

THE ARTERY



My Bloody Valentine: sending the sniffer dogs barmy

OF NOISE

● After an 18-month gap MY BLOODY VALENTINE are back on vinyl making a right bleedin' racket with their new EP 'Glider'. STUART MACONIE discovers Creation's decibel merchants to be quiet (sic) the opposite off the record and tries to start up a conversation on sex, drugs 'n' Kylie Minogue.

Pictures: A J BARRATT

Beneath the pavements of the West End, in a licenced cave half full of bickering Spanish waiters and the late afternoon harvest of the pub trade, clandestine lovers, solitary novel readers and general losers, My Bloody Valentine and I are huddled around a tape recorder, trying to overcome the eternal artificiality of the interview situation.

Three of MBV are silent, the fourth, Kevin Shields is outlining (very quietly) the peculiar pleasures of being in a pop group. Unnoticed at first, the jukebox crackles into life via the speaker by our heads.

Strange at the time, upon listening to the tape the next day it becomes surreally comic. Kevin, a man to whom the adjective 'undemonstrative' can be applied without fear of contradiction, begins to have to compete with the rising strains of the jukebox. He is explaining the attraction of the rock 'n' roll life. "There is an appeal in being on tour. You get to take lots of drugs and be a bit decadent... and that is... quite fun... provided..."

The record threatening to drown his fragile words is, appropriately, Elvis' 'American Trilogy', a song that is either a bloated slew of sentiment or an American cultural signifier *par excellence*, or perhaps both. As Kevin talks of degeneracy in his faltering Irish brogue, the King, the people's ham, bellows, "His truth is marching on!". Just before the angel choirs and drum rolls crash over into silence, Kevin, flushed, looks up from his beer: "I've been waiting to say these things all my life!"

A BLOODY RACKET

THE IRONY being, of course, that there can be few bands less declamatory, less given to rhetoric than My Bloody Valentine. Though their music may, on occasion, seethe and reverberate with sound and fury, trailing showers of sparks, theirs is a purely sensual creation; private, undramatic, given to no grand gestures. Bobby Gillespie is Billy Bragg next to these people.

Reading their old press clippings is like downing a yard of Night Nurse, like walking through treacle. The same descriptions abound: 'Dreamy', 'sedate', 'ethereal', 'trance-like'. And you can see why. As people they are quite open about their 'untogetherness'. They are sociable but hesitant, never brash, and according to themselves rarely even confident.

Their keenest and most wordy devotees drool over the languor of their creations. To the uninitiated, then, this might lead one to expect the pianissimo murmurings of the Cowboy Junkies. Not a bit. My Bloody Valentine, it has to be said, are not averse to making a

bloody racket.

They are a pop group... of sorts. They are quite happy with this description though some of their fans might throw up their hands in horror. High falutin' art theory aside, they are in the same line of work as Kylie and the Goss boys, albeit in a different branch. They have the good sense to realise this. The difference is that where most contemporary pop, be it Martika or The Stone Roses or Skid Row is perfectly rehearsed and rigidly defined, an impeccably tailored garment, My Bloody Valentine's music is blurred, shifting; these are pop songs with broken backs, with the innards bared and glistening.

In the best of them, there's a fruitful tension between the half-formed, ghostly melodies and the lure of pure sound. Nothing is made explicit. You can't hear the words and things keep getting snatched away on the wind. I've always had my suspicions that many 'weirdo' and 'experimental' bands choose such a musical route for dubious reasons; because they fancy the girls and the drugs and the flexible hours but are incapable of writing decent pop songs.

Certainly, if Genesis P Orridge or Christian Death live to be a thousand, neither of them will ever come up with 'Rent', 'This Charming Man' or 'She Bangs The Drum'. But I don't feel this way about Kevin, Bilinda, Deb and Colm. Even at their strangest, their songs resonate with good ideas, with fractured echoes of the pop heritage and a lack of pretence. Wholesome pop tunes that have fallen in with a bad crowd and grown up a little unhinged.

According to legend, My Bloody Valentine are the band who re-invented themselves: saw the light and effected the neat transformation from fey and unfashionable janglers to pioneering 'heads' of the New Psychedelia. But nothing in the MBV universe is ever this straightforward or contrived. I first heard them in the summer of 1987 when I was spellbound by a single called 'Strawberry Wine'. Bold and mesmerising at the time, it remains, perhaps, my favourite MBV song; wild, heady, sad, an out of focus snapshot. As well as being merely a cracking tune, it had a certain wistful mystery that set it apart from the mediocre bulk of most independent label guitar pop.

