



The Finest Dreams of Pop

Guitars, Garages and Gold with the Bangles

For those of us tatty young reactionaries who still get a kick out of guitars 'n' melody 'n' rock 'n' roll 'n' stuff, it's been a fairly good year — as well as some inspiring music

from within these shores there have been good records from other places, even Britain, and especially the American heartland.

A lot of the good stuff, like

the Meat Puppets or Jesus and Mary Chain (who not might quite be messianic but are at least *interesting*, forgodsake), hasn't reached a wide audience, but some has even

shifted notable numbers of "units" in the marketplace. Like R.E.M. Or like the Bangles.

The Bangles are all women; it would be easy to rack them up as a new Go-Gos, with all the strengths and failings of that band, or as the kind of roots-pop-with-a-pretty-face that is Lone Justice, or even make something of drummer Michael Steele's Runaways connections, but they're something more than any of those. A listen to their recently-released (here) first album, *All Over The Place*, more especially the second side, reveals a disarming intuitive feel for pop music itself that spans a range of styles. They get infectiously boisterous in places, gloriously languid in others, but don't ever lose their grip on melody. Kind of like the new Tall Dwarfs record before the acid comes on ...

The Bangles formed in 1981 in Los Angeles, part of a so-called "neo-psychedelic" scene that included the likes of the Dream Syndicate and Green On Red. After a couple of names that they found somebody else already owned, they settled on the Bangles. After a debut EP they were picked up by CBS America (although they come to us via Australasian distribution label Liberation Records, via Festival), recorded *All Over the Place* early last year and have since been touring virtually constantly around North America and Europe to promote it. They have the not so common knack of being able to write good songs whilst on the road and thus had a good bag at their disposal when recording of a second album began in July.

When I spoke to lead singer Susannah Hoffs at the LA studio where the recording was done, the album was nearly mixed but still unnamed:

"We're actually trying to figure out a title now. It's always a problem with Bangles records, because you've got four singers and all these weird different styles involved in the music. It's hard to find a title that's broad enough to express the diversity of the music. So we, um, don't have a title ..."

It's been a while since the first album now — why so long?

"I guess there was a bit of a gap, but we spent so much time touring last year because our record sold steadily, and we had such great touring opportunities; we toured with Cyndi Lauper for a long time. And I guess we always feel that it's better to wait and do it when we've got a really strong collection of songs together than rush in and do it quickly. Because in the end you have to live with it for a long time and you want to feel connected with it."

Back to *All Over the Place* — listening to the record it was easy to hear a live band. Was it a reflection of the Bangles live?

"Yeah — actually people are always thinking that when they come to see us live they won't hear the four-part harmonies, things like that, but they do. Live we're a combination of kind of a garagey guitar rock sound and these four-part layered harmonies over it. It's kind of a weird combination but it seems to work for us."

The arrangements are a notable feature of the record — has that always been characteristic of the band?

"Yeah. It has a lot to do with the producer we've worked with, David Kahn. We really take a song apart and work a lot on the arrangement, usually concentrating on the vocal arrangement; using the fact that there's four singers in this band, which is kinda different from most bands. We use the voices to do different things in the arrangements that otherwise would maybe be done with other instruments."

The most prominent vocal arrangement is on the delightful closing song, 'More Than Meets the Eye', underscored by a string section and acoustic guitars. Does that song get played live?

"No, never ... well, we have done it a couple of times, with just the acoustic guitar and the four voices. But that was a song written in the studio, while we were making the record. Actually, I would have liked it to have had less stuff on it — it had a string arrangement that was overly elaborate for my tastes. But it was something that was an acoustic approach to a song, because we're very folk-orientated and harmony-orientated. In fact we real-

ly would love to do a whole acoustic album somewhere down the line, indulge ourselves."

Virtually every Bangles review has referred to a "sixties" sound, often as not with words like "Buffalo Springfield" and "Beatles" tossed in for good measure. Does it irk you being constantly linked to the past rather than being treated as a current phenomenon?

"Oh, not really. We're not a revival band and we don't go around to pawn shops and play only instruments from that era or anything like that. I think the thing is we grew up in a city like LA, where you're in the car, you're listening to the radio and you're hearing the music. And music in the 60s was incredible — it was like the golden age of rock. It was such an expansive and diverse period — I mean you could hear Dusty Springfield, Dylan, Creedence, the Beatles, all in the same half hour period. And I think it just affected us very profoundly, just as the Hollies (?) or Elvis Presley affected the Beatles."

"I'm glad that some of the stuff that was in the forefront of the music that you heard in the 60s — the melodies, the harmonies; song structure that wasn't just a rap, a continuous repetition over a disco beat, but songs structured verse-chorus-bridge, with the melody leading the track. And those are the things that I guess we've always placed importance on in our song-writing. In that sense I feel like it's a good connection, y'know? But we're definitely not a revival band — this is the 80s and we're fully aware of that and there's nothing wrong with that."

Is there anything you deliberately work towards when you're putting together songs — the diversity itself for instance?

"It just sorta happens. Our influences are kinda varied and those surface in the music. I don't think we do anything very consciously — just like I said about the 60s thing, I think we're conscious of the fact that what's special about the Bangles is the thing we can do with the voices and the harmonies. So often when we write a song there's interplay between the voices, the background vocals aren't just padding to the song. The Hollies used to do that, the Beatles used to do that; where the background is like call-and-response, like a conversation going on. So we sometimes consciously write towards that, but as far as styles go we try and pick what we consider are the best songs to go on the album and those usually turn out to be a pretty diverse bunch."

You've toured a lot in the past couple of years — do you like playing live often?

"Oh God, we love it. That's the thing — we really like playing live. There's something chemically that happens, there's some energy that comes off it. We really have a good time, we like performing. I know some artists who dread performing and they have to do it because it's part of their job and it's gonna help sell records. But I feel that making records is just one part of being in a band and being a musician and it's not necessarily more important than playing live or doing a video or whatever. They're all part of the job, all part of the experience."

"I mean, a lot of times when I'm listening to this record I dream and fantasise about what it's going to be like to perform that song live and it really excites me and we look forward to it. I mean there are some things about being on the road that are really frustrating and tiring; equipment breaking and sound feeding back and so on. But the overall feeling of performing is just something there's no comparison to."

I understand you cover 'How Is the Air Up There' by the La De Das, one of our great hopes of the 60s.

"Yeah — wasn't it a number one? It's great. We always like to find sort of obscure songs that have been hits in different parts of the world, songs that have a good hook and a good melody and a good theme. We recorded that on our first EP actually. We were played it by a record collector friend of ours who works for a magazine called *Blitz*; he said 'You guys have gotta hear this song.' That was before we were even signed and we'd do real obscure songs like 'The Merry Go Round

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