

Paul Westerberg

Talk about the best-laid plans going astray. After successfully scouting out a Minneapolis bistro with a drool-inducing wine list as the ideal locale to loosen the lips of Replacements mainman Paul Westerberg, the visiting scribe is shocked to hear that Paul's been hitched to the wagon for a full month.

"Magazines always send us their drunks, their fuck-ups — people they think can relate to us!" Westerberg says. "You wouldn't believe the number of journalists we've had to carry out from Replacements interviews, and then their articles are always half full of descriptions of their hangovers!"

Westerberg playfully teases the drinking scribe while toying with his sixth bottle of non-alcoholic beer, seemingly enjoying the flight of the curveball he's thrown with the revelation of his sobriety.

Normally another rock n' roll star drying out is no major news but the Replacements, along with the Pogues, have written the book on drunken rock n' roll revelry. The smell of booze soaks through their now lengthy catalogue — eight albums over their 11 year existence — and much of the Replacements' legendary live reputation is based on the sloppy, drunken spontaneity of their shows.

You could even make a case for analysing Paul Westerberg's lyrics and music strictly in terms of the effects of excess grape and hops consumption on his muse. Various loud, obnoxious, sentimental, funny, melancholy and emotional, his songs mirror the moods of the heavy drinker but they stem from the pen of a writer with an open heart, a sharp intellect and a genuine flair for melody. Quite how sobriety will affect Westerberg's work remains a mystery but it certainly hasn't diminished his conversational skills or his generous personality. Over the course of four hours split between a couple of his favorite haunts and a downtown stroll, he reflected candidly on, well, just about everything.

The key topic, of course, is *All Shook Down*, the new album from the Replacements that isn't, we discover, strictly a Replacements' record.

"I made the record with a group of musicians. The Replacements among them," explains Paul. "There were only one or two songs on which all four Replacements played. I didn't want to call it the Replacements but you can't do that if the record company has 'The Replacements' on the contract.

"I wanted the music to come first. To hell with the name. We're just four guys who play music. I hear songs

that may sound differently than they can play. I'm not going to settle for their playing if I don't think it's fair to the song. Yes, it was difficult for the others. (bassist Tommy Stinson, drummer Chris Mars, guitarist Slim Dunlap) to take. I told them first that I wanted to do it all alone and that didn't fly but I think they've come to grips with it now. I'm saying 'The Replacements' isn't a sacred cow. It's a name we use to play live but let's break away from that."

Rather than signalling the inevitable death of the band, Westerberg's stance can be viewed as him flexing his muscles as leader, reminding his comrades that it is, in essence, his show. "Over the years, I talked myself into being one-fourth of a unit but, frankly, that got stifling," he says. "The other guys had songs they wanted to do but in my estimation they weren't as good as mine. In a true democracy I'd allow them to do some and put mine on hold, but then I thought 'Damn it. I'd rather just make my own music'. True democracy never works in a band."

Whether it's seen as a Paul Westerberg record or a Replacements record, *All Shook Down* is his best work yet, a superbly written collection of songs played by some stellar musicians. His supporting cast includes saxophonist Steve Berlin (Los Lobos), drummer Charlie Drayton (Keith Richards), John Cale on viola, Heartbreaker Benmont Tench on keyboards and Concrete Blonde's Johnette Napolitano on vocals on 'My Little Problem', the raunchiest Replacements-style cut on the album.

Fervent Replacements fans who were disappointed in last year's overly produced outing *Don't Tell A Soul*, may have anticipated or hoped for a return to the loud, raw guitar anthems that propelled the band to rock hero status through the 80s. But Paul wasn't about to cater to their craving. He does, however, agree with criticisms of *Don't Tell A Soul*.

"I think there was pressure on co-producer Matt Wallace from the



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label to glossify things," he explains, "then Chris Lord-Alge, the engineer, put this sheen on everything. He put the moustache on the Mona Lisa for us. It got us a Top 50 hit but it crucified the effect of having one song that felt like this, one like that."