With the benefit of hindsight, it's easy to cry up 'Strawberry Wine' as a significant moment, a turning point. It was the first record to feature the current line-up. Prior to then, My Bloody Valentine had boasted an oddball singer called Dave and had been widely, if inaccurately, pigeonholed as competent, albeit uninspired indiepoppers with a penchant for songtitles such as 'Sunny Sundaes Smile'.

After 'Strawberry Wine' came the breathless ascent to credibility as subsequent releases such as 'Cigarette In Your Bed' and 'You Made Me Realise' garnered reams of hyperbole. By the release of their debut Creation LP 'Isn't Anything', My Bloody Valentine were attracting seriously purple prose. If you



Your heart balloons to me

"We like to play loud because once you get over 100 decibels that causes a physical change in people because the body can sense imminent danger."

could get past the references to 'translucent helium dream symphonies' and 'post-semantic tristesse' you might have gathered that 'Isn't Anything' was a fine record; stark, unusual and invigorating, sometimes sweet, sometimes savage and the perfect fashion accessory for those too intelligent for Loop — ie nearly everyone...

That, however, was 18 months ago and a lot has happened since then. There's a new map of Europe for one thing, but more importantly to some, the whole world has gone disco crazy! Every leather-kekked class traitor that ever there was is queuing up to have the Lou Reed remixed out of their system... and shame on you if you can't dance too! Into this new and exciting world come The Valentines with a new EP 'Glider', the title track of which is a splintered, rhythmic celebration bound to be seen in some quarters as a concession to the current dancefloor mania. And even more interesting, in a world turned so effectively upside down that even the execrable Birdland can have hits, are My Bloody Valentine destined for Gary Davis' Radio 1 show... and beyond?

The West End, March 1990. In a few days time these streets will echo to the sound of splintering glass and the odd car going over, but for now all is as energetically and mundanely seedy as always. Half of My Bloody Valentine are early, the other half late. They are two young Irish men and two young English women; polite, affable but with an undertow of

embarrassed shyness. We find a dark, unoccupied corner of a bar below pavement level and try to ease our way into a conversation. This is never easy and sometimes as pleasant as having a tooth removed. With a little perseverance today, however, My Bloody Valentine offer some insights into their idiosyncratic world, into their gameplan or lack of it, into sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll... but not necessarily in that order.

ROCK 'N' ROLL

"TO BE honest, we don't really know what it is we're doing. I mean, there's effort and consideration there... I don't mean that we're doing things unthinkingly. But in the end we don't actually know what it is, we're never sure how things will turn out. I hate it when the London listings magazines have those few sentences saying 'The noisy, psychedelic band play at... That inaccuracy of generalisation, I don't know what it is we're doing but I know when people get it wrong.'"

Kevin Shields speaks hesitantly, wrestling with his words. This is interrupted by flurries of good humoured insight. He is the chief, though by no means the only, songwriter in My Bloody Valentine and in this five-way conversation, he tends to emerge as a pseudo-spokesman, the others being content with the odd affirmation or passing observance. I have just wondered aloud whether, in view of their much vaunted strangeness and

psycho-drug noise, it would be fair to call My Bloody Valentine a pop group?

"Oh, yes. Why not? I would say we're a sort of pop group. It's a fairly broad category. Like I said, we, or at least I, find it difficult to really explain what it is we do. We fiddle about a lot. It does seem that the rock groups of the '60s and '70s did have all their moves and their concepts so planned. We aren't like that at all."

Yet 'pop', as in *Top Of The...* and as in Kylie and Jason moving, fixed-grinned, through an embarrassing dance routine, would seem light years away, at least from the diehard MBV fan point of view, from what this band are about.

"Well, certainly no one is ever likely to come to us and say 'I'm sorry, this just isn't commercial enough'. We aren't part of the market in that way. We're no one's big hope for the future. I get the feeling that we can stay outside of it all, doodling away. Doing our own thing and people will be quite happy with that. All the bands around us on Creation are commercial prospects, but we aren't. Well, yes we are, but not in the sense of having surefire hits. For one thing, we're not steady or consistent enough in terms of the music we make. It's too changeable. Good 'product' is simple 'product'. We're too messy."

Given that My Bloody Valentine can sound like anything from a rock outfit of the Detroit school to Karl Heinz Stockhausen slumming it, often within the confines of the same song, it's perhaps forgivable that critics have gone, shall we say, a trifle bonkers with the English language in their efforts to come to terms with them. Have they ever wondered what all the fuss is about?

