

Exit Music: Can Radiohead save rock music as we (don't) know it?

GQ, October 2000

THE POSTERS on the ancient streets of Arles give little away. Sting is playing soon in Marseille, and coming up is a "Super Big Reggae Party" with U Roy and Alpha Bondy. A bullfight will take place next week in the town's ancient Roman amphitheater.

Even as one approaches the equally ancient "Theatre Antique", built during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, there's scant indication that the most acclaimed group on Planet Pop is here, in Provence, to play its first live show in 18 months. On one side of the open-air auditorium the evening sky is charcoal-grey; from the other, bright golden light streams across crumbling columns and arches.

But now the old men promenading with their tiny dachshunds pause in their post-prandial tracks. For covering the railings which encircle the theatre are sheets of black plastic, and towering over the old brickwork is scaffolding that supports chunky klieg lights. Clustered about the theatre's back entrance is a polyglot throng of youths.

A shiver of excitement ripples through the boys and girls as a slight dark figure emerges from the doorway. No satin or sunglasses on display here; not even a tattoo. Just a guy in grey New Balance sneakers, bag slung over shoulder and head tilted into a mobile phone. Voices – French, German, Dutch, English – yap at Colin Greenwood, bass player with Radiohead, as he follows the band's producer Nigel Godrich into the sharp light. Soundcheck over, they are heading for band's huge lime-green tour bus to eat dinner.

Blinking and squinting behind them comes Thom Yorke, the group's tortured frontboy with his dabchick hair and wonky, lopsided eyes. Radiohead's 18-date summer tour of Europe hasn't even started and already this most alternative of pinups looks vaguely defeated.

"Thom, Thom!"

"Thom, here, Thom!"

One particularly persistent German *madchen* monopolises Yorke as he tries to beat a path to the bus. He stops, poses patiently as the boys and girls capture him with tiny cameras.

And then the Creep who could be God slinks off, alone, into the sultry evening.

*

Radiohead are once again setting their controls for the heart of the rock machine, heavy weights on their slender shoulders. The weight is especially heavy on Thomas Edward Yorke, 31, whose songs and lyrics and singing have made him – possibly against his own better instincts – a near-superstar.

According to Colin Greenwood, "excessive praise" for the group's third album, *OK Computer*, "did Thom's head in." Now Radiohead must follow the record up, knowing that almost anything they do may disappoint profoundly. Tonight, in Arles, the world will hear the first fruits of the band's long labours in studios in Paris, Copenhagen, and England.

To understand what is expected of Radiohead is to acknowledge just how bankrupt "rock music" has become at the dawn of the 21st century – as a sound, as a movement, as a pseudo-religion. ("Oh no, pop is dead, long live pop," Yorke bleated back in 1993. "It died an ugly death by back catalog.") Post-Cobain, R.O.C.K. has withered on the vine, discredited as a cultural force, toppled by teenpop and hip hop and even by what passes these days for "country" music. In America, Pearl Jam struggle to stay relevant; in Britain, the embers of Ladrock barely flicker as Oasis go through their death throes.

Shining like a beacon in the midst of this morass is 1997's shimmering, densely-textured *OK Computer*, a masterpiece which took the moribund rock genre and resurrected it in 13 astonishing tracks built around Yorke's soaring voice and melodies and the (multi)instrumental genius of Colin Greenwood's kid brother Jonny. At a point when Britrock was being shored up by lumpen cool and microwaved Beatles riffs, Radiohead dared to attempt something big and brainy and unabashedly beautiful.

In so doing they kept alive a continuum that ran from U2 through R.E.M. – the ideal of polite, slightly anguished boys reaching for meaning and anthemic transcendence through guitars and amplifiers. Radiohead revived rock's passion, its *urban hymnody*, recalling nothing so much as that post-punk period of *rockism returned* (U2, Echo & the Bunnymen, Simple Minds). Yet they also forged insistently forward, staring hard into a dystopian, over-technologised future, uninterested in peddling stadium clichés.

Significantly, the long timelag between *OK Computer* and its successor – *Kid A* – has created a gap, a lacuna quickly filled by a spate of post-Britpop *faux*-Radioheads: Witness, Muse, Six By Seven, Coldplay, JJ72, Motorhomes and more. There's a quintessential Britishness about the whole crop: the self-doubt and introversion of university-educated boys called James and Dominic hand-wringing over liquid guitars. How wonderfully earnest they are, lost in dreams of Thom Yorke's ugly-duckling deity and Jeff Buckley's ecstatic grace.

Like Radiohead itself, these bands are part of a growing resistance to the paralysing pop-culture irony that's undone rock as we used to know it. Asked why people were getting so excited by his band, Coldplay singer Chris Martin offers a disarmingly simple explanation: "It's not because of our politics or any agenda – it's because people are looking for what's important in music again."

