me say that – that's actually a great ambition. I think his albums sound absolutely ... his new thing just sounds incredible. With *New Deal* I had that post-major label freedom, so I thought I just want to play my songs in the folksy way that I like to play them. But Chris and I had such a great time making that record that on this one we said 'now, let's really stretch out', use the full resources of his studio and work with people I really want to work with. I brought in a lot of records that I really like and said 'that is what I want reflected in this record.' There was a thing on the back of a press pamphlet for *New Deal* that said 'Five records I listened to while making this' and the Nic Jones record was on there, and a Serge Gainsbourg, and *Rock Bottom* by Robert Wyatt ... And, the funny thing about it is, that you can't hear any of those influences on *New Deal*. But you can on the new record. So that's what I tried to do, was get the music I was listening to, and historically liked, music that's outside folk, like the rap music that I really like. Your *Ghost* was meant to be a Dr. Dre production of a folk



John Wesley





INTERVIEW matt PHOTOGRAPHY paul



song, but I always distrust those things when someone seems to be doing something contemporary largely for the reason of having a hit single. A lot of people said 'This is going to be hard because your songs have structures and shapes' and those songs – a Beck song for example – is really just like a James Brown song. So the trick was to get that stuff on my songs and my songs kinda won out! It's a fine line. Every album of mine is an attempt to make a produced album in which my guitar playing and voice and character do not disappear. It's a tough thing to do, people have been trying for years. *Blood On The Tracks* does it. **What do you get from Rap music?** Well, words. A lot of those songs are far more interesting than most singer-songwriters. I think the blight of songwriters is that thing of honesty and authenticity and it all has to be about their lives. And, really, Jackson Browne's done that and I didn't like it the first time around. I like people that make stuff up. I think Eitzel's very good at that, actually. The pretence is that it's all about his miserable life, the reality is they're very clever songs. A lot of rap music is very playful with words, great rhymes and puns and stuff that I think a lot of other music completely misses out on. I think I get a lot from it, nothing but pleasure. You've hinted that *Awake* contains some of your most autobiographical material to date. The ones about sex and love are mostly about me. Also, I feel nearer to my material now. So, whether the songs are about my everyday life or someone I'm in love with or whatever. I think, as you get older, irony and sarcasm become less interesting things in life. It's something you can see in pretty much every major writer of literature or music. I don't think I'm musically original but, lyrically, I think I've done things that nobody else has bothered to do. You wonder why a lot of Elvis Costello songs haven't been covered – for such a great catalogue. And they haven't because they're very individual to him. And, in that sense, I'm very like him because it would be very hard to cover one of my songs. Who would want to take a song about a dead body to the top of the charts? I think people outside of the mainstream ... you owe it to yourself and your audience to behave like your outside. To do things that test.

harding



It's a singer-songwriter Industry Standard that the words 'Nick Drake' have to be summoned when fumbling for a reference point for any sulky old sod caught in possession of an acoustic guitar. The melancholic perfection of Drake's three albums make him- 25 years later- an unsullied touchstone among six-string introverts. It's fitting then that, as I arrive at the Mean Fiddler prior to Ron Sexsmith's recent appearance, he's occupied with a film crew, offering his thoughts on Drake for a forthcoming BBC tribute.

R O N
Sexs
m i t h

Like Drake, Ron Sexsmith's two albums (1996's *Ron Sexsmith* and 1997's *Other Songs*) have attracted a landslide of plaudits from the grown-up press, while conversely failing to instigate the sweet ker-ching of mega-sales that his record company evidently believe he was born for. Not possessing the stellar lineage of Adam Cohen or Rufus Wainwright (two fellow Canadians), and without the doomed sex appeal of Jeff Buckley or the martyred romanticism of Richard Buckner, there's little marketing value in Sexsmith's very ordinary-ness. In the end it all comes down to his songs - modest, melodic,