"I can't pronounce a lot of the words that have been used to describe us! It's kind of thoughtful but thoughtless, if you see what I mean. You do sometimes wish that journalists would be a little more down to earth. It's funny, sometimes when we're OK-ing the press kits to be used in other countries, you think 'God, imagine trying to make sense of this stuff if you can't speak English!' I suppose it's a reaction to punk. Rock journalism went through a phase of having to be very down to earth and now it's okay to be arty again. That's alright... even if we do come out of it sounding like a progressive rock band!"

"Sometimes we don't really feel part of the whole thing ourselves. When we were finishing the latest record, we'd often be in the studio watching the early morning news. This was in that period when every day it seemed there was something phenomenal going on in Eastern Europe. At times like that music and the music business does seem super-irrelevant. Plus we don't exist so comfortably ourselves. Bilinda's got a little boy. So sometimes we don't really feel a part of anything."

Are you saying that you find the whole business of being in a pop group somewhat... silly?

"Well, yes, it's silly. But it's also hard and it's a pain in the arse sometimes. Still, working in a horrible job, which I've done, is harder — as is bringing up five kids in some horrible council flat. I find it hard to be light-hearted about the pop business, particularly since so many people make their livings from it."

The standard wisdom, and what aggrieves the band perceptibly, is that My Bloody Valentine made a career move that could have been choreographed by Houdini in swapping the coy, lisping pastel pop of their early recordings for pure sound and colour, massing along the way the hip approval that had always eluded them. You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to unearth the evidence for this supposed *volte-face*. Simply play a track like 1987's 'Another Rainy

Saturday'; a piece of boppy, adolescent cute somewhere between The Buzzcocks and The BMX Bandits and then compare it with the ruined soundscapes of 1988's 'No More Sorry', and, *voilà*, here are the group who, perhaps with a cynical eye on the fading fortunes of the 'C86' generation, grew up very quickly and very publicly. Throwing caution to the wind and cracking open that deadly second bottle of lager, MBV tell the cynics where to get off in no uncertain fashion.

"To be honest, that isn't true really. If I wanted to I could sit down with you and play all our records in order from Day One and you'd hear a logical progression. In the beginning we were much more experimental. Experimental meaning this group who played this superficially poppy stuff that was really quite sick. It was a lot to do with our original singer Dave. He was a very perverse person who enjoyed writing these little tunes that were actually quite weird. There'd be just one word that changed the whole emphasis of the song. But, in a way it was just an in-joke. Not surprisingly no one got it."

They were bound to say that, of course, but I believe them. My Bloody Valentine were never The Primitives and even in their embryonic phase there was always something fumblingly alien about their little songs. But then there's the matter of the tracks on the new single, 'Soon' (not to be confused with their new EP 'Glider'). It's a My Bloody Valentine record alright, right down to its I-must-get-that-washing-machine-seen-to-guitar-tones and its recorded-over-the-phone vocals. But lurking behind all this 'sonic terrorism' is the unmistakable beat of James Brown's 'Funky Drummer'. Have My Bloody Valentine taken the Guru Josh route to spiritual fulfilment? Have they gone disco crazy? On this matter they are refreshingly direct.

"People who've got all our records won't be surprised. We've done dancey things before now. Did you hear the free single we gave away with 'Isn't Anything'? There was a Public Enemy rhythm sample on that! Some of the stuff on 'You Made Me Realise' was like that too. Of course we've been affected by current trends in music. You'd be really short-sighted not to. We've always said that if we hear something brilliant, we'll incorporate it into our stuff. If next week we hear some absolutely brilliant flute-based music in 3/5 time, then it won't be long before you hear it in our music!"

"We've always been groovy. A good test is how people react who are off their head on... well, just into dancing. Like when we've played with Happy Mondays, they are a perfect gauge. Anything with a groove they'll move to. And we've had their entourage up on stage with us dancing."

I find this hard to believe. "Oh, they don't dance to everything, of course. When we got to 'You Made Me Realise' they'd throw themselves off into the audience!"

DRUGS

NEVER GO through customs with a My Bloody Valentine record. It sends the sniffer dogs barmy. Well, not quite, but certainly MBV's music often gets discussed in terms that wouldn't be out of place in a GCSE Chemistry class. My Bloody Valentine's sclerotic distortions and 'off your face' ambience are bound to lead to insinuations of chemically heightened awareness. Or if you prefer, anyone who makes records this bonkers must be taking wagon loads of drugs... and there's nothing big or clever about that, right kids? Kevin may have looked pained at this. It was hard to tell. "We did this interview ages ago and the bloke just went on and on

CONTINUES PAGE 53

MY BLOODY VALENTINE

FROM PAGE 31

about acid and Acid House parties. He was obviously a *Sun* reader. Anyway, the gist of his argument was 'You make Acid Rock, you must be taking loads of drugs.'