This time around, Paul, who co-produced with Scott Litt, pledged to "strip it down and make it sound like the demos. You hear the songs and the voice; all that stuff in the background is the accompaniment, rather than featuring big, loud, hooky instruments. This record is a reaction to being on tour and playing extremely loud for six months. The last thing I wanted to do was pick up an electric guitar and make some loud music. That's partially the reason it's more acoustic based. I wrote more instinctively this time; spending days writing pages of things. Then I'd come up with a song title, melody

and chord structure. I'd flip through pages of my prose and choose lines from here and there. Lyrically, four or five songs are literally on two pages in different orders."

Spare, haunting songs like 'Sadly Beautiful', 'All Shook Down' and 'Bent Out Of Shape' (which sports the affecting lines "I smell your hair on the clothes I wear, I miss your face") possess a melancholy, almost bleak ambience.

"What you hear there is a guy having a break-down," confesses Paul. "Part of that is directly linked to why I'm not ready to tour just yet. In the past, I tended to live the songs out and feel I had to feel them as intensely as the day I wrote them. The idea of going out to perform this album is not a happy one. I have to find a way to distance myself from it; to convey the feeling without going back to the hotel room and slitting my wrists. But I'm better now than then."

This soul-baring honesty is something Paul claims he's "always found necessary. My art comes first in my life but it's hard to balance that with how I relate to my family, friends and band. I don't want to lose any of them but I want to be true to my songs. I've made that decision, and it's scary."

"I'd love to write a happy song. That's my goal in life right now. I've always told myself before that I couldn't be creative when I'm happy but that's something I could change. I could be a fairly happy, charming person but it's never reflected in the songs."

The current uncertainty in the Replacements camp is something Paul finds exciting. "I thrive on the unknown. I'm addicted to danger," he says. "There'll probably be a Replacements tour but maybe not. The record company hates the uncertainty," he chuckles

mischievously, "but now I'm going to tell the truth, which is that things are dangerously exciting again. I've lied for 30 years. I've stopped drinking now and hopefully I am changing a few things in my personal life so I'm in no position to lie again."

"We've always been a band for rumours. 'Is Paul dying of cancer?' 'Is he crazy?' No. Paul is just tired of doing what he's done but if you think I'm not going to tour you're crazy. In a perfect world, we'd have enough money to go out and do whatever we wanted creatively, then come back and be a band. But what's unfortunate is that financially the other members of the group can't support themselves through the band unless we tour."

"I still don't know if I have the desire or courage to play a solo tour but I'd like the option of playing with either the Replacements or more soulful players."

These are ominous words for the legions of diehard 'Mats fans who really believe they are "the only band that matters". "Each record, there's a new thing for the old fans to get mad about, but if I just listened to them I'd never create anything," Paul says. "A few of the band members concern themselves too much with the old fans but to me, the Replacements always represented daring risk-taking. It may be commercial suicide, but in a way it's heaven-sent that we've never really been commercially successful. It's not like I'm the goose killing the golden egg. Maybe the clay egg!"

Westerberg openly admits that critical raves and obsessive fans haven't exactly had his band threatening to go platinum. Spying Jon Bon Jovi on the cover of *M.E.* he queries, "How many critical raves has he had? Yeah, I might trade bank accounts but I wouldn't want those pants."

A wee feud seems to be simmering between the Jersey poodle and the Midwest rocker. "I saw the Replacements on the cover of *Musician* magazine with the headline 'The Last Great Band of the '80s'. Yeah, right. I never heard of these guys," sneered Jon Bon Jovi, the embodiment of the phony rock n' roll the Replacements slagged on 'Seen Your Video'.

Paul Westerberg attracts a different kind of admirer, that's for sure. "I hate to say it but we're getting more sensitive types now; people who are smart, who read, rather than just like a big noise," he says. "Four years ago, the typical Replacements fan was a guy in college who drank too much and didn't have a girlfriend. We get more female fans now, but I could get into trouble talking about that! I'm willing to show a more female side, whereas most rockers who come on as macho seem false. All the women I've ever known are attracted to men who are man enough to be gentle. Hey, where's that waitress bitch?"

