



The Pixie Who Fell to Earth

* For twelve years, Frank Black, the frontman for what may have been the greatest band of the '90s, has refused to reunite the group. But now he's gotten therapy, and the Pixies will rise again **by BRIAN RAFFERTY**

WHEN FRANK BLACK SINGS, he looks like a mutant baby, anxious with rage and monstrously oversized. His eyes clench, his mouth widens in a galactic wail, and the skin on his head and neck collapses into neat, Shar-Pei folds, shooting the sweat off his face like cartoon tears. Black can do about thirty or so songs this way, without any banter or wisecracks or knowing nods to the kids up front—skinny teens with damp Pixies T-shirts stuck to their chests. It's a fierce little rock 'n' roll endurance contest he's been racing in for the past twelve years, ever since he broke up what may

The hair (and the grumpiness) may be gone, but Frank Black's desire to recapture the Pixies' magic is back.

have been the best and most influential band of the '90s, just as they were on the verge of dominating the alternative nation.

Now, night after night, Black shows up, sells out and plays to an audience that has come to catch a glimpse of what they all missed out on years ago—fans who appreciate his solo work but who, deep down, are

Photographs by LARRY SULTAN

really there to sing along to “Gigantic” or “Velouria” or “Monkey Gone to Heaven.” He will eventually oblige, churning out the Pixies’ hits with assembly-line haste, for these days, Black is nothing if not an instrument of efficiency. Even as his encores wind down, his brain has already left his body and is planning a getaway. “Sometimes you have time to be nice,” Black says. “And sometimes you just don’t feel like it. You have the flu and you’re tired and you’re loading the truck. So get the fuck out of the way. I’m trying to find a shower. I gotta take a shit. I gotta go find a toilet that isn’t filthy.”

After each show, Black cleans up and heads to the most sensible hotel in town. Not the cheapest, just the most practical—on-site laundry, quiet rooms, airport a few miles away. At 39, he’s been playing rock ‘n’ roll almost as long as he’s been listening to it, and whether he’s opening for U2 or humping gear to the van after a club date in Saskatoon, the hotels remain the same. Black has set up his own little world on the road, one in which he can travel from comfort zone to comfort zone. It’s a pleasant, profitable way of living. So why, after so many years of saying he wouldn’t do it, is he now going to reunite with the band that once caused him so much psychic turmoil?

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FRANK BLACK HAS REMADE himself before. He was born Charles Thompson IV, the kid forever being moved around by his restless parents, hauling his Donovan and Beatles records wherever he went. Then he rechristened himself Black Francis, the angry young man of the Pixies, the master of lyrical nonsense, tossing out verbal shrapnel about spaceships and bone machines. And finally he became Frank Black, the one who stopped the Pixies’ party before it could get too big and went out on his own.

“I wrote a fax,” Black says as he describes the band’s unceremonious breakup, in 1992, “and just skipped out without so much as an explanation. I didn’t want to have any kind of confrontation.” It was a confusing, maddening move, one that even Black admits left scars. “People were insulted,” he says. “Maybe rightly so. But, hey, what can I say? That was twelve years ago. I was in a different place emotionally or psychologically or whatever.”

He says this during a tour of his new home, in Portland, Oregon. Black—or as he prefers to be called offstage, Charles Thompson—has been here for eight months, and the place is starting to come together nicely, a collusion of scattershot pop-culture fixations and bachelor-pad

FOR INDIE-ROCK daydreamers, the news of a Pixies reunion was met not with the usual music-snob eye-rolling but with a feeling of about-freakin’-time justice.

necessities: Jacques Tati posters on the wall; two neatly arranged shelves of reading material in the corner (Samuel Beckett, a tome about the Three Stooges, a few years’ worth of *Omni* magazines); an unused weight bench; and a frameless mattress plopped on the floor.

