



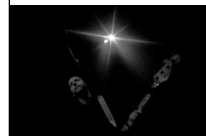
buffalo  
tom

**You know the drill.** You hear that Buffalo Tom are nearing completion on a new album and you hassle the hell out of your press contact for an interview from that day on. Finally you get your date but in the back of your mind you know you've something booked that same day. Slowly the realisation dawns that it's that not-so-easily rescheduled REM performance on Later with Jools. Happens all the time.

You just have to arrange to catch them at another stop on the tour. Except Buffalo Tom aren't playing any other British dates. The solution? Cash the giro, book a flight to Amsterdam. Call up your old pal Joost and tell him you'll exchange a ticket for a little floor-space and you're on your way. Whilst a sleepy-eyed Bill Janovitz snoozes elsewhere, Messrs Colbourn and Maginnis invite us into their dressing room ... ¶ The last time you played London, as part of the Sleepy Eyed tour, someone called out for The Bus from your debut. Besides that guy, has your audience grown with you? Tom} I hope so. Sure you're gonna lose some people and gain others as

the music changes. But, I think we were allowed to build an audience, coming out of a more independent-minded scene. You'll get some people who'll latch on early on and just grow up

with us. I think, these days, there's a lot of pressure on bands to, like, get signed right away and sell loads of records, or have the big hit, and then they're gone. It's a different world now. After Sleepy Eyed and Bill's solo album (Lonesome Billy), both of which were pretty raw and stripped down, Smitten comes as a surprise. Is it important that each album maintains its own identity? Chris} I think the songs dictate the production lots of times but, I think, we react off the last albums a lot. Certainly Smitten is unlike any other record. It's a definition of us at this later period. So, by adding a keyboardist and choosing the songs carefully and working with them for three years, this is going to be our studio record. We made



exceptions to our rulebook. Like, let the producer work on the songs with us and add another member that's playing on every song. Then the songs have their own definitions, by adding strings and horns it became really, like, 'studio'. And we worked on the songs in the studio quite meticulously on the

vocals, the drum parts ... there wasn't going to be anything on the record that was just a one-take. Even the most sparse things, like Under Milk Wood, are pretty layered. This would seem to suit Bill's work ethic. He loves the technical stuff, messing with different guitar sounds and stuff. Tom} It can get time-consuming. It's hard, y'know? It gets to the point where we all feel like 'Agh! There's so much coming out of the speakers I can't hear anything anymore.' There's always the fear that you'll swamp the original song in production. I guess you've learned how to hold back. Chris} You gotta trust a lot. A lot of it's trusting your producer or your engineer. A song like Wiser, for instance, was changed, maybe, four significant times. And then, when Tom wasn't even there – Bill and I'd flown out to finish the album in California doing vocal overdubs – we cut the ending and a different vocal arrangement for the outro in the studio. And we never do that kind of thing. Tom} Very un-Buffalo Tom! Chris} Yeah, even though we'd rehearsed it 300 times in different ways. David Bianco's not taking a 'close enough is good enough' kinda thing so, with vocals, we'd spend hours and hours doing things. It was pretty hard going you know? On our later albums, some of the vocal harmonising and things and bringing them to the forefront took some discipline. And adding keyboards actually meant bringing guitars down and bringing the band down and not playing so hard all the time. Which I think is great, because it complements the earlier albums. We're not too apologetic for the later part of our career which has turned a little more percussive and acoustic. We're all really big fans of that kind of music, like Goats Head Soup and a lot of the early Rolling Stones use acoustic guitars as percussive things. I think it's our strong point. It's actually been our true ... our one original contribution to, y'know, this indie-rock thing, that more acoustic sound. I'm amazed at how much people are critical. In what way are they critical of it? Chris} That we're pussies, that we're not cool. It's not a cool thing to do. We were doing that during the Nevermind era and, of course, Soundgarden's big era, and Smashing Pumpkins, kinda metally-sounding things. We were definitely influenced by J Mascis and hugely influenced by Hüsker Dü. A lot of the reasons that we got on stage were because of those bands. I think, once you play, what's really true to heart comes out. You'd probably be thrown in with less fashionable contemporaries now. Chris} Yeah, I wince when people say 'you guys are sounding like The Wallflowers. I feel like there's traditional elements to our music but I never felt that we were copying too much of a retro thing. I wanted to stay clear of the Black Crowes, Counting Crows thing. Would you agree that you wrote your best songs for this album? Chris} I think there are a couple there that shine out. I feel that with each record. I meant your own contributions. Chris} I don't distinguish them very much. I always felt that I make my best contributions on songs that I don't always necessarily sing on. It's always been my ground. It's not a separate songwriter thing? Chris} In a sense. They definitely start off with melodies and

