



RADIOHEAD

XX KIOK INTERVIEWS **THOM E. YORKE**

THOM E. YORKE, primary voice and writer of Britain's Radiohead, has "SAVE THE WORLD" inked across the back of his left hand. A reminder? I ask like TO DO: *Save the World?* But no, says Thom, it was more a reflection on the problem of writing a song on that subject. Who could do it? Who would want to? Maybe Maria fucking Carey [sic]. The moment came back to me later when I was pondering the contradictions powering Mr. Yorke, Peter Pan-like Yorke...Yorke of the pink complexion, moon-colored hair and chilled honeydripping voice. Yorke of the cynical comments whose idealism reveals itself as, in this midtown restaurant of suits and upscale

tourists, he sidesteps steaks in deference to his vegetarianism and later protects from scrutiny the feelings of fans who write him, telling him their troubles, telling him what he means to them.

This is the Creep? That's what everybody believes — that song was quite a confessional there, Thom. We're on to you now, boy, you and that singable self-loathing. "Creep" was the song that gave utterance to the fear of a thousand alternative radio hearts who could then come out of the closet. The echoes were heard across this land and then back in Britain: "Thom, I'm a Creep, too...oo...oo..." "I wish I was so *fucking* special too...ooo...ooo..."

And, if Radiohead is still a little antagonized because the national press in their mother country was slow to embrace 'em and it took "Creep's" meteoric rise to the top of the charts in this country to spark a revival in their own, well the awards

and accolades have come now but have proved small salve to ruffled feathers.

Why do you think it was big in the US before it was big in the UK?

Because the UK fucked up.

As a country? Fucked up by not honoring their native sons?

Absolutely.

People in the United States were able to recognize genius?

Absolutely. "Creep" is a great song.

And there's no denying it. "Creep" has an anthemic, epic quality and with Yorke's Badfinger-like vocals and mid-song splice of Hollies phrasing it'll be around for a long time. For at least the last ten months, though, it has been last year's song for Radiohead and recalls two and a half years of hard-scabble "wearing our nuts off." Second, consider for a moment the irony of getting your fifteen minutes of fame by virtue of your now-notorious lousy personality. Is it mere coincidence that all the girls are flocking to Eddie these days? Thom can protest "It wasn't me. It was just a character in my head, honest" but this stuff sells — Beck, even Sheryl Crow's pop-rock songs are anti-glamour, bosing down image to get at the crud beneath. Even the most recent crop of movies celebrates the dumb, the dumber and the Forrest Gump in all of us.

The fact is, lowest common denominators are having their day in the sun. The band is astounded anew at "chat" show fare in the U.S. — share your pedophilic desires on national TV, bask in the limelight, cash the check — at least the attention feels good and it's cathartic, too, to air these inner conflicts. Then you have to count on time to erase the label of pedophile or creep you volunteered for. Now that song is dragging you down like a ball and chain, and you're trying to reach the surface but rise too fast and you get "The Bends," the title track of Radiohead's new record.

The five had been schoolmates when they first got together with guitars and amps and then they played together during summer holidays from college. In 1991 they solidified and, on the strength of their demos, an A&R feeding frenzy ensued and within three weeks they were signed to Parlophone. The manic pace snowballed, culminating in *Pablo Honey*, the vehicle for "Creep," and, still, show after show after show.

But, if this ascent has taken Radiohead into the rarefied atmosphere of astronomical success, now with not one but two songs about respiratory distress on this new record ("The Bends," "My Iron Lung"), it appears Radiohead is finding it hard to breathe. When Yorke's vocals abandon the thick and murky power chords of these two heavies to swoop into the ethereal realm that "Bulletproof" and "Fake Plastic Trees" inhabit, the trade-off seems merely one of drowning for the unbearable lightness of being. There's a lot of trouble in these songs.

So what do you turn to to help you out of this bind? There's your music, it's been there for you for so long, what would you do without it but, geez, the business, talk about an iron lung. Write a song about it? Well, okay, but the weight of responsibility of having an audience is so intense and aren't we all sick of Eddie fucking Vedder's *sturm und drang* about

the curse of a fast-track career. If you don't, if you don't let or get it out, do you just knot up all over in pain and then put a shotgun to your head like...

What do you think about Kurt Cobain's death?

I'm sick of that question...uh...If one more person asks me about Kurt fucking Cobain, I'll...

...uh, Thom, Thom

...what?

I was going to ask you how your hotel is.

Oh, it's nice.

It's intriguing to me that you all went to college and mostly graduated before pursuing music. Where did you go and what did you study?

Ed [O'Brien, guitars and vocals] did politics and economics specializing in Northern Irish politics. Colin [Greenwood, bass player] did English literature at Cambridge. Phil [Solway, drummer] did politics, drama and English at Liverpool and Jonny [Greenwood, lead guitar, piano and organ] did two months of psychology and music. I studied English literature and fine art at Exeter, but they told me I couldn't paint. They had a crit. I showed my work; they said, "It's shit," so I started working on a Mac, scanning stuff on and stealing other people's work.

Do you work that way in music?

