



By MIKE GEE

SHIRLEY Manson laughs a lot: infectious, both coy and come on. There's no great running joke, just a series of life's miniatures that appeal to her pretty and twisted sense of humour. Most of the laughter is at her own expense and it peels through an accent that lilts Scottish cadences. A whisper of the highlands blown through a street urchin city brogue.

She's about as far from rock star as it gets despite the thunder of success that's washed Garbage and its self-titled debut (that neatly rewrote some of the rules of rock pop and in doing so produced one of last year's best pop rock shimmerings) clean to the top since their insouciant and quite sparkling debut was unleashed some six months back.

Rock's media flock bleats at her feet, she's a bonafide cool celebrity, some of her interviews read like the hormonal rantings of a not-so-obvious-Erica Jong, others like the tough kid off the not-so-easy block; she has an ear for personality and character and is adept at playing the questions game whichever way it sits up and sets up. Shirley Manson, trim, sleek, poised, subdued intensity meets manic sublimity, is nobody's fool. The archetypal bad girl/good girl, let's play.

Holed up in a New York studio where Garbage are recording a bunch of new songs for b-sides, Manson debunks any romantic notion that she was the archetypal music-is-my-soul-and-inspiration child whose dream of fame and fortune and superstardom finally came true. "No, I wasn't at all," she gurgles. "I was more into dancing. I was a horrible child. I was really vile." Bet your mother wouldn't say that. "Oh no, my mother does say I was vile. I was very bad-tempered and sullen and not a very pleasant cute child." (laughter) "I was aggressive."

Now she sings pop songs of pure vision undercut with a dark aggression that breathes obsession, angst, anger, sex, riddles and poetic revenge, occasionally the flash of love (at the very end she is "waiting for you"); life may be a masquerade but it doesn't hurt to put a pair of Doc Martens in and see what happens. And Manson's the right person for these unsettled observations, she understands them, wears them, draws on her own bizarre-laden "path walk with me" (yes, Shirley Manson would have been Laura Palmer's best friend and she'd have laughed all over *Twin Peaks*) and fleshes out the fantasies and realities; they come together in some warm, dank, sensual middleground - a thin line where Tricky tries to walk but forgets there's more at stake than just the flesh. In Garbage's world the interplay of emotion: desire, want, ambition, hate, the curl of a sneer, security and insecurity, look, pose and self all collide in a bed where the sheets are permanently ruffled and Manson's voice is the stain and strain on the sweat and struggle within.



A decade and more of working out on the rock mainline have given Manson the muscle to strip off the layers and shrug her way through the madness that lurks, shadowy but ever present, at the edge of rock dreams. Normality has little meaning - and that is simply as amusing as it is necessary to keep in perspective.

Goodbye Mr Mackenzie her most notable previous attempt at rock immortality saw her play second fiddle to Martin Metcalfe but never got past its own in-bred limitations - alternative rock that wasn't quite alternative. Still, she learnt survival.

"I think Garbage has changed my life a bit; I'm not terribly sure. I've worked with bands for a long, long, time so it hasn't changed as drastically as it may seem on the surface because I've gigged for years. I've played and made records for a long time. I suppose the main difference is I'm not living in Scotland and I find that hard to stomach at times.

"No, I'm not living in America either. I live in hotels." Laughter. "You know life is becoming ridiculous when you're more interested when you go out shopping in looking at suitcases and you really get into the types of different suitcases and what's the most efficient method of getting your luggage from A to B. That IS sad. And that is how my life is as the moment." Laughter. "But I suppose everything has its compensations. I mean, I'm a lucky dog. I realise how lucky I am. I really shouldn't grumble."

Understatement. This is one story out of the books. Superstar producer Butch Vig (who's as unlikely a rock god as you'd meet; as deep as his songs is his curiosity and vision of life; there's a pantheon of wisdom in his stare and smile) gets together with some mates and relatively unknown Scottish singer and puts together a record that not only spits in the eye of "supergroup", decants grunge into just one small ingredient in a finely distilled rock brew, but also opens the slowly rusting door of the muse enough to let influences and sheer spark seep through, and overcomes prejudices and those who would mock with genuine class.

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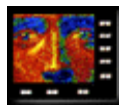
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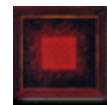
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"It's been bizarre," Manson chimes in. "The whole experience has been like a fairytale. We went on tour before last Christmas and I was standing in the middle of an old theatre in Madison, Wisconsin, in the mid-West of America, and I was looking at the boys tune up their instruments and I was thinking it was like landing on Mars. It was like 'how did I get here?' this wee Scottish girl who's come from the Scottish city and just been transported - in a matter of months - into this mayhem in America. It's very, very surreal.