acoustic demos we both bring in but, I always felt, like, when in most bands you see people start to go in their own directions you go 'well, what is wrong here?' My place in the band, I think, is to really contribute towards songs that Bill sings on - that's my strong point. Knot In It debuts the seemingly contradictory Buffalo Tom drum loop. Tom} We wanted it to not feel forced or anything, something that is going to meld with what we do traditionally. I

think we did need to try something like that, twist some things around. It gives it a different feel. I think we're all looking for slight differences like that – add some horns, add some more keys here, more vocal harmonies and stuff – trying some of this technology that we have now. How different is the group dynamic having added Phil Aitken to the line-up? Chris} You gotta make some room. It's like sitting four people on a bench. You've got to give people their space. You've been playing together for twelve years so that space is etched in your mind, but Phil's so fluid that he fits right around us. Nice to hear Carol Van Dijk singing with you on Under Milkwood. She once said that she'd be happier writing songs for other people than having to perform them herself. Was she nervous? Chris} That's funny because that's the way I felt on this song. I said 'Carol, I want you to sing this song, here's a tape.' She gets to the studio and she's like 'I don't want to sing this song, you sing the song. I'll sing along with you.' I was hoping she'd take the lead because it's a story I wanted



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

from a female point of view. But Tom was listening and he kinda placed in when she sung the best. Which is good, because it's hard for me to tell. You gotta be on your toes and create from your ... it's very instinctive. My favourite parts of the record came out that way. You've used a different production team for every album. Is that to keep things interesting for you? Tom} I think so, yeah. Let's hear some other ears, hear what they have to say. Chris} The last couple of records we were talking to a lot of people who are producing real studio records. We talked to the guy who was producing Neil Young right before we recorded Sleepy Eyed. He was the guy who planted the idea of us recording live. We met with Chris Kimsey who led us in the direction of how the Stones recorded Some Girls – very live – and out of all these conversations we take a lot of things. We shy away from producers who have a distinct sound. Daniel Lanois, that's the kind of guy we try to go against because we've got our sound that we want but we want to let it breathe. Grand Prix, the Teenage Fanclub record, we're such total fans of that. That record sounds so good. Then they mentioned that David got into their songs and wrestled with them a bit ... Looking back at your albums do you have any favourites? Chris} It seems our audience prefers Let Me Come Over so far in our career. We play a lot of music from that record. I kinda like Big Red Letter Day, but I like Smitten. A lot of it I really like. But

playing live is very different from a record. Tom} Once you start touring certain songs may wear on you. It's like 'I don't need to play this.' There was a stylistic jump from Birdbrain to Let Me Come Over typified by songs like Taillights Fade, then I'm Allowed and now Wiser. Tom} I think those songs were us following our own writing voices. Not taking so much from your influences. It was like us finding our own niche as a band. I think Birdbrain is kinda flowing in different directions to see what we think of and the first one ... I think we decided 'these are the ten songs we have, let's record them!' It's perhaps a little early, but how's the press reaction to date for Smitten? Chris} There was a really good one in Raygun. I appreciated the mention that it was a studio album that had twelve different kinds of sound. I think that was sort of an intention. When you get to this stage in your career people review your records as your career. I read the whole review and they haven't mentioned a song - they want to talk about you as an entity. Tom} I think you get a little jaded. I remember how it feels when you first read something they write and it's kind of a shock. You get used to it. It's tough to get a lot of press. I mean we get our share but unless there's a story. We're not getting arrested, being assholes or thrown off planes or anything. You've always been cast as the anti-rock stars. Chris} The boys next door ...

