

Whirlpool ezine, late 1995

Caitlin Moran's lovely, lively Radiohead interview!

by Caitlin Moran

The Corn Exchange in Cambridge is a 16th century barn - high, arc'd roof; buttresses colliding in the centre in star-bursts of roughly carved rose and flame. The walls are honey coloured stone, still boiling from the sunset which streams through the open fire exits. To the right is the mixing desk and the main entrance; to the left is the stage. Just above the stage is the Salisbury Box ('No drinking or smoking allowed in the box') and we are perched up here, waiting for Radiohead's soundcheck to begin, having travelled 70 miles to do so because Radiohead soundchecks aren't the usual, pulverisingly dull mike-shifting and bass-drum testing ("Two. Two two. Two. Two two. Thump' etc.) of other bands. Radiohead soundchecks are a microcosm of the band itself and one of those free, rare treats like wet-ghost clusters of wild inkcap mushrooms and rare meteor showers, that involve a pain-in-the-arse amount of effort to sort out, but once you do, are worth it 12-fold.

Stages waiting for gigs to happen on them are like the blacked-out airstrip on Close Encounters Of The Third Kind; dark, skeletal structures which, with one flick of a switch, suddenly roar into terrifying neon organisation; and an immense air of waiting for things to happen. The lighting man is running through his moves; the room alternately flashed sea green, pink and white-out strobe as roadies shuffle around doing Useful Things and Ed, Radiohead's unfailingly polite guitarist and backing-vocalist - the man who puts the whoops and fire-string harmonies into The Bends - wanders around the empty venue, chewing the end of his laminate and looking at the ceiling with wonder.

Thom, a tiny, beautiful rag-doll in scuffed trainers and chrysanthemum-orange hair, comes onstage with an acoustic guitar which looks like it's had all its innate Guitar Glamour sand-papered off, and stands awkwardly in front of his mike. He absently brushes a couple of chords whilst watching Ed with a bemused air. Slowly the chords stick themselves together, start sewing themselves into a song; so gently you don't realise what's happening until it occurs to you you've been holding your breath for the last three minutes. Thom screws his eyes up, and starts singing - chasing his voice around the room, higher and higher, wilder and wilder, a feral choirboy singing the sun down, and wailing as night and all the terrors therein approaches..

The rest of the band slowly come on stage and take up their instruments silently - they're running through a new song and each instrument comes in at the end of a refrain, slowly swelling the song beyond Thom's scrunched-faced introspection into something that makes the walls buckle. It's got Led Zeppelin heaviness with a middle passage that soars like a bird released. The words 'album' 'next' and 'will be amazing' come to mind. That is, until the bass comes in.

"Colin! Colin! Can we check your mike?" Colin bounds up to the microphone. "Helloooooo" he greets the engineer with Pathetic Sharkesque enthusiasm. "This is lovely, isn't it?" He strums a couple of notes experimentally, as the rest of the band swoon and sway behind him. "Ooooooh," Colin moans. "That sounds all wibbly. Could we, um - " and here a look of profound embarrassment takes hold of him " - stick another three or - um, I don't know - four on the top end? EQ it a bit? It's all - " (large grimace) " - a bit splurgy" (another grimace, to apologise for using such technical language. Centre-stage, lit holy by the spot, Thom reaches a run of three notes which turn the spice to ice. To the right, Colin waves "Hello" and mimes that his bass has gone 'All wrong' to a bemused friend. Radiohead are ace, aren't they!

(Three months later, on the phone to Colin in Minneapolis. Colin is drunk. Colin is a very good

drunk - his eyes grow as wide as plates, and he lobs out some secret in a flurry of giggles before clapping his hand over his mouth. "The next career move is to be Queen", he says seriously, before exploding into more giggles. "We've been practising all the moves. I'm making him a crown and cloak.")

