

# Bookworm

## Bob Mould, Solo

After the noise, there was silence. As if sensing that the sound and fury had been too great to surpass — and too consuming in personal and artistic terms to sustain — Husker Du one day ceased to exist.

The band lay aside its burgeoning legend and stopped. As simple and as complicated as that. A statement was issued and the typical rumours drifted lazily into circulation, centering mainly around personality clashes and chemical abuse, the Scylla and Charybdis of rock n' roll.

Thus did one of the most important American bands of the decade disappear — not with the expected bang, but with a whimper. No valedictory album or tour, no penultimate reaping of those glories accrued in a decade of constant writing, recording and touring. Gone, with only a whiff of anti-climax to mark their passing.

Months go by: still, there is no work. What has happened? Questions left unanswered — until now.

The first you hear is the folkish plucking of acoustic guitar strings. The tune is contemplative, almost soothing. It is gorgeous, it is... nothing less than the sound of Bob Mould, returning from the (literal) wilderness.

This first, instrumental track, 'Sunspots', serves to announce *Workbook's* intent. And while, granted, Husker Du did some gentler stuff, too, there was nothing quite to match the delicacy and restraint of this piece. When it segues into 'Wishing Well', the tone of the album is set — it's subtle, reflective, assured. This could be something of a magnum opus.

Which should come as no surprise.

As one of the two songwriting poles of that band, Mould was virtually unique amongst the harder edged US songsmiths. Welded inextricably to the noise were sentiments at times almost embarrassingly candid, yet delivered unflinchingly; a man with his (wounded) heart fixed firmly on his sleeve.

Today Mould, quietly spoken, unfailingly polite, appears more philosophical than embittered about those final glory days:

"It obviously happens to every band, sooner or later. I think that we just got really tired of playing together. When we started the group in 1978, we were 17, 18 years old. When we got to 10 years later we weren't the same three people who put that band together. We all had different priorities in our lives, and the music wasn't strong enough to hold them all together. There were a lot of personal differences, a lot of personal problems — but for me, to sum it up, we just grew apart from each other, and had nothing at all in common at the end. To continue it would have been a lie — for everybody.

"I have no regrets at all, musically — though of course there are things I wish we would've tried that we didn't, perhaps because, unconsciously, we were afraid of failing. I don't think we extended ourselves as much as we probably should have. But I do think everything we did was real vital.

"Personally, well... the last few

months of the band's existence were really very difficult, and emotionally very draining. It was like a slow burn, and when it finally blew up, it just seemed like it happened overnight, but in actuality it had been coming for a while. I think that's true of any long-term relationship.

"I look back now, and there were some really great times and some incredibly miserable times, but those are the things that take you to the next stage. I don't deny my history, but I certainly don't intend to live off it.

### Dead Past

Which is probably all that needs to be said about the dead past. Certainly, it's as much as Mould is willing to concede. Further questions, assumptions, speculations — all are dismissed gently, with a soft verbal shrug that indicates far more succinctly than an outright rebuke, that he would much rather speak of the here and now.

Of his lengthy sabbatical, he is rather more forthcoming:

"I didn't want to get involved in all the nonsense that was going on over here — the rumours and half-truths that were purporting to be the real story of the breakup. So I thought the most healthy thing would be to go and work on my music, get back to the real issues for a while. I sort of got involved in this farm up in northern Minnesota, and I pretty much spent a solid year up there more or less by myself, just working on music every day, and not doing much else. I divorced myself from a lot of familiar situations — a lot of it was just not wanting people around asking what I was going to be doing, or even to know what other people were doing. I didn't care about music other people around asking what I was going to be doing, or even to know what other people were doing. I didn't care about the music other people were making — I just wanted to reacquire myself with the things I enjoyed about music; a kind of cooling down and rebuilding process



which was real critical for me at the time.

"You see, there's a price to touring constantly, and you are forced to pay it — you have no choice. It means you have virtually no personal life, and not as much time to write as you would like. And you don't have time to take an objective look at what you are writing. Husker Du were incredibly prolific: we were recording almost as quickly as we were writing. But you can only do that for so long, and I certainly felt that, at the end, we were in danger of losing our objectives.

"Also, I just wanted the luxury of relaxing for a year, working on my playing and singing — I've never thought of myself as a good singer, until now. I wanted to strike up new working relationships with people, and to challenge myself a little, which I think I was pretty badly in need of."

### Cloaks & Crutches

Mould stresses that the album's emphasis on acoustics does not necessarily constitute a reaction against the old:

"People would be amazed, I think, at the number of Husker Du songs on the last three or four albums that had been written on an acoustic guitar," he laughs. "My audience, I'm sure, have this vision of me with a big wall of Marshall Stacks at home, blasting away. It's not like that at all. And the songs here that are acoustic-based, well that was clearly the true form of the song, so why tamper with it? Why start walking with the crutches again?"

Which begs the question: will he admit that noise can often be used simply as a cloak, a means of covering structural inadequacies that would, in a sparser setting, be glaringly obvious?

"Oh yeah, definitely. I, uh, realised that a number of years ago. But I think as you grow, and become more familiar with writing and more comfortable with what you're doing that you don't need all those distractions. If the words are good, and the song is a strong one, everything else is almost superfluous, sometimes.

"I recently did two solo acoustic

shows — which really have to rank as the most terrifying thing I've ever done." He laughs softly. "You get up there, and all of a sudden you're very aware of these people sitting maybe six, eight feet away from you, all looking right at you, very intently, waiting for you to do something to entertain them.

"And there's no wall of speakers or anything up there to hide behind. There's nobody else to take their attention away, even for a moment. You're it. You've just got your guitar and your songs. And that's when you find out if a song has got what it takes.

"But the shows went well — I was surprised how well, actually. I listened to tapes of the shows later and they sounded fine. It was so incredibly tense, though. There was one point where I was doing 'See A Little Light' from the new album on a 12-string and this one string just snapped, and suddenly the whole guitar jumped out of tune. I had to set it down next to me and keep going, singing it unaccompanied until the end." Mould laughs again, louder. "That was about the scariest part of the scariest part of my life. But the audience really liked it — they went over the top, in fact, and suddenly I knew it was a good song.

"Playing for people, to me, is the validation of all the torment. The biggest thrill, I think, is when I see people singing along; it's a strange feeling, but a great feeling. This last tour, promoting *Workbook*, there was one show when the record had only been out for three or four days and there were people there who already knew all the words to all the songs! We just looked out and thought, 'Wow, this really matters to them.' And that's just a wonderful feeling, a great thing. There's nothing else quite like that.

"There's a difference between seeing people sing to the music, and seeing them hit their friends to it — and I know what I prefer."

Times have changed, certainly — but by no means for the worse. SHANE DANIELSON

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