Yet right now the question is less whether the Muses and Coldplays will have any relevance once the masters return. The question is: Are Radiohead themselves interested in trying to top the musical Matterhorn that is *OK Computer*, or are they turning defiantly away from the role of rock saviors that the world wants them to assume?

*

A Thom Yorke mix tape sends subterranean shockwaves through the lichen-covered granite of the Theatre Antique. (As a student, the singer was a revered turntablist at Exeter's Lemon

Grove club.) The local *jeunesse doree* munch on *baguettes* as an evening church bell peels over mangled dance beats.

The distorted digital grooves aside, the setting for tonight's show recalls nothing so much as *Pink Floyd Live at Pompeii* – or even the Grateful Dead playing the Pyramids, man. Indeed, those who decry Radiohead as ersatz prog-rockers – as too earnest, too studenty, too middle-class – will have a field day mocking the choice of unorthodox venues (piazzas, more Roman theaters) on this lowkey jaunt around Europe and the Mediterranean.

Swifts and swallows dart through the heavy air as, with uncanny synchronicity, the Yorke tape gives way to the Inkspots singing 'When the Swallows Come Back to San Juan Capistrano'. At 9.30 pm, the gathering clouds burst and rain falls from a great height onto the huddled crowd. For a cataclysmic half an hour it looks as though we may not be hearing Radiohead after all.

*

An image, frozen in pop time (or at least the early summer of '93): a quintet of limp-haired youths unloading their "gear" from a battered van outside a venue in Clapham Junction, south London. An unmistakable pre-gig anxiety written on their support-band faces as they heave amps through the emergency exit door. One runty little dude with big peroxide-blond locks, and a glowering stringbean boy like something out of *Deliverance*.

The image comes to mind because Radiohead at this point were just A.N. other post-grunge band, and a band who most decidedly *hadn't* been embraced by that summer's mushrooming "Britpop" hype. Five university-educated boys from Oxford playing sub-U2ish "rock" with none of the swooning panache of Suede, Radiohead were getting short shrift in the cruel UK music press. At least some of the animosity came down to the entrenched anti-middle-class bias of weeklies like *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker*. 'Anyone Can Play Guitar', Yorke sneered on Radiohead's debut album, but in Britain only the underprivileged are taken seriously as avatars of modern youth.

Drab as the debut (*Pablo Honey*) was, it did feature a song that put them on the map and very nearly became the albatross which finished them. A postscript to the dark abjection of grunge and its slacker offspring "losercore", 'Creep' was a startling slice of self-flagellation sung in Yorke's most putrifyingly miserabilist style. "I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo," Thommy Boy yelled; "what the hell'm I doing here?" When you saw him singing it – all spluttering rage and spastic convulsion – the self-hate was toxic. This was a Kurt Cobain from the dank corridors of provincial English boarding schools.

That 'Creep' took off in, of all places, America was a double helping of irony, especially when Radiohead found themselves playing "Modern Rock" radio beach parties and weenie roasts. "When 'Creep' went through the roof, Capitol Records just wanted to milk it," *Pablo Honey*'s co-producer Paul Q. Kolderie says. "They were doing 'I'M A CREEP' contests and placing ads that said 'BEAVIS AND BUTTHEAD SAY RADIOHEAD DON'T SUCK.'" Although a reissued 'Creep' reached made the UK Top 10 in the fall of 1993, American success made the British press even more suspicious of Radiohead. It also set the terms for the band's uneasy relationship with America. On the one hand, like U2 and the Police before them, they were prepared to work hard at cracking the U.S. market, taking several support

slots on tours. On the other, Thom Yorke balked strongly at the schmoozing that was expected of him.

The thorny issue of how an intelligent band retains its credibility while hawking its wares around the world's pre-eminent capitalist culture is one that continues to dog Radiohead (not to mention Capitol Records) as they embark on the promotion of *Kid A*.

*

"Bonsoir, tout le monde!"

Yorke's first words immediately endear him to the dripping Arles audience as it wrings out its T-shirts. (Would Liam Gallagher have bothered with such a gesture?) 18 months after the group bid *adieu* at the Stade de Bercy in Paris, Radiohead is once again a real live entity, not simply an aggregation of website rumors. Launching into 'Talk Show Host', a B-side favorite of fans-in-the-know, the band quickly makes its case. Jonny Greenwood's keyboards swirl around drummer Phil Selway's circular groove and rhythm guitarist Ed O'Brien's chopped funk-rock chords as Yorke lets rip. *"You want me?"* he bawls in the song's most transparent line. *"Fuckin' well come and find me!!"*

The applause soaked up, the group turns to 'Bones', a track from their breakthrough second album *The Bends*. *"Now I can't climb the stairs,"* Yorke howls over the churning boogie riffs. *"Pieces missing everywhere/Prozac painkillers..."* Jonny G is on guitar now and he's stabbing at the strings, pulling out notes that shriek and quiver in the air.