Black is big and boundless and seized with nervous energy. He’s simultaneously peering at his computer and folding laundry and chatting on his cell phone. His hands move constantly—tapping, cracking his knuckles, tugging at his pant legs. Though there’s always a smile on his face, it seems as if he’s trying very hard to get along, as if he’s thinking, *This is what people do. This is how they act. Keep smiling.*

Which is strange, because Black is also a genuinely friendly guy, one who clearly takes pleasure, for instance, in letting you ride shotgun in his mammoth custard-color ’86 Cadillac while he shows you around his drizzly new town. Yet the overall impression is of a guy who is figuring out how to play well with others for the first time in his life. The past twelve months have been a bitch: He split with his wife of sixteen years, a brutal change that prompted him to leave

his home in Los Angeles and to seek out a therapist. “I just decided it was time to leave for a while,” he says. “I don’t think I’ve ever been single and alone. It’s a little strange.” He takes an eternal pause, considering his lot. “*Yeah*,” he finally says. “Shit happens.”

On top of his divorce, the decision to reform the Pixies did not come easily. Negotiations broke down over money and management, and time and again it seemed that the rumors were what they’ve been for the past decade—just rumors—and that the famously embattled band would never play together again.

To indie-rock daydreamers—the twenty- and thirtysomethings who subscribe to *Mojo* and log on to Pitchfork every morning—the idea of the Pixies reuniting feels like a sweet vindication of all those years of late-night debates over who was the most important band of the ’90s. Black and his band-mates (bassist Kim Deal, drummer David Lovering and guitarist Joey Santiago) usually come out near the top of such über-geek marathons, but the caveat has always been that the Pixies were a good two years or so ahead of their time and that their successors—Nirvana, Radiohead, Weezer—were the ones who really molded the whisper-to-a-scream dynamic into something more popular and more marketable.

Record sales aside, no one has ever been able to replicate the tiny worlds that Black creates in his songs, alternative planets full of sad punks and Mexican superheroes and strange little turns of phrase. Take this, for instance, from 1988’s “Bone Machine”:

Onstage, Black can still take the whisper to a wail. Offstage, he lives quietly and anonymously.





The Pixies in the late '80s. From left: Kim Deal, David Lovering, Joey Santiago and Frank Black

*I was talking to preachy-preach
about kissy-kiss
He bought me a soda
He bought me a soda
He bought me a soda and he tried
to molest me in the parking lot*

The lyrics may read like gibberish on the printed page, but they resonate deeply when Black elbows them into your ears. He has hatched these strange binary codes his entire career, and even in conversation, when he tries to describe how his songs work, his own digressions take on a slightly illogical but poetic rhythm of their own.

“Okay,” he says, “songs are word games, basically, right? It doesn’t matter how serious the lyric is. The rhyme’s going on, or alliteration or syncopation or meter or whatever, whatever game you’re playing. It’s like figuring out a puzzle. It’s like a crossword puzzle, you know? I mean, not exactly a crossword puzzle—filling in the blanks. It can’t be stupid. Or maybe it could be. A lot of it is...slippy-slidey.”

Got it? Maybe not. But if Black were to scream it at you, to throw back his bald noggin and howl it out, it would all make perfect, slippy-slidey sense.

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THE MOST FAMOUS QUOTE about the Pixies didn’t come from one of the band members or their label or a gushing rock critic. Instead, the plaudit that pops up in seemingly every article or mention of the band came from the guy responsible for the biggest hard-rock anthem of its time:

“I was trying to write the ultimate pop song,” Kurt Cobain said of “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” “I was basically trying to rip off the Pixies.”

A few years after the Pixies’ demise, the posthumous shout-outs began to roll in, especially from those artists who had copped from the band’s sound: Nirvana, Radiohead, Weezer. The Pixies slowly became a hand-me-down band, and listening to *Doolittle* or *Bossanova* for the first time was like discovering a fuzzed-out musical world that rendered everything else damn near irrelevant. Soon, nonhits like “Here Comes Your Man” and “Head On” were anchoring mix tapes and college-radio playlists alike, and by the time David Fincher used the swooping

“Where Is My Mind?” at the end of his 1999 movie *Fight Club*, half the crowd knew the words, filling in their own little *whooo-hooos* over the closing credits. There’s even a musical in the works, based on Black’s life and scheduled to premiere in the UK this fall.

