



heaven

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BY JAMES ROTHWELL **England's Cotswolds region boasts some of the most heavenly landscapes in the world. Long, rolling green hills and perfectly kept fields are dotted by eerie 12th- and 13th-century churches, ancient stone walls, and medieval villages built of a distinctive honey-colored oolitic sandstone. But while**

PHOTO BY DEREK RIDGERS (MANIPULATED BY CLIFF SCORSO)

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they remain in his memory, the quaint footbridges and evocative, pastoral views are not what Cocteau Twins guitarist Robin Guthrie remembers most vividly about his recent visit there. "They serve these 'cream teas' there," he says in his surly Scottish brogue. "It's a cup of tea served with a big fucking cake filled with cream and calories."

It's just like Guthrie to bring lofty visions down to earthly proportions. For 15 years, he and his fellow Cocteau Twins—singer Elizabeth Fraser and bassist Simon Raymonde—have created enigmatic, ambient pop distinguished by Guthrie's atmospheric effects and jangly, compressed rhythm guitar work. Fraser's vocals—a quirky blend of baroque inflection, amorphous lyrics, and chortling throat noises—have helped the band capture a devoted worldwide audience who think of their aesthete heroes as nothing less than cosmic seers, while music critics bring grandiloquence to new heights of hilarity in their very presence. In a well-known event, one scribe went so far as to call their music "the sound of the voice of God." Though that may be hyperbole, the group's ten albums—*Garlands*, *Head Over Heels*, *Treasure*, *The Pink Opaque*, *Victorialand*, *The Moon And The Melodies* (with Harold Budd), *Blue Bell Knoll*, *Heaven Or Las Vegas*, *Four Calendar Café*, and their latest, *Milk And Kisses*—are masterpieces of gorgeous, sophisticated guitar pop, helping provide the blue-

print for sonically adventurous guitar bands like Medicine, Lush, Curve, and Cranes.

Despite comparisons to celestial beings, the stout, bearded Guthrie is anything but high-falutin'. Born January 4, 1962, he grew up in the tough city of Grangemouth, Scotland, and formed the Cocteau Twins in 1980 with Fraser and pal Will Heggie, who left the band a few years later. A punk aficionado with a fascination for Nick Cave's *The Birthday Party*, *Suicide*, and *Roxy Music*, Guthrie was also weaned on Elvis, Link Wray, and surf-rockers like the Trashmen and the Shantays. He's a resourceful if technically limited player who's as likely to grab a Parsons-White B-Bender as an E-bow, and though he's never made a purely ambient record, Guthrie's massive guitar-made soundscapes have helped pave the way for a new era of guitarists who enjoy sonic tinkering as much as technique. In addition to the new *Milk And Kisses* LP on Capitol, Guthrie and company have released two recent EPs: *Twinlights*, an effect-free voice, piano, and acoustic guitar production—"Actually, there's not enough to hide behind," jokes Guthrie—and *Otherness*, a remix project by Mark Clifford of U.K. ambient group Seefeel.


Guthrie spoke to us from September Sound, the Cocteauss' Middlesex, England, studio, once owned by the Who's Pete Townshend. "I'm here—you ask questions, I'll answer them," Guthrie deadpans characteristically. "Call me old-fashioned, but that's the way we'll do it."

When did you start experimenting with soundscapes?

Well, I'm not a fan of reverb on guitar, but I

like to create space using a lot of delays. I started getting into effects on the first few Cocteau Twins records. I was studying electronics, and, because I didn't have enough money for the real ones, I started building my own effects, which I've long since gotten rid of. Then I got things like the Electro-Harmonix Memory Man, Clone Theory, Big Muff, and Electric Mistress when they were just coming out. I used a lot of tape echoes on the first album. I was running my guitar into a Big Muff, a Watkins Copy Cat tape echo, a Clone Theory, then another tape echo, then into the amp. That's where I was at then. I just wanted to create something different, because by my own admission I couldn't pick up a guitar and play other people's songs, and I still can't. I'm the most dull person to have a jam with. I'd rather be playing someone else's instrument!