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# Dakota Suite

**I don't feel morbid**, says Chris Hooson of Leeds-based Dakota Suite as we broach the subject of misery in music. I'll tell you what I do feel, and he's definitely warming up here. I mean, my stance is that life is just inherently disappointing. He says this with a flat, isn't-it-obvious tone. I can't get around it. It's a morose pronouncement maybe, but one that's central to Dakota Suite and their music's icy edges- even being overtly stated in the refrain of *Divided*: "life isn't what you thought it would be"- and it inhabits the outlook Chris has for the band. ¶ I tell him I like the fact that they haven't upped sticks down to

London in an attempt to be noticed. We never get asked! he laughs, adding, I never see myself making any kind of living out of this. I used to work with alcoholics and now I work with kids in care, like drug users and stuff, and I just never see myself making any kind of living out of music. I just think it's nice that someone wants to put out my records and I think that's quite a healthy view to have. I love playing London, because it seems to me that the people in London will come out and see stuff, whereas in the provinces out here you go and do a gig to three people and you're thinking, 'why the hell am I doing this?' ¶ Dakota Suite's music is sparse and spacious and, in spite of a varied musical canon that nudges at jazz and world rhythms, they make a vulnerable, thin-skinned sound that betrays Chris Hooson's initial motivations. Basically I started writing some songs as an exercise in catharsis, he says. Doesn't that impetus make it difficult to perform live? It's really difficult. I do a gig - and I think I have this in common with probably lots of other bands of a similar ilk to us - but you always get a couple of real obsessives who come up. I've had

similar, he states. And I'm talking in the sense of the variety of stuff like the instrumental album, the Suite for 18 Cellos and stuff. I don't hear anybody else doing it. While admitting to a liking for Red House Painters, Will Oldham and, more recently, Plush, Hooson confesses to a general ignorance of modern music. I'm obsessed by ECM you see, he explains. And I'm not the first to point out a similarity between the packaging of Dakota Suite's albums, with their monotone photography by Chris's wife Johanna, and the stark look of the ECM back catalogue. He goes on, my listening is mainly fairly melancholic instrumental stuff like Harold Budd and Eno, the Rachels and stuff like that. Another influence, and I don't think it comes through very much, is the whole Coltrane thing. We're hideously into Coltrane. I listen to so little new music it's not true, so if there were any English bands I really wouldn't know it, because I don't listen to any, which is a bit sad. ¶ Their name taken from the NY apartment of John Lennon, and an instrumental on 'Barbed Wire Fence' entitled December 8th 1980, as well as that album's dedication, 'to the memory of John Winston Lennon,' I finish up by asking where this Lennon fixation stems from. People get the album, look at it and they go, 'December 8th 1980, what's that about?' and my face starts boiling. Usually the other band members have to restrain me, I'm like, 'I'm not answering that, I'm off.' My parents are from Liverpool, that's where I grew up, they grew up going to the Cavern. Mum and Dad were into that hippie, end-of-sixties vibe. While other kids grew up with Fisher Price and building



people walk up to me in tears, like, 'your music means everything to me.' And I really find that difficult to cope with because when I do a gig it really is like an outpouring. I feel like vomiting afterwards. I really feel distressed and I usually have to get away really quickly because I'm genuinely shaking. Because when I sing a song I put into it the intensity with which I wrote it and I do tend to get a little overwhelmed because it tends to come back to me a lot, and that's hard. ¶ Bearing comparisons to Low or Mark Eitzel or Rex, Dakota Suite's reference points are all American. Does he not see any British contemporaries? His answer, though warily confident, is mercifully free of any best-band-in-the-world posturing. I don't hear anybody else doing anything

he died, I was 9, and I had six weeks off school, I was thrashing around the playground twatting people. I was mad, I was really insanely mad. When I woke up that morning and heard the news I was just beside myself, I was gutted. It's the same reason I can't listen to *Double Fantasy* at all, it does my head in. I mean I don't think our music shows any Lennon influence at all, but I always say, if you're from Liverpool and that's what you're steeped in, you'd understand how big it was: in Liverpool, to my parents, and to me consequently. I moved to Holland about two months later and I lived there for about eight years- my parents had a bar- and it took me a long time to get over it and now it freaks me, it really freaks me. If *Woman* comes on the radio I have to turn it off, I just can't bear it. There is no influence music-ally, I'm just a bit hung up on the whole thing, really.

blocks I grew up with Pink Floyd and the Beatles. And my only memory of childhood is this huge John Lennon picture of him standing in front of the kick drum with this lovely Rickenbacker. I had that huge poster on my wall. And I remember when