Well, that seems reasonable enough.

"But it doesn't mean anything. I mean, everybody takes drugs."

I can feel the 'Alcohol is a drug too, you know' argument approaching.

"OK, not everyone but most people take a certain amount. . . . This stuff that we're drinking is a drug too you know.

"Drugs are not really that important with reference to us. Our music doesn't sound too good on acid. With acid you want something really monotonous with loads of space and room for you to do your own thing. There's too many changes in our stuff. Ecstasy might be more relevant because it doesn't alter your state of mind. I suppose dope might highlight some of the more positive aspects of the music, I dunno."

Leaving aside the question of whether drugs are an aid to listening, there's the separate issue of whether you are actually ingesting most of Bolivia in order to make the records in the first place.

"I haven't written a lot of music on drugs. It wouldn't really sound any different anyway. I worked for ten months in this horrible job where I had to get up really early and I felt spaced out all the time. I felt weirder than I ever have taking drugs."

Loathe though I am to leave the really quite interesting subject of drugs, I decide to move on to something cheaper, more fun and within easy access of ordinary people.

SEX

LET'S FACE it. When Malcolm of Hartlepool finally gets Tracy back to his council flat having plied her with 16 rum and cokes at Cinderella Rockerfellers, he sticks on the Luther Vandross. . . . or Kate Bush. He doesn't look to My Bloody Valentine to get the juices going, that's for sure. It's hard to conceive of a band less superficially sexy, more removed from the world of nipple tassles, basques and stubble chins. This isn't meant as a personal slur, merely that their tenuous diffidence is about as 'unthrusting' as you can get. So why is it that people find My Bloody Valentine so bloody sexy, eulogising at length about bruising, smouldering sensuality and the like? Are these people normal or what? To paraphrase the immortal words of Rod The Mod, do *they* think they're sexy?

"Well, that's for other people to decide, surely. I think our music is pretty sensual. It's not hard, industrial music or anything like that. It's very human. People who experience the pleasure of any sexual thing will find something there, I think. Our lyrics are quite explicit occasionally but it's all real. There's nothing there that ordinary people don't say to each other when they're alone.

"It's a cliché but it comes down to the fact that most music is dehumanizing, it's sanitized. Heavy

Metal bands and disco music, it's *Dallas* sex. No real person can relate to it when some rock singer is going on about giving you his 'lurve'. Our records are about the feelings that ordinary people have and the language they might use with each other."

But is it sexy?

"That depends on how good your imagination is. If you don't have a good imagination then we're not. It's not 'Je T'Aime'. It's not lots of women pretending to have orgasms all sampled and put on there."

WEIRDOS

"EVERYONE WE know is just like us. We don't know many happy, stable people. Or very confident, upfront people. We're not The Beastie Boys."

My Bloody Valentine's music often comes across as the sound of an everyday netherworld. Full of the stench of the squat and the echoes of the disenfranchised. Alternatively, you may feel that they are the sound of a gang of earthmovers on a stag night with some badly recorded Mary Hopkin vocals over the top. Whatever, Sonia they are not. They know this and they cherish their position; of making music that pleases them and their devotees without having to look to the mid-week chart placings or any of that malarkey. Are they in the right line of work?

"We are very untogether, almost too untogether to function sometimes. But we're not vague. Ask us a direct question and we'll answer it. But we're not performers, we're not that confident. I don't like standing on stage and being stared at by a thousand people. Well, would you?"

I've got used to it. Put it another way. Do you regard yourself as unique?

"Everyone's unique."

No, they're not. The Quireboys are clearly not unique. They are stupidly, stultifyingly identical to a million bands that have gone before.

"Oh, I see what you mean. If you were from one of those guitar magazines, I think I could make a case for us being unique. You know, the way we use guitars in a moving, bending way that no one else does. In some way we are weirdos. We like to play loud music because we know that once you get above 100 decibels, that causes a physical change in people. Endorphins get released into the system because the body can sense imminent danger. On the other hand, we're sometimes quite normal and derivative. That's one of the reasons I love De La Soul. They're endearingly derivative but the way they put things together is unique."

With this body sensing the imminent collapse of the interview, I switch off the tape. Needless to say the conversation flows like water.

"We saw this programme last night called *Rock UK* and they were playing all this contemporary rock music and I thought 'This is the antithesis of what we are about'. We're much closer to Kylie Minogue than David Coverdale."