The first bands I was in were punk bands in '77 and '78 back in Scotland when I was a teenager, but I strayed away from that. That was just learning to play the guitar, stuff that anybody with a guitar can do. After that I wanted to do something more, but I never really picked up the guitar with the same enthusiasm of everyone who could play "Stairway To Heaven" in the music shop on a Saturday afternoon. That was not for me at all. Part of me would really like to be able to play the guitar technically well, but part of me is really happy that when I pick up a guitar, I can make it sound like *me*. My technical style is so limited. I don't practice very often, and I enjoy other aspects of making music even more than playing guitar. I love playing keyboards and drums, even though I don't play them very well either! But I produce music, and I see that as more my role



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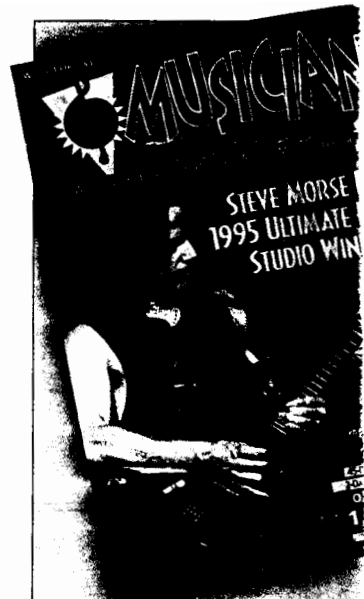
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than any one particular instrument. I'm torn between lots of things. It would be much different if I could actually become a virtuoso guitar player, but the chances of that happening now are slim.

Could you dip into your effects bag for me a little bit?

Do you really want to talk about this? [Laughs.] God, I've got a big cupboard at my house with at least 150 old effects pedals, even original units still in the boxes. I've got lots of Colorsound stuff still in the box, and at least 25 Electro-Harmonix units. That's what I've used since I started playing guitar, and then after I made a few records and started making some money, I thought, "I'll get myself some new things!" Then at some point I said to myself, "This is *not* the same." One of my favorites is the blue Boss Vibrato pedal, the BB-2—that's a genius pedal. On 1983's *Head Over Heels*, some of the guitar sounds were played through an Electro-Harmonix Poly Chorus, which has a feedback control. If you turn up the feedback control as you're playing, the unit starts to take off by itself. I could stop playing after a while and the sound would just carry on. I like that sort of thing—it's easy on the fingers. Slide is really great for creating soundscapes—just moving the slide about on the strings, not really playing specific notes. You can hear that a lot on *Four Calendar Café*. I also like to feed back off the Yamaha NS-10 studio monitors as opposed to doing it off the amp.

For clean sounds I use a Rockman Sustainer, and for the more distorted sounds I use a Marshall JMP-1 preamp, and I switch between them. Generally, I like to go through the preamp first, then into chorusing and time-domain stuff. On the last tour we used a sequencer for click tracks and effects program changes. But I had a pile of random pedals in front of me as well so I could make weird noises. I've got a couple of old delay lines that I was using for really strange modulation effects, where there's no straight guitar signal at all, just a lot of feedbacky stuff. You can hear it on my last album, *Four Calendar Café*—it's the guitar sound in the background of "Evangeline." I like analog delays quite a bit, but in a live situation I've always needed something that could be MIDI controlled. My favorite digital delay is the Yamaha D-1500. I've got about six of them—you can pick them up quite cheap. On the last tour I was also using a Zoom 9050 multi-effector, but purely for delay. I ran everything via program changes from the sequencer. So I've got my pedals—the fun things to play with—and the rest has always been programmed to change the preamp settings, the delays, everything. So the right sound should always be coming out. It's sort of like using a multi-effector unit, but it's bigger! I haven't found a multi-effector that really excited me. I'm not



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much for presets—I'm a fiddly person. I'm a make-everything-go-to-zero-and-start-from-scratch type of person. I like to be more extreme with effects. A fuzz pedal that says "fuzz" on it, not "overdrive" or "distortion" or anything like that, but "fuzz." That's what I like.

Do you use E-bows?