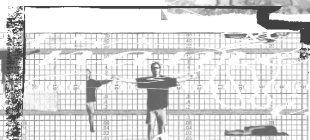
interview **Martin**  
photography **Johanna**



**If it's true that humankind** is spliced between the 'watchers' and the 'doers', then Warren Defever - writer, producer and plate-spinning Everyman within Michigan's eclectic His Name Is Alive - falls squarely into the latter camp. Never one to idle on the touchline, when he's not overachieving in a band set-up he might be found making music under a selection of other names, he's directed a number of short films and also published several childrens books, each with - yikes - a clear moral message. Despite his activity, Defever remains a reluctant frontman - when we play live I'm always at the back - and, it seems, an equally reluctant interviewee as he perches on the edge of the 4AD sofa with an amiable mix of disinterest and nervousness. Defever professes a dislike of the UK that goes hand-in-hand with his slightly bonkers pledge never to work with anyone whose house he can't walk to. I don't really like anywhere outside my house, he deadpans with just a trace of paranoid agoraphobia. But here he is, having dragged himself and the band over to Britain for a few dates, and maybe the occasional game of stage hoop-la, on the back of His Name Is Alive's latest album Fort Lake. Defever's disparate work ethic is equally applicable to his band's records. Any listen to His Name Is Alive elicits a kind of channel surfing effect as motley genres- dub, gospel, rockabilly, funk- blur seamlessly together, sharing little else but the same sheeny production. Kids today are able to take in a lot more things, he says in affirmation of this dilettante MTV sensibility. Wearing his current fascinations on his sleeve, as well as a penchant for what he calls Detroit Booty music, it's easy to detect a love of Hendrix in the extended guitar throttling of songs like Don't Make Me Wait and Wishing Ring (especially the ludicrously distended fret-wank on the version from the B-side of the single Can't Always Be Loved.) So is each album a reflection of his listening at the time? They are, yeah, he considers. But

by the time they've come out I've moved on. Okey dokey. In the past Warren has taken hands-on control of all aspects of HNIA's output - writing, editing and recording the music, penning the lyrics and producing the songs, as well as allocating the idiosyncratic titles (of which Up (Up Your Legs Forever)

stands out.) For Fort Lake though - taking deep breaths - he loosed control somewhat, sharing the writing credits with bassist Chad Gilchrist, and turned over some of the production to ex-Funkadelic producer Steve King (born and raised in Warren's hometown of Livonia, naturally.) He was really just another friendly face, Defever says nonchalantly of King's presence, both in the studio and at their live residency at the Gold Dollar club in Detroit, which, he adds, used to be an old transvestite bar. It was here that the sound of Fort Lake, with its Jetsons-meets-George Clinton combination was defined. Did you start out with any musical agenda? No, no agenda at all really. It all developed while we were playing. And the songs let me know when they're ready. While lesser mortals are content to plough genre-specific furrows album after album, Defever is happy to spread himself thin, preferring a pick 'n' mix ethic. From where does he get this short stylistic attention span? He blames his Grandfather. I mean, I started playing music when I was seven. I would go to my grandpa's house and pick up his banjo and play guitar and fiddle and stuff. But, then again, maybe Warren's just contrary. I thought I was being a rebel.



*This name*

**It's an unlikely alliance.** If you're going to be in a band with your ex-wife wouldn't you need a couple of other players to relieve some of that tension? Not, it would seem, if you were Sam Coomes. And if you are going to draft in someone to help out with the live show, is it wise to recruit an ex-bandmate who's currently receiving worldwide praise and admiration for his solo work? But then Sam Coomes is a man so at ease with the situation that he will openly make-out with his keyboard in front of not only his one-time spouse but a Dingwalls audience who, for the most part, are witnessing the Quasi experience for the first time. Quasi is Coomes and Janet Weiss (she of Sleater-Kinney), a truly dynamic duo with an on (and off?) stage rapport second to none. And when the shuffling frame of Elliott Smith saunters on to flesh-out the sound with a little bass, guitar or keyboards, the resulting chemistry and sense of, well, love is enough to make grown men weep. At least it would be if the music weren't so damn 'up'. From the very depths of Coomes' beloved Roxichord come some of the most irresistible, catchy melodies to hit the eardrum in '98. In the absence of Weiss a tired but lucid singer parks himself in a Wandsworth café alcove and entertains a few questions.

