

Band of the Week: Cocteau Twins

Resident sound-nerd [Tom Killingbeck](#) thumbs through reams of musty vinyl so you don't have to. Here are his weekly recommendations...

Monday 20 June 2011

#32: Cocteau Twins



Who: Elizabeth Fraser, Robin Guthrie, Simon Raymonde.

When: 1970s-1990s.

Where: UK.

Why: [Scotland](#), despite being a frozen wasteland of bracken and heather where itinerants grapple for shortbread and deep fried [Mars bars](#), is possessed of a world standard indie rock heritage. From the [Jesus & Mary Chain](#) to [Belle & Sebastian](#), [Franz Ferdinand](#) to [Teenage Fanclub](#), [Arab Strap](#) to [Josef K](#), our Northern cousins have time and time again outclassed us. For me, the best indie band up from the border has always been the [Cocteau Twins](#). Formed by two friends from Grangemouth, Robin Guthrie and Will Heggie, the line-up truly fell into place when they met Elizabeth Fraser at a disco. The three were heavily influenced by the wave of arty post-punk that was sweeping the urban centres of the nation; [Joy Division](#), [Siouxsie & The Banshees](#) and [The Birthday Party](#) in particular. The latter band assisted the blossoming Cocteaus in securing a deal with [4AD](#), the label that they would help to define. With a Roland 808 drum machine, Heggie's solid basswork and Guthrie's wraithlike guitar effects, the band's sound was distinctive. But Fraser's vocals sent them into the stratosphere.

Her interpretation of the band's surreal lyrics was remarkable, owing more to [glossolalia](#) and mouth music than to traditional rock performance. Her gauzy wails floe and throe across Guthrie's deep, watery soundscapes; causing the listener to feel like they're swimming in the music. While this early output is

dated by its use of the limited electronic instrumentation of the time, it's still essential to see the band in embryonic form. By the time their second LP, *Head Over Heels* was released, Heggie would have departed to join [Lowlife](#). Delighted in his signing's dreamy atmospheres, 4AD founder [Ivo Watts-Russell](#) entreated the two to appear on his collaborative record *This Mortal Coil*. This project yielded two significant fruits; Liz's [unbelievably wonderful cover](#) of [Tim Buckley's](#) 'Song to the Siren' a career highlight with it's otherworldly intonations, and the recruitment of Simon Raymonde to play on their next LP, *Treasure*. A collection of tracks with outmoded names, this marked the beginning of a period of true musical ingenuity.

A startlingly brilliant run of EPs dotted around the semi-acoustic album *Victorialand*, before the group signed deals with [Relativity](#) and [Columbia](#) (on lease from 4AD) to ensure that their masterpiece, *Heaven Or Las Vegas*, would reach as wide an audience as possible. It remains a watershed record, light-years ahead of (or to the left of) any of their peers. A faraway, neon-clouded pop album, Fraser's vocals hit new heights, quixotic and strange lyrics such as 'Gee, you're so ephemeral' becoming swooning angelic paeans. Even though her words are often indistinguishable, they're somehow moving due the reeling emotion put into her singing. *Heaven Or Las Vegas* would become the highest ebb for the Cocteaus' waves of glittering sound, as a split from 4AD signalled a downward spiral. In 1997, after the break-up of Fraser and Guthrie's relationship, their band, too, split. Since then, Fraser's beatific tones have been leant to [Massive Attack's](#) hugely successful album *Mezzanine*, as well as to the soundtrack to Peter Jackson's adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*. In 2005 a reunion was dissipated at the last minute by Elizabeth's reluctance, and, for now, we'll have to enjoy these hallowed songs in the darkness of our bedrooms alone.

Influences: David Bowie, Kate Bush, Joy Division, Siouxsie & The Banshees, The Birthday Party.

Influenced: Julee Cruise, Julianna Barwick, My Bloody Valentine, Slowdive, Sigur Rós.

Sample Lyric: 'Am I just in heaven or Las Vegas / It's so much more brighter than the sun is to me'.

Which Record: *Heaven Or Las Vegas* (4AD, 1990)



One comment

Champagne Conservative

20 Jun '11 at 10:33 pm

Head Over Heels. My god, that album.
Like My Bloody Valentine, but immeasurably better.

Newcomers would do well to give *Treasure* a look, as well- by far their most accessible album.

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