



T H E C U L T O F

Frank Black

A chat with Frank Black should be mandatory therapy for any music scribe suffering from job burnout. Here's a genuine 'alternative rock' pioneer/celebrity who'd far rather engage in conversation about a lost tribe in Siberia, or rocket launch theory, than inane self-important dialogue about his role in modern rock, or the making of his latest record. He also has a highly realistic view of the whole interview process.

"This is such a heavily marketed business, which is why you and I are even talking. It's not like I'm John Lennon and you're Lester Bangs [just as well — they're currently worm food!] You're interviewer 501. Not to belittle you or me, but this is what goes on in our world, with this kind of focus on pop art. That sounds cynical, but it's partly because we live in a society rich enough to buy CDs and magazines and support the careers of lots of different kinds of artists.

Everything is so fractured now, and I have my own little niche."

His cult-ish niche may be tiny in relation to the Alanis Blowfishes of the pop world, but our Frank ain't complaining.

"I'm very glad to be able to do what I do. I enjoy it thoroughly and I make plenty of money. What more could you ask for? I can eat at any restaurant I want. It's pathetic how rich I am compared to some guy living in Sri Lanka with

fuckin' bombs exploding in his backyard. Now that's rough. So what if some guy is selling platinum and I'm not. I've got a 94 Ford Bronco, the same one OJ drives. I've got a house and a backyard big enough for a quiet softball game!"

Unlike his fellow Bronco owner, Frank Black's fame and wealth are well-deserved. The only slicing and dicing he does is with his guitar riffs, wonderful creations that have revolutionised contemporary rock 'n' roll and influenced scores of groups ever since Black's first band, the Pixies, burst out from Boston a decade ago.

In six turbulent years the Pixies released four albums and one EP, college rock fav's all, and became genuine arena rock stars in France (a rare lapse into good taste there). After their acrimonious disintegration, bassist Kim Deal devoted herself to the Breeders and the Amps, while Black has gone on to release three solo albums: 1993's *Frank Black*, 1994's *Teenager of the Year*, and new gem *The Cult of Ray*. The erratic nature of the 22-song *Teenager* disappointed many Frank fans, but *The Cult of Ray* finds him on top of his game once more. Its songs are by turn witty and weird, and his mastery of melody returns.

Black is clearly an artist who'd choose root canal work over dissection of his earlier career.

"I just find that a little dull. I feel like I'm doing my best work now, and that's where my focus is in terms of the specific music I make. Someone else's focus may constantly be on 10, or five, or three years ago, but I have no patience with those who dwell on the past. I can't even listen to my last record — nothing against [co-producer] Eric Feldman or fans of that record. Some guy from Iceland called it a masterpiece yesterday, but to me it's just some stuff I did in the studio a couple of years ago.

The inevitable mention of the Pixies and their impending tenth anniversary sparks off a clever evasion of the topic that takes us to Siberia!

"To me that date is just another cylindrical mention of something from my murky past. I don't want to accept that whole calendar thing. I like the 'many, many moons ago' approach. I read a book by an anthropologist, called *Lost in the Taiga*, about these people who lived in a remote area of Siberia since 1920, to escape the Bolsheviks. They were very religious and spoke this form of old Russian, and were quite the sensation when discovered. My point is, they had lost their calendar, a catastrophic effect. The brother responsible for counting the seasons somehow lost count, and that was very distressing to them. But maybe I don't want to count time. I like to think not just of the future, but the distant future, 1,000 years from now. My romance and nostalgia is often for that kind of future.

Ah, yes. Frank Black as the poster boy for Generation *X-Files*. His love of science-fiction shows no sign of abating just because everyone else is jumping on the UFO-wagon. He's fittingly included on the new *X-Files* album, and named *The Cult of Ray* after his SF hero, Ray Bradbury.

"Generally I like exploring all those topics that may be above your head or in your imagination. I'm not saying every time I write a song about the cosmos it rings true or resonates for everybody, but I like to explore those areas and sometimes it does resonate. Working through to those special songs one ends up going through a lot of ditties, and I've got a ditty or two!"

Living in Los Angeles just fuels the

interest/obsession.

"I live just up the street from one of the biggest rocket research labs in the world. Space, the military, defence and offence, evil and good, have made California what it is. It's all connected, maybe not with whatever the hot new politically correct thing to sing about is, but it is damn well connected to me and my life.

Being based in LA puts Frank close to his new record label, American. All his previous work came out on 4AD/Elektra, but he claims he needed to jump ship.

"I didn't feel loved! It's terrible to be in this cold corporate situation where people are lying through their teeth, saying how much they love the record and what a priority it is. Then it's: 'Oh, it's not ringing the bell this week, it's outta here.' I know it's a business thing, and I don't blame them totally, but I've got to have a little spirit. There's a lot of competition out there! American is a relatively new label and I like that underdog vibe."

The Cult of Ray has met a torn critical response, but Frank can live with that.

"A friend of mine, who manages Teenage Fanclub, was telling me it's not being hated or loved that's a concern, it's indifference. That's corny, but true. Even in more obscure times, I'd always get reviews. It means you're at least enjoying some kind of stature. Sometimes my record company will fax me a completely horrible review. I'm obviously a man who can take it, but they don't have to send it to me," he laughs.

Frank can give as good as he gets, critically. When told *Vox* recently said new song *The Last Stand of Shazeb Andleeb* may have been his farewell ode to the biz, he sneers: "They're so shallow. It's not even a metaphor, it's about a real guy. Sure, I get a big ego and have a pop star mentality, but not every song I sing is an ironic twist on my own situation. It's about a guy who got killed last year. If they're all so computer savvy, they can type his name in their search and get three weeks of *Los Angeles Times* articles about that!"

Turns out Frank has a self-confessed near-obsession with New Zealand, a place he has yet to visit.

"I almost made it down there before I got into the music business. I dropped out of school and was living in Puerto Rico, and Halley's Comet was going to pass. I heard of people observing the event in boats off the NZ coast, and I was making plans to go. I ended up getting involved in a band instead, and I've always slightly regretted not going. But New Zealand isn't going anywhere, and I hope to make it. Sounds like the damn Garden of Eden, and my brother is visiting there this year."

On being told New Zealand will see the dawn of the new millennium first, he gets real excited.

"Wow, that's kind of an event. As you know, I tend to shy away from things cylindrical, but I like the ring of that. Maybe 2000 will be the year for me in New Zealand.

"But there's one thing I've got to ask you: last time my girlfriend checked, she is very allergic to kiwifruit. Once, in a dressing room in Spain, she was sitting reading a book in front of a fruit bowl containing a sliced kiwi. She began to feel tickly in her throat, she got a bad rash. Now I'm worried we'll get off a plane and drive right through a kiwi grove!"

It's OK, Frank. The kiwi is in decline, so c'mon down!

KERRY DOOLE

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