# Qua

Your version of The Zombies' This Will Be Our Year was a highlight of the Dingwalls show. How did you stumble upon that one? That was, like, a spur of the moment thing. Maybe last time we were on tour with Elliott we were driving down the road and just started getting off on the song and thought we should play it, it would be fun. And we did, but we never actually play it unless Elliott's there 'cause I never figured it out on the piano! The list of cover versions you've been known to play includes a lot of other British bands. Bowie, Black Sabbath, Duran Duran, George Harrison. I guess it's probably not coincidental. When I was growing up American music was more like Hard Rock and Heavy Metal, and British music was more Pop, which I was more interested in. Even the British Metal, when I started listening to that, was better than the American stuff. With a few exceptions. Do you believe Happiness Is Guaranteed to be an accurate depiction of the future? I had an elaborate scenario in my head when I wrote it that would have required a really long song. It's about, you know, in the future everybody lives in a space-pod or a dome underwater where everything's controlled and safe and everybody's happiness, up to a point, is guaranteed. But there's people who can't fit into this structured, controlled environment despite it being a moderately happy experience, so they live where we live now, on the surface of the earth which is fucked up and has all kinds of problems. Much like it has today, but they prefer it despite all the trouble. It's written from the perspective of somebody who lives in one of the controlled environments but I think I would not be interested in that. I'd be back down with the rest of the ne'er-do-wells and black sheep on the surface. So, that's an elaborate exposition of a short pop song! Emotionally it sounds pretty sterile. Those are tendencies that have always been around anyway, as



technology increases we'll have more and more chances to go farther and farther in that direction. But there's always people that want safety and stability and willingly clamp down on any freedom or individuality in the pursuit of that. And then there's those of us who feel we have to resist that. There's a recurring theme of Man Vs Machine in your work. I use the machine and robot imagery because of the times we live in. If I was writing a couple hundred years ago I woulda used some other thing. It's like the old TV series, Star Trek, where you have Spock and Kirk and Kirk is the passionate, impulsive ... kinda hideous in a way, ha, ha, but very human as a person and Spock is very machine-like. Sometimes, for instance, for most of my life I've had to work crappy, service-industry type jobs where it's required of you to be very machine-like quite often. And so your behaviour is regulated by the Company. You're told what to do, how to act and what to say. Inside the human part of you is going 'Fuck this! Let me out!' and so things like that exacerbate those dichotomies. Are you hoping music will mean never having to do that kind of work again? I never want to go back! Ha, ha, ha! I'm gonna be busy for a while now. It seems like I've been able to grab a passing car on a rollercoaster. Let's see how long I can ride it out. It was kind of a long time coming. Your lyrics have come under a lot of scrutiny. An example would be Poisoned Well with its supposedly Elliott Smith inspired line "You won't live long, but you may write the perfect song." It struck me that it's just as likely to be about you. Or anybody really who's a troubled musician, you know what I mean? It's not limited to Elliott or me. I don't mind that people scrutinise the words. I wrote them on the inside of the record. I'm also a listener of music and I read the lyrics and I think 'that's probably about this'. And I might be right and I might be wrong, that's the interesting thing about it. It's not like a philosophical tract or a mathematical formula; it's open to all kinds of interpretation. It's not in my pin it down and print my own definition on it. Will the smoothing out of your relationship problems with Janet prompt a change in direction for your songwriting? Possibly. We were playing music before we had our split, during it and after it. It's fairly distant now; we've gotten over it. I have had, and probably will have, other relationships. These are insoluble problems, basically, ha! So it was maybe a little more intense at the time, but there's

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

no shortage of things to write about inside the human being or in the outside world. Did you ever imagine ever playing these songs with anyone besides Janet? Besides her being one of the best drummers around, when we were not getting along at all we were still working together very well and both of us knew that. It's very difficult to get to the level that we're at where we can kinda communicate with our eyes. It was hard won for us. It's not something I'm thinking about at all, to not play music with Janet. But I played music before I met her and I'll play music until my dying day! So, you're playing with your ex-wife and ex-bandmate. Are you the most well adjusted man in rock? No! Far from it. I'm well adjusted to living a maladjusted life, maybe? Which is what's required working with the rest of the maladjusted people I work with.