The Replacements' reputation for drunken debauchery persists, however. "Some women have this image of the guy who swings from chandeliers. One journalist came to interview us just after covering a convention of 350,000 Hell's Angels. All her girlfriends phoned to see if she was all right, but they were more worried about us. I couldn't believe it. What the fuck have we created here?"

His chandelier-swinging days are over now, Paul hopes. "I've been drinking since I was 13," he states. "It became my life, I could only function under the influence of alcohol or chemicals. I've been a victim of the biggest rock n' roll cliché. You create this monster and have to live up to it. Finally, it was 'Paul, you're not happy doing this. Who cares about rock n' roll? Stop drinking or you'll die.' Once you do that you realise you still have rock n' roll. So write some, play some! I've done everything not sober for so long that each time I do something sober it's like 'Hey, I can do that!'"

"I'd like to see it as a lifestyle change. Of course, it'll come out that

these cause cancer," he says, eyeing his fake beer suspiciously. Paul confesses he's reticent to commit to a Replacements tour "until I have a few more months under my belt. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't afraid of the pressure touring entails."

He's not about to get moralistic, though, and he's tolerant of continuing drinkers. "If Tommy asks if he can have a drink I'll say 'If you don't, I'll punch you out. Get shitfaced so I can see what it looks like!'" But Paul does acknowledge feeling "slightly responsible" for influencing fans to get under the influence.

"I've seen horror shows at our gigs where we tended to attract a crowd that would use us as examples for their own problems — 'If he can get as far as he is being so fucked up, there's hope for me'. Anyone thinking that is in for a depressing, ugly, scary lesson."

Westerberg remains suspicious of celebs using their status to preach. "If they want to do good in their minds, OK, but to me it's laughable. Fine, if you're politically orientated, but I'd rather hear you write a catchier song. Make up your mind, buddy."

To Paul, a catchy song is one of life's lasting joys. "I love melody and the feeling words convey. I don't like rhythm and groove-orientated music and that seems to be the music of the day."

The Replacements still see themselves as mavericks in the music biz. "We've never really been part of anything," he says. "We were too young to be punks and way too young to be in a classic rock band and now we're too old to be in the Pixies. We have a mixture of classic things but with an attitude that wouldn't have survived in the '60s. We'd have been the garage band that played the dance shut down by the police. We were seen as a punk band because basically we drank too much, had a good time and were a bit obnoxious. We're dreamers who lucked out and somehow got a little skill along the way. Now, we'll never be the young new hope and we're glad we're past that. Paranoia sets in when you're the critics' next big thing."

"The Replacements could have been very successful if we'd been a little smarter or a little dumber but we were always in the middle. We'd never want anyone to tell us what to do but we didn't know what to do on our own. The door has been open but we've been climbing up the building to get through the window because we don't trust who is waiting behind the door."

The Replacements have definitely been one of the most influential bands of the '80s, inspiring a whole generation of guitar-bashing rockers. "Snot nosed garage bands will go out of their way to write songs about us, or me in particular," Paul maintains. "They cop our attitude, they've got the drinking, they do silly covers, they switch instruments, but they don't have the songs."

Not that Westerberg considers helping out younger bands to be beneath him. He gets positively animated when discussing the Leatherwoods, a Minneapolis group he's begun producing. "They have great elements they just need to bring together," he says.

In turn Paul remains a fan of some of his early rock n' roll models. "We played a gig in New York with Keith Richards on our last tour," he recalls. "They didn't want us hanging around backstage but I snuck in and got a polaroid of me and Keith. Course he's looking at me like I'm the guy who sweeps up! Hey, we've always worshipped the dinosaurs we were supposed to hate. We loved Rod Stewart, the Stones, Led Zeppelin."

And just as those rockers keep rolling on, so will Paul Westerberg. "I really don't know what's in the near future for the Replacements but I can see us with snow white hair, our guts hanging over our trousers, playing 'Bastards of Young' in a lounge somewhere in 2006."

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