

Du What You Du Du Well

Husker Du's Bob Mould

Picking over the crumbs of the last few months it's plain to see that 1986 hasn't exactly been a rock and roll feast. Only bands like the Go Betweens, That Petrol Emotion, Shop Assistants, the Orange, Sneaky Feelings, the Saints and particularly Husker Du — whose *Candy Apple Grey* was their fourth consecutive mandatory album in just over two years — have provided the sort of protein the scene needs to stay healthy.

Ultracore

"We saw what was going on in 1976-77 and we just thought that we could do better. We were bored 16 and 17 year-olds. We liked the Buzzcocks and the Ramones but we were fed up with everything else so we got together in late '78 in Minneapolis and we started playing out in '79 doing all original material."

Bob Mould's description of the band's beginnings would have applied to most British bands post-1977, but Husker Du came from America's mid-west, hardly a hot-bed of subversive chic. As it was, their *Land Speed Record* — 17

songs fused into a single white blur — defined Hardcore USA at the time when British punk had long since waned:

"A number of years ago we were a lot faster and more abrasive than we are now and I think some people believe we've sold out," continues Mould from the band's Minneapolis office. "Unfortunately there's a lotta bands in popular music that make the kind of music they know people wanna hear. Husker Du is one of those bands that makes the kinda music we wanna hear. Although considering the kind of music we played five years ago

anybody would be justified in saying we sold out because nobody could be that abrasive for that many years. That's probably why we're not as popular here as we are in Australia, New Zealand and Europe. Over here they don't know what to make of us yet, even though we've been touring the States so much for the last five years."

Perhaps Husker Du's success in Europe and elsewhere is due to the fact that there's an established punk tradition in those countries and they see the band as a continuation of that bloodline:

"Yeah, I think some of the people



Husker Du (L-R): Grant Hart, Greg Norton, Bob Mould.

who like the band see that in us and I think that's justified. Maybe we're one of the few bands who believe that there aren't any roles and maybe that's why we've alienated a number of people who've liked us. Husker Du likes to do things the way they do it and anyone who likes to come along for the ride is welcome."

Generating excitement seems to have been an early priority?

"Yeah, one way or another we were trying to do that but we were hoping it would happen naturally. It's interesting that the people who do like Husker Du in the States are really rabid fans, they know every song and they have every record, which is nice."

The crucial change from the hardcore frenzy of *Land Speed Record* through to this year's carefully prescribed bitter pill, *Candy Apple Grey*, occurred on *Zen Arcade*, a truly justifiable double album of amazing ideas. You want manic power-drive then bend your head to 'Re-occurring Dreams'; if acoustic's your thing then 'Never Talking To You Again' fits the bill; 'Turn on the News' is as close to conventional heavy rock as they've ever been; 'Pink Turns to Blue' was budding, peeling pop and 'Something I Learned Today' was just one of many great punk thrashes:

"It's hard for me to judge albums as being the worst or the best but *Zen Arcade* is my all-time favourite, although *Candy Apple Grey* is technically the best record we've made as far as being an album from beginning to end. But there's a lot of stuff on *Zen Arcade*, a lot of ideas to try and grab hold of. It would be nice to try and do something like that in the future when we've got a lot of time to concentrate on doing something real special."

At the same time that *Zen Arcade* was released the band did a brilliant incoherent blubbery climactic version of 'Eight Miles High':

"That was one of those songs that we'd all heard in separate places around the same time and we just thought that it would be neat to try and do. We messed around with it at practice and it fell into place real quickly, so when we recorded *Zen Arcade* we did 'Eight Miles High' as a single. And it was a real interesting version. It's a pretty classic song. 'Ticket to Ride' was the same. A lot of closed-minded people have criticised us for making fun of the Byrds and the Beatles and that nobody should ever do a Beatles' cover but we like both of those bands a lot and 'Ticket to Ride' is a pretty cool riff and that's why we wanted to do those songs."

New Day Rising, for my money, was last year's best album thanks to a first side that rose in intensity to 'Celebrated Summer's' fierce but beautiful climax:

"It was a straighter ahead album than *Zen Arcade* but there were still a lot of different ideas on it and some worked better than others. We work better by ourselves for some reason."

Was that why you got rid of Spot? "He never really added that much to the band or what I thought a producer should do like adding ideas or elaborating on things in the songs that the band doesn't hear. And as an engineer ... well, the sound wasn't getting any better from record to record, it just kept getting muddier and we felt we could do better ourselves. So we decided to part as friends before we killed him."

An Apple a Day

With the departure of Spot, Husker Du produced themselves on *Flip Your Wig*, a move which resulted in a fatter, cleaner and more orthodox texture. The band, it

seemed, were ready for a major break-out. It came this year when they signed to Warners and released *Candy Apple Grey*:

"Warners was the first offer we got. They started calling us about two years ago and at that time we were very sceptical thinking that they wanted to change everything that we were doing and make us dress funny and things like that."

"Eventually almost every major label called and once we started talking to them we found that Warners were serious about giving us a free hand and that is pretty implicit in the deal we struck with them. So we have complete freedom. Although the record company, like anyone would do, even those people who say we've sold out, looks for the most commercial aspect of the band, like saying, 'Oh 'Sorry Somehow' kinda sounds like a pop single so maybe that's the one we have a chance with on the radio.' We put the songs on the record though so we shouldn't object if they try to get the radio to play the song."

As a title *Candy Apple Grey* alludes to the two facets of the band that have developed over the last three albums; namely the sweeter accessibility of Hart's songs contrasting with Mould's own unfailing realism:

"Whether it's sweet or grey is ultimately up to the listener. If you look at the lyrics we're not very didactic, we're not the sort of band who says, 'You should do this or you should be this and that.' We would rather ask a lot of good questions than give people a lot of bad answers."

"In a lot of songs we try to tell personal stories objectively and let people decide how those add up in their own lives. We're pretty normal people, we're not too affected by anything, and I think people appreciate that there's a band like us that just likes to make music."

Like their previous album, *Candy Apple Grey* isn't a bundle of laughs in the lyric department. Depression ('Don't Want to Know if You are Lonely' and 'Too Far Down'), death ('Hardly Getting Over It') confusion ('All This I've Done For You') and doubt ('I Don't Know for Sure') are honest not escapist:

"We try not to mince words. A lot of it comes off the top of your head and I think everybody has it. Some people have to cloud them with flowery pictures or clothing. We just try to shoot straight, we don't try to bullshit anyone and I think it makes people feel good that they're not the only ones who feel that way."

Both 'Too Far Down' and 'Hardly Getting Over It' saw the band going acoustic, a far cry from *Land Speed Record*:

"We take our work very seriously and going acoustic is something that takes a long time to get confident with. You take away all the abrasion, the cymbals, guitars, hollering and stuff and when it comes down to drums and acoustic guitar there's not a whole lotta room to hide. It was something we had to grow into but now we're comfortable with that side of the band as well."

Your nasal vocal on 'Too Far Down' sounded like the Strawbs' Dave Cousins:

(Laughs) "I've heard someone say Richard Thompson and someone say Neil Young, but not the Strawbs, that's interesting. The nasal thing is

Comfort was there when Billie sang the Blues.

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