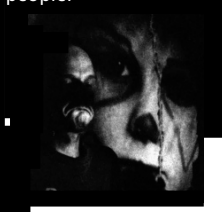
**INTERVIEW** wyndham  
**PHOTOGRAPHY** paul

# Godspeed you Black emperor!

And lo, GODSPEED YOU BLACK EMPEROR! did arrive in London at the appointed time, and all the hipsters, and all the cognoscenti, and all the curious, and all the post-rockers, and all the media, did gather together at the appointed place and did wail and stroke their chins at the spectacle. And GODSPEED YOU BLACK EMPEROR! did rock in most aggressive fashion, and laid aside their cerebral tendencies in order to fulfil the prophecy of those who had testified to their epic talent. And the people did talk and chatter throughout. And GODSPEED YOU BLACK EMPEROR! did weep and gnash their teeth in frustration. ¶ What is it about the world of music that makes us demand so much more than music of musicians? Isn't it enough that they write and record great albums for us to listen to whenever we want in the privacy of our homes? Obviously many bands love to play the games that the industry offers - recording endlessly, playing any place that invites them, talking until the cashcows come home about what makes them do it, the state of the nation, the meaning of life. But what about those for whom this is anathema? Why does the industry insist that they head out onto the road when this does so much to harm their creativity in the long term? Bands like Built To Spill, Talk Talk, Plush - all acts unhappy with the games they were forced to play, so much so that they nearly drove them from the pursuit that made us all so happy. These are bedroom artists, artists that we should learn to enjoy in privacy. This music isn't about the beer-fuelled bonding to which guitars more often lend themselves. It's about intimacy and our love of their talent. Why should we want them to perform these songs in public if they don't want to? Is it that we need reassurance that we are not alone in our passion? GODSPEED YOU BLACK EMPEROR!'s debut album knocked me sideways the first times I heard it. It was their sheer bravado and their lack of

respect for conventional rock forms, their willingness to go to places that most would discard as pretentious just because they could. The feeling that when they made this music they probably surprised themselves as much as they were now surprising me. But then they took it on the road. They started doing the interviews. And they killed the spirit. Don't take my word for it. This is what they told me. If GODSPEED YOU BLACK EMPEROR! never make another record it will be our fault. What were we thinking? How could nine people head out for a prolonged period of time, on a small budget, and expect to maintain the spirit of adventure that made their record so exciting? These are hardcore egos, with hugely disparate influences, forced to share confined spaces and perform the same music over and over again to please a crowd buzzing on the novelty. These are quiet, reserved people, forced to answer the same questions over and over again in an attempt to define what exactly it is they do, when it is precisely the fact that it all happens by accident that makes it so memorable. The two members of GODSPEED YOU BLACK EMPEROR! who join me for an hour or so in a noisy Islington pub are clearly uncomfortable with the whole concept of promotion. They shift awkwardly when asked about influences, band history, motivation, thematic and musical concerns. In fact, the only time they seem to relax is when they start to concede that the trip has been hard and extremely frustrating for them. They speak quietly, and try to not compromise the seven members of the band who are not around by answering on their behalf. They complain about the photographers at the show the night before, and bemoan the fact that they were forced to drop the more subtle aspects of their performance in order to win the audience's attention. And they explain how, when they