politely downcast ballads that rarely waver from a moody- but never sullen- pace and tone. They're finely sculpted, literate songs from a man who honed his songwriting during a Bukowski-esque decade of post office work. And as the songs ooze a kind of plainspoken honesty, Sexsmith himself manages to be emotionally naked without being tortured, somehow surviving producer Mitchell Froom's best efforts to coat him in that glossy sheen of his. With public praise from luminaries like Elvis Costello and Reg 'Elton John' Dwight, and lucrative covers by Shawn Colvin, Joan Baez and everyone's favourite professional Scot, Rod Stewart, Sexsmith is perhaps damned by the faint praise of 'songwriter's songwriter'. I really don't know how I'm regarded, he responds softly when I put this to him, his eyes fixed on the tabletop. It's good to have that kind of respect but, at the same time, every album feels like it could be my last because I'm always struggling to get off the ground. I've been kind of lucky in a way, because even though I haven't sold enough records I still seem to be staying alive somehow. Sexsmith touches on this perceived lack of sales regularly, as if he still hears the admonishing ring of a boardroom pep talk in his ears. Following his epymous debut a certain sector of the British press fell over themselves to worship at his altar. There's been some bad press too, he's quick to respond. Though it has been pretty supportive. I think if you're doing something that's a bit singular or if you're kind of an underdog- like my stuff doesn't sell very well- I think they tend to be a little more on your side. I remember with the first album I didn't know if anyone was going to like it, and the second album certainly I was thinking that people were going to say that it wasn't as good or whatever. With the aw shucks humility of one of his own songs he continues, so far I just feel really relieved that they've both been accepted in a good way. For Sexsmith's forthcoming (difficult) third album he is again paired

with Mitchell Froom, his longstanding producer. Although it's hard to imagine the demure Sexsmith doing battle with anyone, it's a choice that has met with some resistance in the slippery corridors of Interscope. With each record I've have had to make a bit of a stand. With the first album there was a fight after we finished the record because I guess they were hoping it'd sound more like Crowded House or something, and so

there was a bit of a - not so much a fight - but I did have to put my foot down. Going into the third album, politically it's probably not the best move for me but we just really have a good working relationship. I send him my new songs and, I mean it came down to the songs, if he didn't like the songs I would've worked with someone else but he felt really good about the whole situation, he didn't think it was stale or anything. The previous night Sexsmith had appeared on stage at the Kashmir Klub, a weekly open-mic session. I arrived in around 10 o'clock, he explains. And there was a fax from a friend of mine that said, 'if you get in early enough I'm going down to this place, it's a songwriter's night.' It was just very spontaneous and I didn't expect to play, I just went down to hang out. Cajoled by the organiser, Ron gave impromptu renditions of Wasting Time from his debut and Pretty Little Cemetery from

Other Songs. I'm hoping to go down again, he says. 'Cause I like places like that. It's an affection for the informality and support of these open stages that was built up during his formative gigging years. When I was starting out in Toronto I used to go to this place called Fat Albert's which was a place where songwriters hung out and played their new songs. Supportive though these places are, it was the shock of comparison that forced

Sexsmith to pull his socks up. I remember thinking I was pretty good. Then I started going to these open stages and I just felt really kinda humbled by it, by how much work I had to do. Just by hearing these people I thought were great with words, it sort of shone a light on my weaknesses. I was trying too hard to be poetic, I was using too many images and stuff that has never really been my strong point. It kinda forced me to have a look at what I was doing and try to simplify it and try to write more like the way I talk, y'know, a little more conversational. Then I started writing songs I could feel good about. Beyond twisted image criticism and any perceived lack of sales it's this simple laurel that Sexsmith is happy to rest on. And like a bashful mission statement he adds, I've just been trying to get better at it.