We feel it in our dampened bones. Radiohead rocks.

*

The Bends (1995) changed everything. Recorded in a state of semi-crisis, a point when the unavoidable tensions of sustaining a band had boiled over, it steamrolled the slovenly Britpop competition of the time. *"The Bends* was neither an English album nor an American album," said Paul Kolderie, who mixed the album after John Leckie (Magazine, Stone Roses et al) had produced it. *"It really had that feel of, 'We don't live anywhere and we don't belong anywhere.'"*

Sonically, *The Bends* was a far richer proposition than *Pablo Honey*. Here was an art-rock band that wasn't afraid of being musos. The sheer range of textures was dazzling, and with it came a host of other vaguely proggy signifiers: sudden time changes; string parts written by prodigy Jonny; fractured, oblique lyrics about alienation and disease.

Mix Pink Floyd with Nirvana and Jeff Buckley (who blew Radiohead away when they saw him live in London in April 1994) and you get both angst-rock ('Just', 'The Bends', 'Black Star') and plangent lamentation ('High and Dry', 'Nice Dream', 'Fake Plastic Trees'). More than anything, this is where Yorke finds his voice – a voice suddenly outgrowing its Bono/Ian McCulloch origins as it built from tremulous softness to soaring intensity, supported by superhuman lungs. *"[Radiohead] possess the great lyric singer of his time,"* says

Scott Walker, for whom the group adjusted their schedule to play the Meltdown festival in London this summer.

Radiohead weren't the only British band shooting for something more than indie cool – both the Verve and the Manic Street Preachers wanted to make big, ecstatic music – but it was *The Bends* that most mocked the Blur/Oasis spat that blew up around Britpop in 1995. "The Britpop movement was wrong for us because it was so awash with this knowing irony," remarked Jonny Greenwood. "In some ways it wasn't about... being serious about being in a band."

By year's end, *The Bends* had put Radiohead on the world's stage and earned them the friendship of their heroes R.E.M.. When Michael Stipe took Yorke under his wing, giving him pointers on how to handle success, it was as though the older band was passing on the mantle. By 1996, when they started work on *OK Computer*, Radiohead had accepted that being in a rock band didn't mean they had to behave like rock stars.

"I think what happened within the band," John Leckie told Mac Randall, "is that they had this kind of paranoia about being polite, straight, from Oxford, never getting into any trouble or scandal, very clean, not rock'n'roll at all. That's the way they are, and yet at the time they were worried about that, about taking on a rock'n'roll career and not being rock'n'rollers. They had to learn to be themselves, and to be comfortable with that."

As they set about recording *OK Computer*, Radiohead became an entity unto itself, removed from the British music scene. Unlike the majority of bands who "make it" in Britain, Radiohead did not up sticks and move to London. They remained in and around Oxford, where they'd all grown up, and knuckled down to work in their own rehearsal space near the village of Sutton Courtenay.

Opting to produce the new album themselves with the help of *Bends* engineer Nigel Godrich, Radiohead adopted a more looser, more experimental approach to their third opus. "We weren't listening to guitar bands, we were thoroughly ashamed of being a guitar band," Thom Yorke admitted. "So we bought loads of keyboards and learned how to use them, and when we got bored we went back to guitars."

The bulk of *OK Computer* was recorded in a spooky Elizabethan mansion belonging to ageless actress Jane Seymour. St. Catherine's Court, outside Bath, offered the right ambience for the band's bold new sound – an enveloping, almost symphonic montage of guitars and machines, loops and chorales. Into this big, open sound was poured all of Yorke's obsessions with the way technology was eating into people's souls, his vocal performances comprising a single long lament for human feeling in a hyper-mediated universe. Songs like 'Paranoid Android' and 'Subterranean Homesick Alien' alternately expressed separation from society with yearning for connection.

For some, the result was a '90s *Dark Side of the Moon*; for others, it was a masterpiece that blended the Byrds and the Beatles with Can and Miles Davis, a work that gave new validity to the term "concept album". For Capitol, it came as something of a shock. Convinced they had the new U2 on their hands, the West Coast label had assumed that Radiohead's third album would be *The Joshua Tree* to *The Bends*' *Unforgettable Fire*.