Because the band has managed, through its own inactivity, to hold on to its mystique, there is something slightly unsettling about hearing the words *Pixies* and *reunion* in the same sentence. No one wants to see Frank Black as a sad middle-aged rock ‘n’ roller whoring himself on some crappy VH1 Classic-sponsored reunion or cohosting golf tournaments with Hootie. In fact, much as Pixies fans would give up their still muddy Reading Festival programs to see the band perform together again, many of them are also aware that nothing kills a myth faster than trying to live up to it.

Black stands to gain the most from the Pixies reunion, and he knows it. “At the end of the day,” he says matter-of-factly, “it’s my band.” For the past decade, promoters have come to him every year, waving their wallets, and each time he has shooed them away, more interested in doing his own work than in going through the headache and the heartache of getting the band back together. There was always residual “Pixies money” dribbling in, and Black did all right by it—no Sting-style villa in Tuscany, but he wasn’t starving. This year, though, the interest was just too high, and the offers were just too good.

It all started in August, when Black made a joke on a British radio show about reuniting, a remark that was picked up and repeated the next day on the *New York Post*’s Page Six and on CNN’s ticker. Suddenly, everyone thought it was really happening, and Black began to consider the notion seriously. “I was like, ‘Well, yeah, what the hell?’” he says. “I wasn’t so uptight about it.” After all, he says, they all will make “crazy money.” “There’s a lot of mystery around the band, so we’ve been getting really high offers,” Black says. “I could use the money right now. I know the other guys could use the money. We could all use an influx of cash in our lives. And let’s face it: Those European festivals, they pay a lot.”

It’s a blatantly commercial statement, and were he Chris Cornell or Perry Farrell, we’d tell him to take his \$20 Ticketmaster surcharge and shove it up his greedy ass. But when the Pixies reunion was announced early this year, the response was not with the usual music-snob eye-rolling but instead

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Though there’s no shortage of Frank-filled material due to come out this year—including a brand-new Pixies greatest-hits album and a solo double-disc set—fans-to-be should check out the following from Boston’s finest.

THE PIXIES:

Surfer Rosa/Come On Pilgrim (1988) A

single-disc combo of the band’s first two records, available together only as an import. It’s a twenty-one-track assault that establishes the band’s jarring “calm ‘em and bomb ‘em” sound, with lovingly sincere melodies sitting atop scalding guitar work. **Standout tracks:** “Gigantic,” “Where Is My Mind?”

Doolittle (1989) With an extra polish from producer Gil Norton, this became the band’s best-selling album and remains a dorm-room must-have to this day. **Standout tracks:** “Here Comes Your Man,” “Monkey Gone to Heaven”

Bossanova (1990) Flush with reverb and surf-rock twang, it’s an altogether quieter Pixies sound—though there are still moments of barely contained rage. **Standout tracks:** “Down to the Well,” “Velouria”

Trompe Le Monde (1991) A return to the band’s angry roots, this is still the band’s most underrated record. **Standout tracks:** “U-Mass,” “Head On”

Complete ‘B’ Sides (2001) Possibly the best batch of castaway tunes ever assembled, further proof that the group was simply incapable of turning out a clunker. **Standout tracks:** “Winterlong,” “Wave of Mutilation (U.K. Surf)”

FRANK BLACK:

Frank Black (1993) Black’s first solo album is his finest post-Pixies, pre-Catholics record, an extensive working out of Beach Boys fixations and new-wave fetishes. **Standout tracks:** “Los Angeles,” “Hang On to Your Ego”

FRANK BLACK & THE CATHOLICS:

Pistolero (1999) Stripped-down and raw, Black’s new band used a no-frills approach to flesh out his reinvigorated songwriting chops. **Standout tracks:** “Bad Harmony,” “Western Star”

Dog in the Sand (2000) Black’s best work since *Trompe*, a grizzled batch of *Sticky Fingers*-esque blues-rock. **Standout tracks:** “Blas Off,” “Hermaphrodites”—B. R.

LEFT: COURTESY OF ELEKTRA ENTERTAINMENT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES; CD COVERS: FROM TOP: ELEKTRA/ASYLUM; 4-AD RECORDS/WB US (4); ELEKTRA/ASYLUM; SPIN ART (2).