interview **Martin**
photography **Sarah**



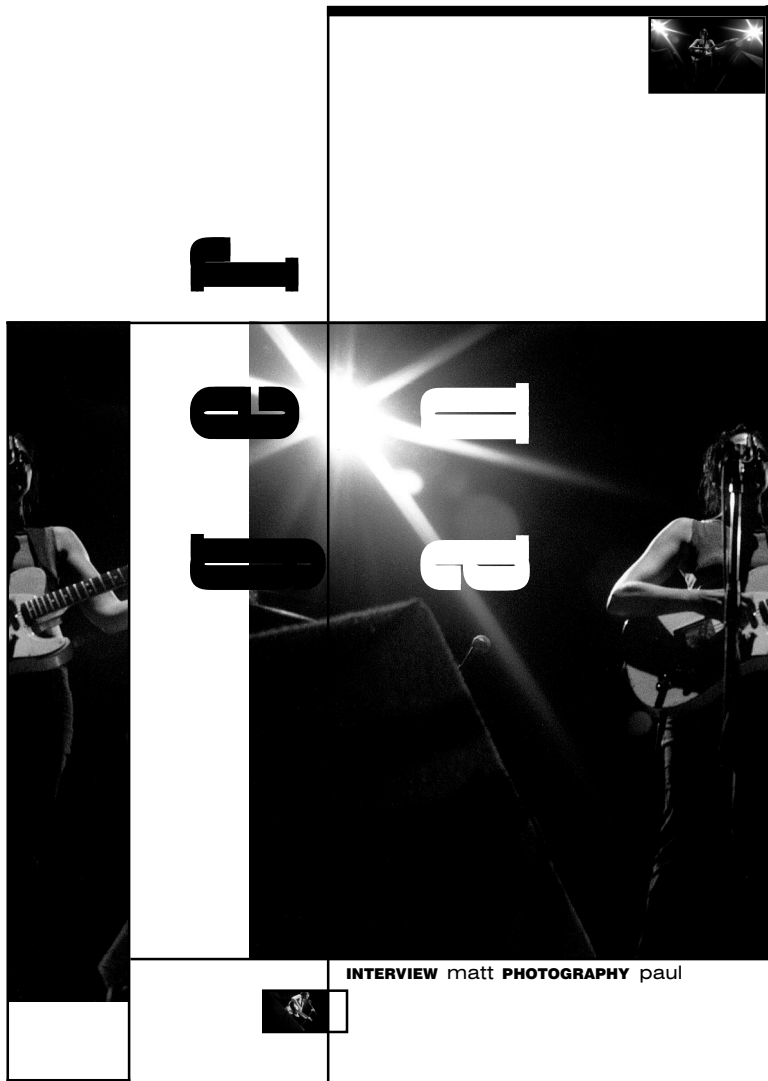
tisa
LETTER

OTUR



Another production team, what did Tchad Blake bring to Slide? Tchad's my best friend. I'm very lucky that he did my record 'cause, probably, if he wasn't my friend he might not have. I met him through 'Love Circus' - we wanted him to mix the record. We became friends over the phone. It doesn't happen very often but it was instant. Both of us were going through some losses in our life so we really connected, and then throughout the next couple years I would just send him tapes. I didn't want to bother him [with the record] because I didn't want to abuse our friendship, but I told him we were looking for a producer and he said 'Oh no, I can't put you in the hands of a producer.' 'Cause he likes my things the way they are. He said 'you just need to record them over in a different way' and I'm like 'do you wanna do it?' And I lucked out. He chose the musicians and I trusted him on that. This is your first record without drummer Kenny Aronoff. This was a new experience. It's like 'OK, Tchad.

You choose who you want', and I love Jerry [Marotta]. Jerry's sexier than Kenny. As a drummer? Yeah, as a drummer. I love Kenny but this was a nice change. It's a studio record, but it retains



INTERVIEW matt **PHOTOGRAPHY** paul



the warmth of your home recordings. This session went just so smooth. Two songs [Slide and Guillotine] and the instrumentals were ones from home that Tchad liked from my tapes. But the rest was all done in the studio, really quickly, we just kinda played 'em you know? I was a little wary of the name Mitchell Froom on there. His production seems to dominate the artist. Sometimes, but not as much as Daniel Lanois, though. That's why Tchad didn't want me to have a producer, 'cause he said 'You have a certain personality'. He wants to make the artists be the artist and not be him. Would you expect to work together again? He told me this was his favourite record that he worked on. I'm honoured because I love his records. There must have been some vibe going on that he liked in particular. But I'm not writing anything for the first time, so I can't even think of the future. You know, I'm happier than I've ever been, so I'm trying to think it's not a bad thing. It's kinda like a drug and I'm not getting that drug. There's less tragedy permeating this record. Are you in a good relationship at last? No, it means I'm not in one! I'm not being abused and hurt and torn apart by anybody, or myself. I'm just moving forward, I think. In all the records I've written there are lots