Thom does seem to have been becoming more of a performer of late. He'd always give his all - often more than his all - on stage, but tonight's gig showcases some kitsch-Elvis moves that are disturbingly horny. Clutching the mike stand whilst collapsing, right leg twisting and jerking like he's in the middle of a rude dream - Thom's being ironically sex, if such a thing's possible. Actually, it is - I've just remembered Jarvis.

"Yeah", Colin affirms. "Thom's playing with what can be done on stage without turning into a complete tart. Not to distract from the music or the lyrics, but not trying to express the excitement by, um, wiggling his legs or something. Trying to combine the cerebral with the physical - a lot of bands who are more literary than others seem to think it's undignified to become physically expressive on stage - I think it makes things more exciting, don't you? I'd always fancy someone who's brainy and a good mover over someone sitting there in the corner reading poetry and scowling at everyone on the dance floor. Have you seen Sparklehorse yet?"

No. Dunno much about them. Their singer's leg exploded, didn't it? "He was very ill," Colin confirms. "We love them. Radiohead love Sparklehorse. We've dragged them from America to come on tour with us because we love them so much. We want to manage them. Make their t-shirts - 'Radiohead Say Buy Sparklehorse Records'. Ooooooh no," Colin stops himself. "You have to say the word 'fuck' in t-shirts now, don't you? Radiohead Say Fucking Buy Sparklehorse Records."

'Fuck' is last year. 'Babe' is 1996.

"Oh." Colin seems momentarily confused.

"Well, then, 'Radiohead Say Have You Seen Babe Yet?' Will that do. Can we do the Sparklehorse t-shirts after the Babe ones? We really do like them. They're our friends."

FRIENDS ...Radiohead have made a lot of friends over the last two years. After the first, passionate kiss of 'Creep' in 1993, followed by a subsequent tricky two years which all the band seem relieved to be over. The Bends was a hugely unexpected shag-of-the-decade which left everyone slightly dizzy with lust, and reaching for a much-needed reflective cigarette. Working by wildly enthusiastic word-of-mouth, The Bends support by five top 20 singles, hasn't been out of the British charts since it was released. Two years ago Radiohead played in cruel and unexciting lunch-time sunlight at Reading. This year, they headline T-In-The-Park in Glasgow. It's unlikely they'll ever drop down the bill again, already having a back catalogue that can reduce a grown man to tears of joy and wonder in five minutes flat.

"It's soooo lovely, because we love Scotland", Colin says, brimming with enthusiasm. "We love Scottish people. We want to make it really thrilling - huge fireworks that scare the livestock or something."

Like Bjork's half-out blow out at Reading last year?

"Yes, but funny at the same time. Maybe we should finish on 'Lucky', and then have the stage blackout, and then as everyone claps and cheers and runs to the toilet, the fireworks could go up, all glorious, and explode into the word 'Colin'. Written like I do my signature - you know - with the 'L' making a little nose and the whole thing looking like a lovely, smiley face. Playing in the UK is great - you do miss out on things abroad. Like this Mad Cow palaver - we're missing all of that. What's it like? What's happening back there?"

Panic. Denial. Fibs. Huge sense of smugness emanating from Kentucky Fried Chicken.

"They're taking it really seriously in America," Colin reports. "Apparently, there's 34 British cows still loose over here that they can't find, and all the media is obsessed with tracking them down. They've got appeals on the TV and everything. Thom's going to write a song about it. It's so poignant. There's a little fiend somewhere in Minnesota with 34 cows wearing bowler hats and union-jack t-shirts all huddled in the corner and trying to hide behind a hedge. It's so funny that cows are at the top of the news, isn't it? Cow Crisis!! That's funny."

So what's the new album sounding like?

"Oh, it's brilliant," Colin enthuses. "I do like Radiohead. It's all written now."

Hi-NRG pop songs with choruses about sunny days and ice cream on the beaches?

"No, same old thing" he sighs, mock-despairingly. "Gloomy old rock. We've tried other things but it's not us, really. We do like to gloom."