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with a feeling of about-freakin'-time justice. Here's a band that's been name-dropped and ripped off for years, never getting the big payday they deserved. Not only will they finally get some cash, but after years of loaning out records and lecturing 14-year-olds on how Bush and the Vines have nothing on Black Francis and Co., true aficionados can finally look smug and say, "See? We told you so."

There is the risk, of course, that the newer, older Pixies could suck, that the admitted money lust will undermine everything. But once the band members finally got back together to rehearse for their on-again, off-again, on-again tour—a feat that took some serious zero-hour managerial wrangling—Black found his priorities changing. "Without getting too mushy, there was not really much of a breakup the first time," he says. "[This time] we went through the breakup that we never had. The financial stuff is great, but I really feel like there's a kind of peaceful, joyous thing about just playing music with people. It's something that we had when we first started, and somehow it got messed up. I hope that this time around I can make that up and say, 'Okay, sorry I used to be such a grouch.'"

Besides, Black has never embarrassed himself artistically. After leaving the Pixies, he fared better than anyone expected, stepping into a pile of cowboy punk and recording nine albums in the past decade. Taken together, the output is a bit too much for anyone but a true Frankophile to wade through, but at least two of the albums—1993's *Frank Black* and 2000's *Dog in the Sand*—are near masterpieces.

Having made the music he wanted to make, Black is now more at peace with his relationship to the Pixies. "I'm perfectly comfortable with the band's legacy," he says. "I haven't always been, but whatever. You're never gonna escape the shadow, but you wanna be taken seriously. And I have been, eventually."

A few years ago, Black's take on his past would have been less measured and diplomatic. He had a reputation for being unwilling to make nice with the press and for being impatient with the demanding fans who would go so far as to chase him down back alleys to cuss him out for the various ways in which he'd disappointed them. "I always ended up with someone yelling at me," Black says. "I used to yell back. But now I just try to avoid it."


Joey Santiago, the Pixies' guitarist, agrees. "He's mellowing," Santiago says.

"He's opening up more."

Improbable as it seems for a cynical guy like Black, therapy has been a big help; indeed, the Pixies reunion would never have happened had he not done it. "I do it on the road once, twice, sometimes three times a week. I end up talking in all kinds of weird situations—on my cell phone, on the side of the road in Montana or in a phone booth at six o'clock in the morning in some little village in Scotland. It's very educational, interesting stuff." One of the topics Black has spent the most time talking about is his rather vagabond childhood. "When I was a kid, I used to move a whole lot," he says. "So I'm used to a kind of transient lifestyle. I discovered through therapy that it isn't always the best thing for me. I'm less able to connect with people. So I'm trying to change that a little bit."

Portland seemed the perfect place to do that, a fairly innocuous town where he can hang out or hide out as he wants. His brother and father live nearby, as does his new girlfriend, but no one else knows he's here. The cable guy milling around his apartment seems much less interested in installing a new modem than in figuring out why this guy has an eighteen-fret *Powerpuff Girls* guitar. And the 20-year-old record-store clerk with the Pixies shirt whom Black passed repeatedly while shopping for Celtic rock albums was completely oblivious to him. At the moment, Black is happy for such anonymity, sometimes spending whole days in his apartment listening to jazz and classical stations and reading, or playing *The Sims*. "It's kind of fun not knowing a soul," he says, "but at some point I imagine I'm gonna wanna know a couple of people, have a couple of acquaintances."

A few months from now, Black will pack up and go on the road again and likely make enough money to keep him set for life. And yet he seems to know already that this relatively humble existence is what he needs to return to. "It's easier to leave your hometown," he says, "when you know you're gonna get back to it."

He wiggles around on the black leather couch and stares at the traffic below these impossibly foggy mountains. "It's nice to look at the freeway like it's a constant sort of art piece," he says. "It's kind of soothing in its own crazy way. When it gets dark, it just lights up the hills." He pauses, and a proud, wild grin spreads over his face. "It's all...*twinkle-twinkle*. You know?" 

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