of questions about trying to move on and 'why do you feel stuck?' and, I feel like, in many of these songs I'm moving on, noticing the world, noticing frequencies and vibrations outside of myself and I like that. It's just harder to write about. You moved to LA since your last record. I moved there to make the record but I liked it, so I stayed. Bloomington is more inspiring because I'm lonely there and I'm more upset. Ha! You re-recorded If I Think Of Love from the OP8 record. For me I liked [the new version] a lot better because it's more paradoxical. Such a pretty song. It's a miserable situation and you're really pissed off with this guy and every time you try to love someone you think about the shit he put you through. So it's like 'If I think of love I think of you, you asshole!' I just have fun with it. So snotty, but most people think it's a nice song. The symbolism of the butterfly seems appropriate. It's all about trying to go from a dark place to a light place. A butterfly is the best example of that. Coming from an ugly place and trying to make it beautiful. Trying to see the positive side of things. Turning Into Betty's about trying to see the positive side of my mom. I thought she was stupid to be so positive and now it's like 'Wow, there's a whole other world out there, that's so amazing'. And I just didn't see it. Nothing too positive about your experience with Smashing Pumpkins. It was the night before the first show after a month of rehearsals. I got a call at three in the morning being told I was gonna fly home. Where did I wanna go, LA or Indiana? Cause I had flown the cats to Indiana, I had to sublet my apartment. I had no place to go, and I wasn't given a reason. It was total rock star bullshit. There must have been a reason. I'd turned down the tour. I was happy in my life. I had a record coming out. But then Billy called me at the bookstore and he was really nice and he said 'You gotta try. I love your records. I think your voice would really mix with mine. So you could play violin, sing, I want you to play some guitar'. It sounded like he really wanted me. So I went to the audition, we all got along and so I went home and had to get my life in order for a five month tour in three days. And then to not have Billy call me and tell me why... The were miserable people so I kinda was glad! But that reminded me why I hate that kind of music.



Chat with David Free!

swell

Was it always the plan to self-produce the new record? I don't think there was a plan, you know? I'd really like to find a producer but I can't think of anybody... or maybe I can but I don't think they'd work with us. The last album took a long time to see the light of day. This one has arrived comparatively quickly. We did have a year or two between when we turned the last record in and when it came out, so I think I wrote four or five songs in that year. We had a big chunk of it written when we started recording, so it was a matter of writing five or six more songs. Still, it took a long time. I think I worked 10 hours every fuckin' day for 3 months. It was really condensed. Your albums are getting successively more layered. We never talked about it. We just did it. I thought the last album had too many keyboards, so I kept making one does. There's no Sean this time. How did making the record differ without him? It actually made things go faster, 'cause he's extremely slow, you know. He writes great parts but it takes him a long, long, long time. And he has to have the whole studio to himself to do it, so that really slows it down. I heard Rob play in '91 or '92 with P. Harvey and I really liked the way he played. I thought, if ever Sean wasn't in the band, I'd really like him to play and, it turned out, he was a fan. So it happened. Did computers play a part in the making of this record? I've always used them from the beginning. I always use them to edit the album together. But [I use them] to actually do the keyboard parts. 'Cause I can't play keyboards very well, so I play them into a sequencer and have it fix 'em. On this record I did play piano into Protools and then I fixed it a little bit. It's really important except that it takes a lot of time, as you probably know from doing this magazine. We spend a lot of time on the artwork – we used to do our own little fanzine [Swollen] but we didn't have time for that any more – and videos and stuff like that. It's great to have that control but there really isn't enough time in life to do it all.

Looking now at your debut alongside For All The Beautiful People, do you see a natural progression? You know, I've never done that before but, yeah, it's pretty scary. Eight years gone, never to come back. I don't know what the fuck's been going on – the last five years especially – it just keeps leading us on and on and on and on. I don't know whether I should jump off or not, or continue. I don't know. I could barely write a song then and now I can write songs more automatically. I have so many fragments of songs from that period, but now I just write them complete. I haven't listened to [Swell] in a long time.

INTERVIEW matt PHOTOGRAPHY john