Capitol hadn't reckoned with Radiohead's own growing suspicion of the crude brushstrokes that stadium rock required. Even *OK Computer*'s most overtly commercial track, the sublime 'Let Down', was all about the distrust of apparent sincerity. "We're bombarded with sentiment, people emoting," Yorke complained. "That's the letdown. Feeling every emotion is fake."

If Yorke's postmodern malaise was a spanner in the works, Capitol sounded bullish after the first drooling reviews appeared. "There's nothing I've seen in any country in the world that's excited me as much," the label's then-president Gary Gersh told me. "Our job is just to take them as a left-of-center band and bring the center to them. That's our focus, and we won't let up until they're the biggest band in the world."

But did such a hoary notion mean anything anymore? Not to Radiohead, who in an earlier era might have been Pink Floyd or even the Beatles but who happen to have surfaced at a *zeit* when the *geist* is all about questioning and subverting the fake plastic pillars that support the rock *mythos*.

In her recent book *I'm a Man: Sex, Gods and Rock'n'Roll*, the poet Ruth Padel calls rock "a theatrical dream of being male... full of male teenage selfishness, contradiction, violence, misogyny, narcissism, supremacism, resentment, anger, darkness and fantasies of omnipotence." For Radiohead, as for REM before them, rock has become an exhausted cartoon, an arena of empty exhibitionism.

Shattered by the *OK Computer* tour, which took them through to the end of 1998, Radiohead finally regrouped to begin work on a new record at the beginning of 1999. As with *The Bends* and *OK Computer*, painful false starts – this time in studios in Paris and Copenhagen – were the order of the day. Ed O'Brien's often painfully honest "diary" on the band's website radiohead.com kept fans abreast of the maddeningly uncertain process by which they were writing new material. At the root of the band's uncertainty was a central loss of faith: the faith in rock itself.

*

"This is a new song..."

Here are the words we've been waiting Thom Yorke to say all day, and now he's said them. Tomorrow they'll be on the Net and rock's global villagers will be e-gabbling about "the new songs".

Radiohead play seven new songs at the Theatre Antique, and most of them leave the crowd looking bemused. Are they songs at all? Or are they mere experiments, fragments worked up to resemble finished pieces?

'Optimistic' is moody and muted, as is the warmer 'Morning Bell', sung mainly in falsetto and arranged in 5/4 time. Neither appears to possess a chorus, and both suggest that Yorke is aiming for the shapeless, post-triphop sound of 'Rabbit in Your Headlights', his mesmerising cameo on UNKLE's *Psyence Fiction* album. 'Dollars and Cents' is more spacious, opening out into long vocal lines on its chorus, but it's hardly 'The Tourist'. Later comes the monochordal grunge-fuzz of 'Everyone – The National Anthem', with Jonny Greenwood

miking the "found sound" of a transistor radio and the others grinding away over Phil Selway's pounding sixteenths.

'In Limbo' is formless but pleasingly dreamy, with Ed O'Brien at the keyboard and Selway playing splashy jazz fills, but 'Everything In Its Right Place' – based around electric piano chords that sounded like old Steely Dan or Stevie Wonder outtakes – is nothing more than an ascending motif masquerading as a song. Doubtless it's a precautionary measure to make the last new number, 'Knives Out', the most accessible. With Yorke strumming an acoustic and O'Brien harmonising nicely, this Smiths item could almost be Travis.

What stirs the youth of Arles, of course, is the majestic megaballads ('Lucky', 'Exit Music', 'No Surprises', 'Climbing Up The Walls') and the post-grunge blasts of angst ('Bones', 'Just', 'My Iron Lung'). "Oh, you know this one," Yorke says as he introduces 'Street Spirit', then adds, "*Phew!*" "Thank you for being so nice on our first gig back," he grunts after penultimate encore 'Nice Dream'.

What chance a backlash when *Kid A* is released next month? Already knives have glinted in the British press. "Why would a band with such a rare gift for combining sonic invention with memorable, emotive songs give up half its winning formula?" asked the *Observer*. "Prog rock for dullards," sneered the *Guardian* of Radiohead's Meltdown appearance in July.

*

On the eve of the Meltdown show, Thom Yorke posts a typically cryptic note on radiohead.com. It's a direct quote from the Malcolm Lowry novel *Under the Volcano*, and it begins thus:

"Or is it because there is a path, as Blake well knew, and though I may not take it, sometimes lately in dreams I have been able to see it?... I seem to see now, between mescals, this path, and beyond it strange vistas, like visions of a new life together we might somewhere lead."

With *Kid A*, Radiohead are taking the road less travelled, a winding track that makes a sharp exit off rock's superhighway. Modern music may be about to experience its most dramatic rebirth.

© Barney Hoskyns, 2000