



# Radiohead: Coming Up For Air

**T**oo much success can hurt a band just as much as too little. Radiohead can prove it.

Indie kids the world over shook their fists along to 'Creep'. The effect was infectious. Somewhere along a two year tour based largely around one song, Radiohead forgot who they were. No longer. 'Creep', and the old Radiohead with it, have been consigned to a watery grave. There's a new Radiohead swimming below the surface, and it doesn't sound like a particularly happy Radiohead either.

Radiohead's second effort, *The Bends*, has already sent tongues wagging throughout Europe. It's a big, bold, emotional tussle with fame and self doubt, misery married to melody and a living, breathing reminder of the blackest days for the band.

Guitarist Ed O'Brien and Johnny Greenwood are in press mode, in London for Radiohead's first show in the capital for seven months. *The Bends*' genesis was difficult, enough to put the threat of disbandment on the charts. And it all started so well.

"When we were first rehearsing, it was quite weird," O'Brien says of last year's first efforts to get *Pablo Honey*'s successor in the can. If you can just imagine the most utopian rehearsal experience... it really was amazing."

It didn't last. "We came to London to record, and we had all these external pressures. The record companies wanted us to sort out the five singles from the album straight away, which seemed a little ludicrous at the time. Now it seems totally ludicrous. There was this big expectation for Radiohead to deliver this big rock album."

The band's first session, in London's RAK studio, was a disaster. Producer Mickie Most seemed to have little idea of what the band

wanted and the atmosphere created despondency. Only six tracks were completed in eight weeks.

It was a last tour to capitalise on *Pablo Honey* that put the wind back into the sails of the good ship Radiohead. They ended up in Australia and New Zealand, and all of a sudden it came right.

"Well, we started off in Australia and we had some terrible gigs. Then we came over to New Zealand, and the places we were playing were a lot like the ones we play in Oxford."

Greenwood agrees. "We found the atmosphere just a hell of a lot better in New Zealand. The musical taste seemed a lot more liberal, a lot more like the things we listen to. The only Aussie bands I've had exposure to are the big stadium rock outfits, whereas you look at New Zealand bands like the Muttonbirds, we're much more comfortable with that."

"Plus, says O'Brien, "the atmosphere when we played in Christchurch was amazing. We love those gigs where there doesn't seem to be any sort of crowd limit!"

Enthused with a new sense of confidence after New Zealand and a stop-off in Mexico, the band travelled back to tackle *The Bends*. They fired Most, headed back to Oxfordshire, and ended up in the Manor, the rambling country studio that gave birth to Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. Under producer John Leckie, the band kicked into gear.

"Half of the album was done in two weeks, and 'High and Dry' [the first single] was only a day's work," Greenwood says.

Mind you, there were some diversions.

"In the Manor, they have this big mural of all the groups who've recorded there," says O'Brien. "And they have this awful picture of Jim Kerr holding up his arms with a dove. It's really bad, it's airbrushed and everything. I

think it really affected Thom, 'cause we'd hear these noises at night, and go out to find him wrapped in his bedspread, staring at this picture."

This recollection of Jim Kerr in rock god mode sets the ball rolling. It seems particularly galling to Radiohead to have had some Simple Minds tags thrust onto their latest effort.

"God, I hate that man! He's such a wanker," says O'Brien, all thoughts of Radiohead forgotten for the moment. "If he walked into this room I would have to say: 'Oi! Kerr! You're a wanker! Aaaaarrggghhh!'" He jumps to his feet. "It'd be on with the Eric Cantona shirt and a good hard kick to the ribs!"

"It really pisses me off," he continues, the steam no longer coming out of his nostrils. "I really thought Simple Minds could have been better than they are."

Perhaps this is a timely warning. Since *The Bends* broke the surface, Radiohead have been touted as the new U2, the next indie act to crossover from the fringes to the centre.

Certainly, *The Bends* is miles away from the brittle pop of *Pablo Honey*. It's lush, orchestral, booming where earlier efforts might only have whimpered. But this is no mere rock bombast. Thom Yorke's lyrics grapple with a crushing feeling of self-doubt and worthlessness, that even with things so good, the bad times might be just around the corner. In its mix of late model U2 guitar effects, the Chills' ghostly nautical tinges, and the structured pop format of early 70s acts like Bread, the Bends is a twisted masterpiece.

Its title track, along with the anthemic 'Bones' and the ballad 'Nice Dream', deal almost guiltily with fame, with the gulf between audience and band. But in 'My Iron Lung', Yorke sets fire to the albatross that is

'Creep' with sneering disdain. It is the sound of Radiohead killing their own past.

But O'Brien and Greenwood are careful to point out that *The Bends* didn't come about because the band were at each other's throats.

"I don't think we work that well together when the five of us are not communicating. We have enough insecurities without that happening. The last thing you need is to have four other people who are not talking to each other. Thom always said this album was going to be our revenge against the rest of the world, our own little bubble."

The grind of touring, massive promotions and flesh-pressing had taken their toll on a group who consider themselves pretty mild mannered.

"We had just got to the point where we were completely frustrated," O'Brien says. "We would love the gigs, we would get off on the audience's reaction, but that's only part of the day." Long tours frayed at the friendship the five had built over years. "We wanted to be recording new songs, but we couldn't. The whole thing was the communication had broken down. We weren't all talking openly about breaking up, but it was going through everyone's mind."

Radiohead 1995 are a much more relaxed outfit. As one of the few British bands to have actually broken America (they sold thousands of copies of *Pablo Honey* there before being noticed in England), they're keen to hang on to the handhold. Their first US tour since October 1993 looms. Ed O'Brien is keen to jet down to Sydney and New Zealand for a week's holiday in the middle of the year. The cracks that appeared last year have well and truly been fixed.

Who needs U2 anyway?

STEPHEN DOWLING

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