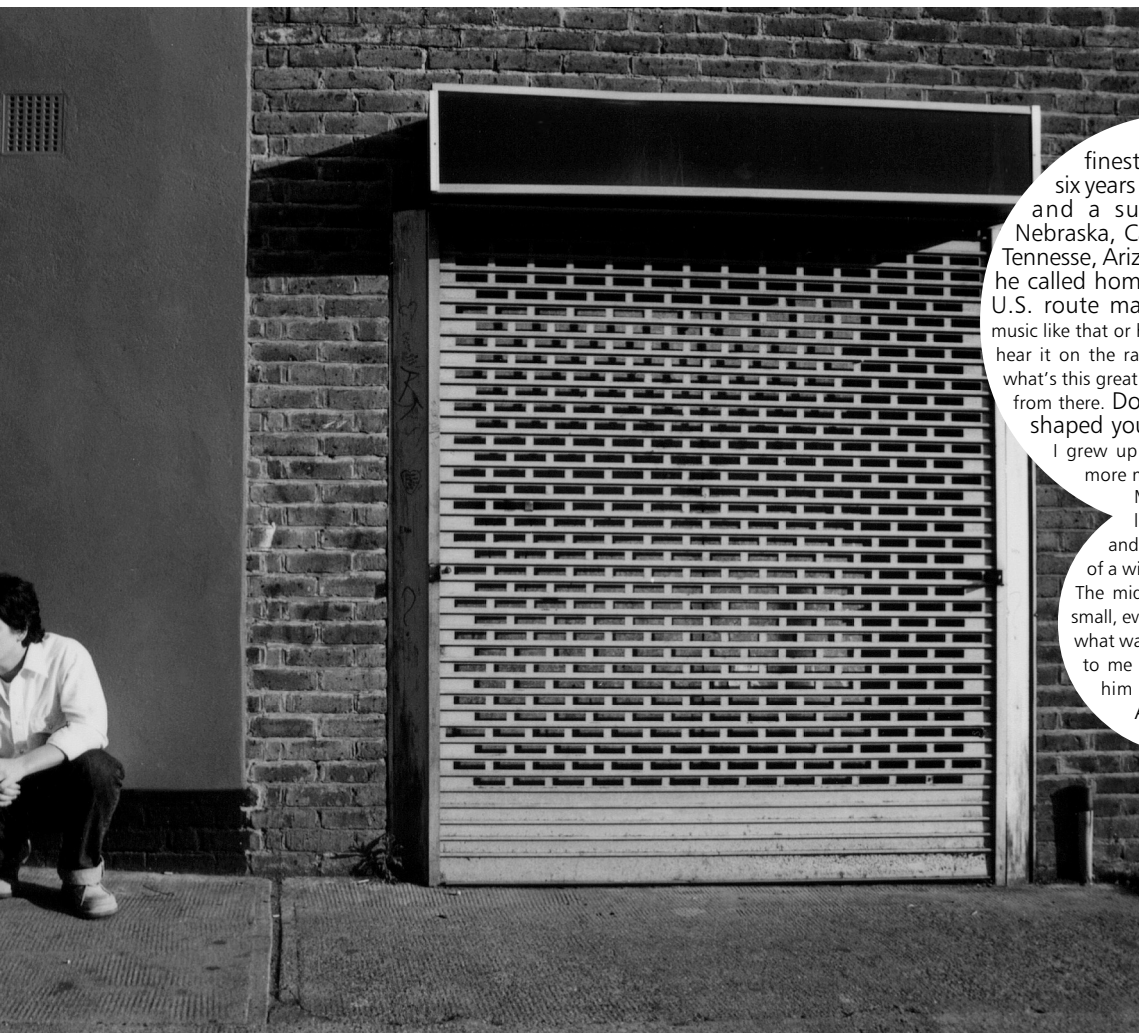
started, they thought they had found the answer to the frustration that comes from playing the same songs over and over again, night after night. Now they're not so sure. And as we disperse, it occurs to me that the hour of their time that I have taken up, and the weeks that they have spent on the road, were useless. What matters to me about GODSPEED YOU BLACK EMPEROR! is that they go back to their studio by the rail tracks in Montreal, and that they rediscover what it was that made the whole thing so exciting in the first place. And that I go back to the album and rediscover what made them so exciting in the first place. What matters is their music. And when other stuff starts mattering when they don't want it to, then the music can only suffer. ¶ And the nine prophets did lay down their instruments, and did look upon the assembled crowd, and did raise their voices in frustration. And some did cry that they were false prophets, and that GODSPEED YOU BLACK EMPEROR! wore no clothes. And yet others did salute the Second Coming and did proclaim the EMPEROR! to be the future of civilisation. And GODSPEED YOU BLACK EMPEROR! did shake their heads, and did retire to whence they had come. For they had found what they had looked for, but lost it again amidst the gifts and offerings of the people.



**You could say it was all John Hughes' fault.** If it weren't for that magic handful of '80's flicks in which the Chicago writer/director chalked out the Bratpack blueprint then Josh Rouse might still be staring out of his Mid-west window. As it is his debut album, *Dressed Up Like Nebraska*, has been on

# Joe

the shelves for several months now, a record that sleepily thumbs its nose at neat categorisation. Not that this diminutive Nebraskan is blazing any particular avant-garde trail with his sombre, heartfelt clutch of songs. Just that none of the easy monikers- country, pop, country-pop- quite cuts the mustard.



