



Morphine

Like Simple Sexy Swimming

“...it’s just slide bass guitar, low baritone saxophone and drums. They’re a very sexy band particularly when you’re sitting on the speakers, which I did at a recent festival. It was wonderful.”

The saucy individual experiencing the bottom end through her bottom end is none other than PJ Harvey, and the band is Morphine, the Boston three-piece who for over five years have been peddling their distinctive ‘low rock’ to an ever-growing audience, and inspiring music writers to outdo each other with imaginative drug metaphors. (OK, here we go...) With the new album *Like Swimming*, songwriter Mark Sandman proves he can still mainline a hypnotic groove straight to the brain that leaves the listener hanging out for more. But, as ever, the Morphine chemistry would be incomplete without Billy Conway’s sly drumming and saxophonist Dana Colley, who exquisitely fills the space left by the absence of a guitarist in a way no flowery fretboard wanker could possibly achieve. Colley talks from his home town and impresses with his unpretentiousness, his ability to make me smile, and the obvious love he has for his craft.

The album title, *Like Swimming*, what does that mean exactly?

“Well, its like this: glugluglugluglugluglug. Got it?”

Colley uses the best digital fibre-optic communication technology the world has to offer to send across thousands of miles the sound of, ahem, gargling... Is that rehearsed?

“No, actually it isn’t, it’s the first time I’ve done it.”

What are you drinking?

“Just water. That was like swimming. Actually that was more like drowning, but that’s a different album.”

What’s the major difference for you between this and your previous records?

“I think this record is a little bit more experimental. It goes into another area more boldly than the others. It has a more sombre feel to it than the other ones.”

Do you think that’s possible for

Morphine?

“Is it possible you ask? Yes it is. I think it’s got many layers. You can listen to it once, twice, three times, and still pick up things. I think the mix is really good.”

You’ve got some quite different sounds on this record. What other instruments have been used?

“Well, you could probably with little effort recognise the organ that’s been used in a couple of songs. We used a little bass saxophone on ‘Eleven O’clock’ (you have to really listen for that one), and there’s the tritar that Mark plays and created (it’s a three stringed instrument with a low bass string and two guitar strings).”

Although Sandman is the creator of Morphine’s minimal compositions, there is always a sense of almost organic synergy between the three members.

“...you have to step aside to let people through to the bathroom. Their desire to go to the bathroom is as strong as yours to play your solo.”

How much group involvement goes into the songwriting?

“I think Mark is the songwriter; clearly he has an idea of what he wants his songs to sound like. And we do our best, Billy and I, to read what he wants and what he’s thinking, and support his idea of what a song is to the best of our ability. There are instances where our jams will create a piece of music that will wind up getting recorded, so there is a continual process of playing together, and generating ideas, and just trying to support each other.”

Those fortunate enough to have seen Morphine when they toured here in late 1995 will remember, in addition to Mark Sandman’s supremely cool onstage presence, the sight and sound of Colley playing two saxophones at once.

The two saxophone um, *thing* — I don’t know what else to call it — when did you start doing that?

“It’s been a couple of years. It’s inspired by Raashand Roland Kirk, a great jazz master in the 50s and 60s who played three instruments [at once], two of which he created (the Stritch and the Manthello). And he was blind and could circular breathe [through them] all at the same time, blow whistles and sing and chant, pass out flutes to the audience and encourage people to understand the wonders and mysteries of music and sound, and its connection to the soul.”

Awesome.

Do you play your saxophone through effects?

“I have done on albums and stuff, and I’ve done it live. In the past few years I’ve just been trying to focus on the saxophone itself, and creating as many tonalities as one can just by the use of the instrument, and a PA, and a competent and expert sound crew.”

Do you get those as often as you’d like?

“Yes we do, we don’t leave home without them. Phil Davidson and John Wiswell, who are to me my Marshall stacks.”

Sandman describes his band as being “about subtraction more than production”.

The band as a whole seem quite into simplicity. I take it that’s a concept shared by all three of you?

“Yeah, definitely. I think you have to take that into account if you’re going to be in a trio, and you have to learn to work simply and build, and to understand that silence is the first sound. It’s simple application of being Miles Davis-ean.”

You had something like a 10-hour jam on the day he died. Obviously he’s a pretty huge influence on you?

“Well, you know, there’s no one like Miles.”

Back to the simplicity thing: do you like leading a simple life?

“Oh... life...”

Colley says this with all the dramatic flair of the best daytime soap performer.

“Yeah, pretty simple.”

And has Morphine’s success made it more complicated?

“No, not really. I think that’s one of the reasons we choose to live in Boston, because my family’s here, my friends are here, the people who ground me are here. And the people who’ve known me my whole life can always tell me if I’m getting a little bit too much of chip on my shoulder. They’re pretty quick about that.”

Is there anything else about Boston that influences you specifically?

“Its musical and artistic output, and it’s just a great place to set up shop, and work with a lot of people, and have a community. Six hours to London and six hours to LA. But don’t everybody move here.”

With your live performances you’ve chosen on many occasions to headline your own tours instead of supporting larger bands. What’s the motivation behind that?

“Well, because it’s simply simpler. You know, we can pretty much all get into a van with our equipment. There’s a great deal of beauty in that.”

If you stop playing small venues for a while, like the bars around Boston where you essentially began, do you miss it?

“Definitely, we do. I think that’s when you’re usually at your freest to play almost. We played a place called the Plow and Star, and you’re at the same level as everybody else, you have to step aside to let people through to the bathroom. Their desire to go to the bathroom is as strong as yours to play your solo.”

Do you ever improvise on stage?

“From the minute we get on there!”

Surely that’s got to be more interesting for you than just belting out the same songs again and again?

“Yeah, I mean, you arrive at a certain place and you know what you’re doing, and you tend to rely on certain things that have worked. You have to have a structure to a song to get it across. But there are aspects where it is certainly open to interpretation.”

Morphine’s Powerstation gig so enraptured the crowd the band were called back on stage for multiple encores.

Do you have any specific memories of New Zealand when you were down here last?

“I think the audience was the warmest we’ve ever encountered. They were really appreciative of the music, I think partly because of how difficult it is for people to get down there. But once you’re there you feel like, ‘Shit, why don’t we just stay here for awhile?’”

And, finally, the sex thing.

The word ‘sexy’ has been used to describe Morphine more than once. Is that something you really try for?

“Oh, yeah, absolutely. It’s a day in, day out kind of thing. You get up in the morning first thing, check yourself out, make sure you’re really sexy and feel sexy. And then go get your sexy clothes on, and go out to your sexy coffee bar, and try to look sexy.”

Colley obviously spent time perfecting his technique in Auckland’s High St district during his visit.

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