

FEATURE

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BUTCH Vig is talking about suitcases; he's gone through three in the past year alone. And he's still searching for the perfect one out of which to live. It'd be tragic if it wasn't so ironic. Butch Vig's life has taken a 180 degree swing and tired as he is he can still smile about it.

"It's bizarre, really," he muses. "I spend years living in studios, in one place for months on end, then suddenly I'm living from town to town, hotel to hotel, endlessly. I think we'll be glad when we finally say 'stop, that's enough'."

That moment is fast approaching at the time of interview; it's late 1996 and Garbage have just a few weeks left on the road, the final legs in a constant circumnavigation of the world that's seen them play more than 250 dates with, here and there, a few weeks grace in between.

And it's taken its toll. Vig confesses he lost five kilos in the first half of the year; something that has as much to do with bad organisation as the sheer pressure and disruption of normal habits that comes with endless touring.

He slumps into a the thickest corner of a sofa, "There have been dates where somehow people forget that we need to eat food or do a dinner break, especially when we do press all day, then play a show. It's like you finish stuff in the afternoon, go to a soundcheck and then a lot of the time you still do stuff like meet and greets with retailers or competition winners.

"Personally, I don't like to eat before a show or too close to a show; you get kind of anxious, you know. So I lost about 10 pounds earlier this year, although I've gained a little back now. I normally weigh about 170 pounds but I got down to 158 for a while there.

"One thing I learned this year is some of the food in Europe sucks really badly. It's not too bad in the UK and France but like Germany," he grins, "oh man, all we did was drink beer there. Nobody would eat anything because everything was fried or just really heavy. It's like, 'oh take the menu away, waitress; another round of beers and pretzels'."

Butch Vig, nice guy; producer of Nirvana's epochal "Nevermind", the Smashing Pumpkins definitive "Siamese Dream"; the hottest producer on the planet who founded arguably 1995/'96's hottest group: the measure of their success still shakes Vig. Five singles - "Vow", "Stupid Girl", "Queer", "Only Happy When It Rains" and "Milk"; a stream of remixes by club heavyweights like Tricky, Goldie, Rabbit In the Moon, Adrian Sherwood and Todd Terry; now #1 Crush on the No 1 selling soundtrack to the hugely successful "Romeo & Juliet"; and an eponymously titled debut that since its release in 1995 has sold and sold and sold its way to platinum and multi-platinum status in territories all over the world.

On paper it's a dream come true; in real life it's just damn hard work. And that's what this interview is about. It's about the grind, about the simple things Vig, Duke Erickson, Steve Marker and Shirley Manson have learned; about dreams come true and what has still to be done because this is just the beginning. It's a wind up to and look back at the first phase. It's rock on the edge, the thin line between sanity and insanity, much and too much.

Erikson, tall, skinny, almost ageless, walks over, bums a fag, smiles, returns to his own chat session in the other corner of the bar. Manson's taking two hours out - she's exhausted, the drain and strain written all over her face - and Marker's just disappeared.

Vig, the most comfortable with himself of them all, has a weirdness that wasn't there a year earlier when we first met. His eyes wear friendliness as a thin mask to an abject need to be alone - and soon.

"Yeah, that's true," he says, "there comes a point in all this when you really do want to just be alone, to stop, to wind it down. But even when you do, you suddenly find it takes time. Like we had three weeks off before the Australian tour - that was the longest we'd had off since October '95 - and it was really hard to get up again. Like we met up in Singapore and all of us are looking at each other - it's the first time we've been there and we want to do a good show - and none of us are ready to do it. But you do, and it wasn't a bad show, a bit sloppy, but not bad.

"But you do learn a lot from this kind of experience. I have. You really appreciate your time with your friends and family. I don't think you realise how much you actually miss people until you get back and actually see them when you're in a comfortable place again.

"It's one thing to work on records in other cities; it's different to being on the road because on the road you're never secure, never in familiar territory. And we've done so much press and stuff you get kind of pulled at all the time. After a while it gets kind of surreal. It's only when you get home that you can actually start to relax. Even if it's only for three or four days, it's such a relief."

Right now, that's what Vig and co are doing, relaxing. Plans to start recording in early February have been shelved. Garbage will go back in the studio on March 1 and not before. It's taking them a lot longer to recover than they imagined, to wind up to do it again, because once they start on the long-awaited follow-up, the whole process will start to fill in the next two years.

And for Garbage there's, Vig admits, massive pressure in just recording the follow-up. "We're the tall poppies now," he says, "bigger than we expected to be. There's a lot riding on the next album for all of us. So we'll probably all have nervous breakdowns recording it. But we really do want to start working on it as soon as possible. Because we have a tendency to work slow - or meticulous as I should say - I can honestly see that we're going to have it ready before the end of the summer (Northern) for release towards the end of '97.