"My girlfriends keep on saying 'what did you do?'. They come to gigs and they're like killing themselves laughing because there's like kids at the front shouting my name and things and like 'this is ridiculous'. Laughter. "It's really funny."

It's ironic that Manson has no real idea of how bizarre the picture has become: the slight dark-haired woman who cites Siouxsie Sue and Chrissie Hynde as icons has become one herself - and she hasn't even noticed. "Really," she exclaims, "I can't say I've been aware of that. Really, we haven't had time to sit down and think about it. I'm slowly becoming aware though of, erm, we played in Chicago on the last tour and there was a bunch of kids waiting outside saying 'this was the first time we staged dived' and 'this was the first time we moshed' and the like. And I'm thinking, 'gosh, they must see us as a real band - a professional band'. That's like scary, like weird, wow. I can remember going to gigs myself and being that excited. I find it flattering and a bit scary too." Laughter. "My God ... "

Scary is also ... the first audition for Garbage. "Horrific, horrendous, absolutely horrible," she giggles. "It was, really." And making the first album. Expectations have this way of playing on the mind, realist or not. But it taught Garbage something about pressure. "It can't get any worse," she says. "At least, no worse than that we've felt already. Success hasn't added any more because before we even came out with a record we felt an enormous amount of pressure.

"We knew we had to make the grade otherwise we could have been totally dissed because a lot of people were already saying 'Oh, it's been easy for you; Butch has this great reputation and you're just destined for success'. I totally disagree with that. All be it that there were moments when we'd be lucky enough to get an interview with a journalist because of Butch's past, I think in general it worked against us rather than for us. People were waiting (and willing) to pounce on it and totally tear it apart and they were a little surprised they liked the record.

"We were petrified then so I don't think we'll be any more scared when we come around to making the second album than this one."



And like all good bands Garbage are growing as they play: the familiar strains of their string of "hits from the album" and the accompanying atmospheres have already taken on a life of their own as the quartet tour relentlessly. "It's constantly changing; it has to," she says. "You learn and you get bored and you want to experiment so it definitely continues to mutate." The last word is delivered with considered relish. Mutate. Just like our Shirley. Even her boyfriend has tagged the upward mobility of his erstwhile girlfriend. "He's taken to calling me Zelig," she whispers. "Have you seen that Woody Allen film?" Yes.

Allen plays a minor celebrity whose abilities as a "human chameleon" astounded the world. He is desperate to be accepted by others and goes to extraordinary lengths to become one of the crowd. In "documentary footage", Zelig is seen waiting in the on-deck circle as Babe Ruth is batting, among a crowd of Nazis cheering Hitler, and growing a beard to become a Hassidic rabbi. "He keeps on saying like he's seen pictures of me and I'm standing next to some celebrity or something, so it's like 'My God, you are Zelig' and I'm like 'My God, I am Zelig'. It's so funny." Bizarre.

Not as, though, Michael Jackson, who attracts comment at the end of a rant about the virtues of America rather than its more publicised downside. In Manson's eyes the beauty of America's heartlands is as powerful as the more celebrated scape of her homeland; likewise the downside of its cities only emulates that of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. "It's the way every country is. "But Jackson ... he must be mad. I think it's so sad that nobody has even tried to intervene. I mean, he's mutilated himself completely. I was saying that to the boys the other day; imagine the world in 100 years when history looks back at this creature who was born a black boy and has ended up an effeminate white, you know, mutant."

Psychoses, illusions and obsessions. The garbage of life. Everybody hurts sometime. Scars heal - but how? The question echoes in the fragile peal of keyboards that spiral and fall in the fractured beauty, the danger, the unknowing of *A Stroke Of Luck*. Manson exhales throatily, "A stroke of luck or a gift from God? The hand of fate or devil's claws? From below or saints above? You come to me now." The answer's out there somewhere.

There's a quiet murmur, "I have plenty of psychoses but they don't rise to the surface on first meeting." Obsessional later on? "Oh God and how. Yeah. Oh yes." She isn't kidding. The laugh says so. "Just like everybody else."

"I came around to tear your little world apart, I came to shut you up, I came to drag you down, I came around to tear your little world part - and break your soul apart ... I can't stop when it comes to you."

- Vow

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