No, well maybe, because whenever I listen to something I think, "Shit, we don't sound like that but we've got to sound like that." So I find myself having to just block out a lot and wait for something to happen. We like first takes and accidents, for stuff to come out just like on the chat shows in America, which I find fascinating. There is never that level of almost pathological openness in Britain at all. It is starting to seep over now. I just don't get it. But I suppose I'm doing that, yeah, just working on a chat show really. I did an interview yesterday and I ended up saying, "Actually I don't mean any of this new album. I don't feel any of these things. It's totally dishonest." Because there will be people throwing at me "Wow, he's so honest. He's so personal." And it is but not really. It's just me working. Pop music is an impersonal medium, but it's not. It's really powerful, but it really is just work and it's not my whole life. That's why I'm going to find myself this time out going, "I don't mean it. I just made this all up." I just don't want the fucking responsibility. I'm sick of the letters, man.

What do you get? What do people write you?

It's not so bad now, but I wouldn't want to name names.

Well, name problems.

No, I can't tell you a story because if they read it then they'll know it's them; it's not fair. But, you know, everyone goes on moaning about this shit all the time and shut the fuck up, you know? You set yourself up to be this person in each song as a certain thing, as we all do, and the one thing I want to try and get across is the fact that I'm doing it for that length of time and then I move on, like I've completed a painting. People think that words are so important. They are just fucking words, you know, there isn't this mystique, there's not this Michael Stipe sort of "Wow, what's he saying, what's the hidden meaning behind 'What's the Frequency, Kenneth?'" There fucking isn't one. It's just a jumble of words. The thing

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I'm most worried about is getting fucking precious about what we're doing.

And that's what I see

on all these fucking chat shows. These people might be pouring their heart out but ultimately it's to something that is a totally impersonal, cruel medium that then moves on to whatever. CNN can show endless pictures of Ethiopians dying and then you watch an advert for a chat line. Everything that I do will be neutralized within that medium and make it look like a joke. So I have to be aware of that now from the onset and treat it as it is. I don't want to be precious about this. I don't want to have to moan, "Oh, my creativity's been reduced to the level of MTV." When I write, I spew out all that stuff but it could be from me or it could be from someone completely different.

Another musician told me how he'd been listening to a Beatles A to Z weekend on the radio and when they got to the letter "I" they were all the songs written by John Lennon, and he knew then why John Lennon was his favorite Beatle — because he spoke in the first person and had the power of that position infused in the songs. But then we talked about his admiration for Elvis Costello, and he has always had such a heavy persona laid over what he did as an individual musician, especially to begin with. It wasn't about who Declan McManus is yet he found a way within the constraints that he decided on. I think that is a really interesting quandary. I guess persona is a protection of sorts.

Elvis Costello is a classic example of someone who sets himself up to be within a persona but all his best work was

stuff like, "A Good Year for the Roses," while I find with his first two of three albums I am really alienated because he has this approach and it didn't free him up to be great. It completely constrained him because he felt he had to have this approach because if he didn't no one will fucking listen.

Do you think it was packaging then?

Yeah, totally, and he freely admits it. I read this interview with him of about five years ago, and he's basically saying it's a total fucking joke and by the time he came to America he had realized it and knew that his best work was done when he wasn't trying to be Elvis Costello. That thing he slipped into with "A Good Year for the Roses" with that Cole Porter aspect — what the fuck was he doing? I find the reason the song sticks is that it sounds like a completely new style or it's almost like there's a different reason for that song being there in the first place.

Name a song on the album and how it came to you.

I'll give you contrasting examples. "Planet Xerox," or "Telex" as it is now called because Xerox will sue, was started after we stepped out for a meal with [producer] John Leckie. We were all getting sick of recording. It wasn't going very well so we got really drunk and came back and I said as a joke to him, "Let's do a song that we haven't really written yet and see what happens." We started at midnight and then carried on until five the next day, using a drum thing that we hadn't used with another track, and grabbed other bits and the motivation was one of pure self-satisfaction and enjoyment and release. And then a song like "Bulletproof," was, I don't know, I'd had the song for ages, ages and ages, never had a lyric, and then suddenly one day, when I was feeling really like I'd been run over lots of times by a steam roller, the whole lyric just floated

straight into the song so I went into the studio with that.

Tell me more about Scott Walker [Yorke's pet favorite, a vocalist from the '60s].

The reason I love Scott Walker is that there is this total tragedy in his voice that even he's not completely aware of. He's trying really hard, pouring himself out to the point where you find yourself laughing, you do, the first four or five times you hear it and then you'll never laugh again because there is something in his voice that lets him get away with it. When we were on the last tour we did in America, where everything was going wrong, I used to sit on the bus for hours and listen to Scott Walker on my Walkman and it was a total comfort to me because here was a guy who was just really tragic — a really tragic figure, really tragic voice.

Don't you think that's kind of a contradiction to what you were saying about how you want to work? In other words, don't you think that that's the same thing as what fans are finding in you?

[Laughs.] Maybe, yeah. No, yeah, it is. The contradiction is a way of preserving what I do so people don't laugh at it like that the first time they hear it. I'm sure Walker didn't want it either. But you see, so much of that is just melody, you know, and the performance and the delivery and that's not something I can change. I'm built a certain way, sing a certain way, perform a certain way and I've spent a lot of time over the past year trying desperately in the studio not to be the person that I'm built to be. Then everyone started telling me, and I just went crazy because I didn't want to be this person that everyone wanted me to be and then we did "Fake Plastic Trees." Suddenly I realized that I was really forcing the issue — trying desperately to be, I don't know, just trying to put the



lyrics and the songs out in the wrong way because I didn't want to be the person that was trying to get out in the music. So maybe I'm still doing it, all this crap I was talking about in the beginning.

SPACE NEEDLE