"To be honest we haven't got a lot done for it on the road. Just ideas. I have a little hand-held recorder I take with me everywhere and so do Duke and Steve and Shirley is always scribbling down lyrics. We've been screwing around in soundchecks and stuff but it's all like just ideas. The only thing that's good is that we're much more sure of ourselves as to what we are as a band compared with when we started out."

The early days of Garbage seem so long ago to him; they aren't. Late 1993, Wisconsin and a trio of mates - Vig, Erikson and Marker - all of whom have made their mark as studio whiz-kids and flopped in their previous band incarnations as Spooner and Firetown. What they need is a vocalist. Eventually, they see Manson, a Scot with a near decade long history - mostly in minor achievers Goodbye Mr Mackenzie - fronting Angel Fish. She ad-libs her way, darkly and humorously, through an informal audition and Garbage is born; a dream outfit of seasoned veterans with a concept to challenge and alter pop's staleness, to mix a technological edge through a melodic and harmonic core. "You have to have melody, you have to have harmony, you have to have hooks. That's the basis.", Vig said at that first interview. Then he grinned. "But we wanted to take it somewhere dark, poke in some of those dark corners of the psyche, places people don't like to talk about."

That they delivered is history, but what is more remarkable and often forgotten is that this band delivered without even getting to know each other, its dynamics, possibilities, potential.

"That's so true," Vig says. "You have to remember Shirley was singing on some of those tracks and she barely knew us. It took us the whole course of making the record to understand each other, to see how far we could push her. She wanted to get out of us how the chemistry was going to evolve. Playing live helped take that process further - don't worry we're not going to make a live album: we want to get back to our roots now, make an organic pop record."

"We still want to utilise the studio much the same way we did on our last record and see how far we can push it. But the live playing will influence us. I'm sure we'll try and play more stuff in the studio live and then go and lop and layer things but hopefully all four of us will be in there jamming which will be kind of exciting."

The possibilities are, of course, obvious. Vig's mind is working ahead already. At core, he admits, he still lives for the studio, misses it, wants to get his "hands dirty". But he's also on a steep learning curve, surprising as that may be for a man with his pedigree. In a way they all are. Not the least Manson who in a year and a bit has merged as the focal point in a band where the most natural focal point was behind the drum kit. Butch had the name; Manson had the character. It made, eventually for sweet heaven.



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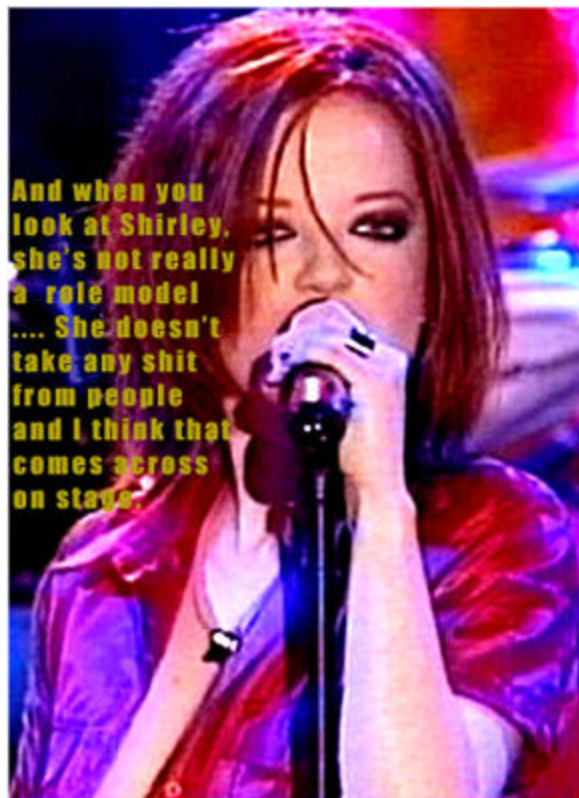
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Manson delivered a kind of sexually uninhibited, smart, streetwise rock bitch for the '90s. Bjork had trod a similar path in the Sugarcubes but taken it a little baser before spinning off solo into dance music and rewriting the ideas books, offering an astral woman for the future. Bjork became myth and magic. Manson became a pin-up, at the same time dragging a massive "girl" following to her heels.

Vig smiles at mention of the Manson phenomenon. "It's funny, there I was at the beginning. Butch Vig, cool producer of Nirvana and the Pumpkins. Everybody wanted to talk to me, all the focus was on me. A year later, it's like 'Butch who? Oh you mean the drummer in the Shirley Manson band'. His eyes twinkle.

"One of the things we've found from playing live is that our audience is very diverse. A lot of the young kids are really sensitive, emotional, types. We don't get macho, drunken audiences, that would go to like a heavy metal show or something; and we also get a lot of older fans. It's split down the middle like male/female, 50/50. A lot of the guys come because they're fascinated by Shirley, they've got a crush on her or whatever. I think girls come because they want to be like Shirley, they see a lot of power in her performance, just in the way she handles herself.