I've used them over the years, but the guitar I'm playing now has a Fernandes Sustainer built into it. You hit the little switch and it does all the tape loop or E-bow sorts of things. The guitar was custom made by Russell Fong. The shape is like an upside-down Jazzmaster—the body's tapered thin at the top and fat at the bottom. Mitsuo Tate [second guitarist on C.T. tours] plays one of his guitars, and Simon's got two of his basses. It's not my principal guitar, but I use it live because it's a big fucking sound, and the sustainer allows me to do a lot of stuff that I used to do with an E-bow. I've got three pickups on it—humbuckers and single-coils. I'm also using two of my old trusty favorites: a '59 Stratocaster and '59 Jazzmaster. Between the three of them I'm covered.

I'm not fussy about the guitars I use in the studio because there's never one single sound I'm trying to create. I like to have different—albeit subtly different—guitar sounds whenever I pick up a guitar in the studio. So I'll pick up whatever's lying about. If I was the type of guitar player that had the classic Eric Clapton sound or something like that, I'm sure I wouldn't pick up just anything—I'd need a special guitar and amp to get that sound. But I don't like to limit myself to having one sound. The effects treatments are how I hear things, but as far as the actual piece of wood is concerned, the tone and the playability is where the difference in guitars comes for me, not the overall sound or the finished result. There's always another guitar sound around the corner waiting to happen, so it's best not to be precious about anything.

But you do have certain trademark sounds—your jangly clean sound for example. Do you use the Rockman Sustainer in the studio as well as live?

Yeah, I've got a few of them. I use other pre-amps as well: a Marshall JMP-1, a Gallien-Krueger, a Mesa V-Twin, a Soldano. The studio is set up with one rack for all the studio effects, then another rack in the corner which is the guitar effects rack, and then I've got my live rack as well. If I don't have a piece of gear in both racks it's like, "I wish I could use that processor, but it's in my live rig. Fuck it—I can't be bothered getting it out. I'll use something else." About 97% of the guitars are recorded direct into the board. If I want something a bit different I'll use a Fender Vibrolux, which is quite cool. But the Rivera M-60s I play with live are quite Fenderish; the tone controls are wired the same way. You turn

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the tone controls to zero and you get no sound basically. I like that. But my live stereo amp setup is a constantly evolving thing, much to the pain of Lincoln Fong, who builds it for me. He's Russell's brother, and he works here at September Sound. A techie type.

Did the Cure steal that chorusy baritone guitar sound you had on the mid-'80s albums?

I would say there's no such thing as stealing sounds. I had my Fender VIs from the early '80s. But I don't believe in anything like that. "I was first! My Fender Bass VIs are much better examples than most people's!" I've got two olympic white '62 Fender VIs with Strat pickups—two of the first 30 made, so I'm really happy about that. I paid absolutely nothing for them because no one wanted them when I was into buying them. I haven't got them out for quite a while, but they'll return. There have been several songs in the past where Simon and I would play the baritones simultaneously, and playing those in harmony is a really nice effect.

You use both regular whammy bar and Digitech whammy pedal quite a bit.

If it's the feedback-type stuff, that's me standing in the studio holding a guitar up against the amps, bending the neck, and waving it about. Generally it's the sort of thing I do when there's nobody else about! It's usually done late at night with sunglasses on. [Laughs.] I use the whammy pedal to tune down, mostly in live situations, just to save my guitar from going out of tune. I'm one of those fuckers who, whenever I touch a guitar, it goes out of tune. I sit with this strobe tuner onstage, and all I do for the whole show is watch that fucking thing, because as soon as I touch something it goes out of tune. Also, with the distortion I use, it's fine if you're only playing one note, but as soon as you hit two notes together, if it's even the slightest bit out of tune, it starts beating and sounds all wrong. Plus, every Fender guitar ever made has the second and third frets out of tune. The guitar can be perfectly in tune, but because of the spacing at frets two and three, if you play there, they're going to be a little bit sharp—I promise.

Otherness is the closest thing to an ambient record you've done since The Moon And The Melodies with Harold Budd.

A little part of every Cocteau Twins record is an ambient project. That's one of the ingredients. I like to create space and atmosphere. You can change the atmosphere of the song just by the sound, without changing the chords at all—that's fantastic. If you listen closely to my records, there's always something going on in the background: a guitar feeding back or a weird delay thing. You don't always hear it on the first few listens, but as you listen more you uncover layers and layers of stuff. Like an onion! ■

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