After soundchecking with the Cure's *Why Can't I Be You* he tells me, I got turned onto that stuff by John Hughes soundtracks. They had Psychedelic Furs, Echo & The Bunnymen, New Order, The Smiths. I loved them. In six years have been divided between the road and a succession of short-stay homes. Nebraska, California, Utah, Wyoming, Georgia, Tennessee, Arizona, South Dakota. The list of places he called home before the age of 20 reads like a U.S. route map. In small towns it's hard to get hold of music like that or hear it, he continues. You're not going to hear it on the radio. I'd watch the movies and go, 'Wow, what's this great music?' And then I'd go pick up the records from there. Do you feel that this itinerant life has shaped you? Well, it's shaped me as a person, I think. I grew up pretty quick. At a young age I was much more mentally mature than a lot of people my age. My mom and dad were divorced when I was like two and I lived in with my mom for a while and she remarried my stepfather who was kind of a wild guy. He was a crazy guy, did a lot of drugs. The mid-west is a very conservative place and very small, everybody knows everybody, so everybody knew what was going on with that and it was embarrassing to me when I was younger. I was embarrassed by him in general. Tired of this peripatetic Absolutely Fabulous-style existence, when Josh turned 16 he moved in with his father. A strict military man, this situation brought its own complications. A day after graduation I moved out. And that was a big problem with him. A lot of the songs on the record are either about being

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embarrassed of my step-father and him dying and the emotional impact on me or, y'know, not getting along with my father well. Under the spell of a Neil Young-fixated uncle, Josh began writing songs when he was 18. But it was only when he moved to Nashville, after a succession of half-hearted bands that things started falling together. Well, actually, what I did was I pretty much just sat on my couch. In Nashville Josh hooked up with David Henry, sometime Cowboy Junkie and his collaborator on *Dressed Up Like Nebraska*. He had an ad. in a paper that said, 'cello player- just got off tour with the Cowboy Junkies.' I called him up and we did a couple of gigs and the first demo that we did was the one that got all the interest, so it really clicked, y'know. Was David Henry's role that of a kind of musical director? Yeah, in keeping consistent with my guitar playing. Not

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

any arrangements or anything like that, or any melodies. He has a really good attitude, he never really gets down. Where I'll get depressed and be like, 'I suck,' he'll be like 'no, no, you don't suck. Let's try again.' A year after recording your debut, are you satisfied with the results? Recording a record is funny because that's really just one take of something you can do in a lot of different ways. The single they put out in America, *Late Night Conversation*, isn't the best time we've done it, y'know. It's just kind of, 'that's the song, lets just do it and get it down.' I'm really not into perfection. I like mistakes and I like to hear them, I like it to be a little rough around the edges. With the upbeat rawk of a song like *A Simple Thing* and the slow build of *Flair* and *The White Trash Period Of My Life*, *Dressed Up Like Nebraska* evenly mixes a kind of mellow pop with stripped, rustic country flavours, falling somewhere between Matthew Sweet and Mark Eitzel. I think I blend the two, he says. I consider myself a pop artist. I like songs with subtle hooks to them and a nice feel, not cheesy like, y'know, like a lot of radio pop is. Old Cure is pop music to me, they're great songs and there's a hook to them but there's depth as well. But I'm also, like, a Mark Eitzel fan and he's not about that at all. But even the more radio-friendly songs from the album, like *Suburban Sweetheart* and *Late Night Conversation*, have a relaxed quality to them. I like music I can put on and sit around my house to and lay on my couch and listen to and really enjoy, more than music I'd put on and go out to on Friday night and party to. I just don't do that, I don't live that type of lifestyle. As well as an EP with *Lambchop* in the near future (*and a new album in June - Ed*), Josh has a more somnolent

project hibernating. I have this idea in my mind of doing an EP called *Six Songs To Help You Sleep*. Very laid back. They're songs but they're very atmospheric, y'know: lap steel, a lot of delay on them, just really eerie. A lot of the songs I have written are in the same key and the same feel. I think it's a great idea. I don't know anybody who's really done it. Like a musical version of those *New Age* tapes? I like to go to sleep with the stereo on, I don't get a chance to do it much any more, but right around when I started playing music I would go to sleep with the headphones on. I think somehow that gets planted into your subconscious, y'know, when you're sleeping at night somehow it gets in there. **Snooze Rock**, anyone?

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