And when you look at Shirley, she's not really a role model She doesn't take any shit from people and I think that comes across on stage.

"This all ties in with the longevity of the record as well. Both come down to some degree, I think, to something we were working on in the lyrics. Shirley didn't want any of the songs - even though they are dark and explore some things that are difficult to talk about for some people - to go too far. She wanted to be careful that they'd ultimately be strong, that people could see they could rise above experiences - in that sense the songs themselves had to rise above the experiences they were dealing with, and they also had to be universal.

"I think that's the major reason why a lot of kids picked up on us and also come to our shows. And when you look at Shirley, she's not really a role model, but for girls she's all those things. She doesn't take any shit from people and I think that comes across on stage.

"She's totally herself. When we have bad nights she's pissed and it's a totally different vibe. You see her on a good night and she's this darkly seductive, coy, flirtatious, strong woman. On a bad night, man ..." he laughs. "Sometimes, early on we'd get guys down at the front yelling at her, you know all those traditional lines. And she'd be like 'don't fuck with me' and nobody would fuck with her.

"If she's having a bad mix or something, sometimes we go through a rollercoaster ride; to be honest it pretty much is every night and that's also why it's exciting. You know, there've been 10,000, 20,000, 50,000 people out there some nights, and I swear to God

everyone is watching her, and I'm up there playing drums going ..." Butch Vig's face gets a frat boy grin on it. "Whatever, it's cool though, it's a natural thing.

"I think really we're lucky because Shirley has blossomed as an artist and become the focus. She has something in her that a lot of people don't really have. I don't know whether it's star quality, charisma, whatever, but she's got something that when the music goes through her and she's singing it, she's I don't know, part of it is subtlety; she incredibly subtle. She doesn't come across as trying to be heavy-handed.

"When she's on stage, she's very natural. There's no choreography. We've never sat down and told her, any of us, to do this that or that - she'd probably have told us to get stuffed if we did. It's just like we're gonna play the songs and see what happens."

What really happened is Garbage grew up in public. From that first show to a packed club of 300 in Minneapolis when they discovered they had a lot of learning to do, to the last shows on the Australian tour, particularly the Sydney show which Vig comments was the best they'd played since their sets on the summer European festival circuit.

That night in Sydney, in the barn-like surrounds of the Hordern Pavilion, with its unfriendly acoustics, concrete floor, high ceilings, Garbage were a swaggering, confident beast of a band. The frontline attacked stagefront with a beautiful ebb and flow, charging, strutting, powering as Manson twisted her audience around her skinny frame; toying with emotions, playing little psyche games. Witch, bitch, innocent little girl. Manson had many faces and in the sea of sample, feedback and irresistible hard-assed bottom end, she had the perfect pulpit from which to take Garbage to the limits of their swirling atmospheres. Rarely does pop reach such levels - and this is only their first record. Some kind of wonderful.

Butch Vig smiles, "I think we're getting a lot better but, man, I tell you some of the things I've gone through. Like for two weeks before we went out on our first major tour after that Minneapolis show I had to go back in the studio every night and figure out how we were going to deal with the samples.

"I'd got this midi sampler. I'd never done it live. It was like how do I want to do this? I know what I'm going to play. Now what do I want to trigger? How am I going to play it? And how am I going to monitor it? The first months were basically just trial and error. We ended up changing a lot of stuff when we came back in January '96, the songs and the grooves. Duke and Steve threw the keyboards out and for the most part got Midi guitars, and we loosened up stuff so it wasn't exactly like it is on the record. It's better now. A lot of the songs are taken right out, so much so it's hard for me to go back and listen to the album.

"We kept changing stuff from then on and that's important. If we'd played the same thing for 250 nights in a row we'd just be fucking boring to watch. People would know that we were bored. If we're not bored at all, that's the coolest thing. It still keeps constantly evolving.'

He sips on a beer, stares round the room; a pretty waitress smiles at him. "It's worked out okay, hasn't it? Better than expected really. You know we were so paranoid about overkill, especially when it got up to like four or five singles in some places. We're almost hyper-sensitive about it. I mean, like it should be overkill by now."

He puts the bottle down, scratches the stubbled chin, "Actually, it got the point where we started telling everybody 'we don't want to ram this band down people's throats: if it starts getting to that point we're gonna stop' - because there is a stopping point, a time when enough is enough, all round. But apart from maybe Britain earlier in the year when things got a little crazy because we had so much press and it just got out there, I think

we've held it together really well. And it is extraordinary, extraordinary, it's gone on so long."

His meal arrives and the tape recorder goes off. Garbage reached that point where enough was enough, for now. Not that the rest of the world outside of these four people seems to think so. Perhaps, now is the time to savour what they really achieved. This was a phenomenon. What happens next is anybody's guess.

Butch flicks through his salad, takes another swig of beer, "You know, I can hardly wait to find out either."



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