



Catherine Wheel

Not Your Average English Band

There seems to be an interesting dual music history happening for Catherine Wheel. To anyone vaguely familiar with the English music scene and related press, they're survivors of that whole 80s 'shoe-gazer' deal: dour, droning indie rock, laced with pop sensibilities. Yet here in the USA, Catherine Wheel are a whole different deal. They're the English band who aren't afraid to rock, the ones who can kick a whole big guitar swirl along with the foppish strummings, and that means we like them. Now they've put out a new album called *Happy Days*, which has a far bigger, more confident sound and a nastier attitude than 93's *Chrome*, and they're back out on tour, so America likes them even more. *Happy Days* is an album that successfully melds the band's innate English pop sensibilities with the slightly darker musical and lyrical tendencies of bands like the Pixies, Soundgarden, or even PJ. Harvey, and it comes out sounding more original than most of the rock music to emanate from UK shores in a while.

This aside, it's time to play devil's advocate, and on the receiving end is Catherine Wheel guitarist Brian Futter. The man has just toured through the heat and dust of the south-west USA, and is currently trying to relax after soundchecking in LA. Instead, he gets me telling him that his band doesn't really seem like an English band, but that's OK because, basically, English bands suck.

"Well, we're not a fashionable English band in England. I'm not saying they're no good, but bands like Blur, Pulp, all that kind of thing, they're quite campy, and it's like the opposite

end to us. The word 'rock' is like a dirty word to them. We are a quintessential English band, but we have a lot more in common with, perhaps, Led Zeppelin than we do with fashionable English bands at the moment. We're all coming up on 30, so we're from a different era really."

You say "rock is like a dirty word", and that seems very true in the whole UK scene — even here it gets a raw deal. In the UK, music seems to revolve around the music press' vision of 'Brit-pop', and rock music is basically a bad thing.

"It really seems to be. The music is reinvented so quickly over there. The two main papers, *NME* and *Melody Maker*, are so powerful they can and do try to dictate what goes on. It can be exciting, the papers are full of new bands coming through all the time. That's what the English thing is about really, producing all these bands that go out into the world. Some may never make it out of England, but some do."

How do you think the UK press will take your new record? It's not really a part of what they're all about.

"We don't know. We haven't played in England for two and a half years, so we're releasing two singles first to remind people of us. I really don't know what will happen, and I'm a bit curious to how it will be taken, but it won't bother me. We've got a hard core of 20-30,000 fans who'll buy the record on the first day over there, and from there it's anyone's guess. This is our third record, and since the last one, basically, we've toured the world except England, and it's helped us define our-

selves. *Happy Days* is the first real Catherine Wheel album. I think the other two were just approaching it. If we'd stayed touring in England, there would have been so much pressure on us to do the 'Brit-pop' thing, and we would have just died. It's strange that being away from England has allowed us to become more English to ourselves, but not how people think English bands are."

What really strikes me is how organic and loose the album sounds compared to your countrymen's work, and your own earlier stuff.

"We treated this like it was our last record. We did it purely to please ourselves and the rule book went out the window. We knew because of that we'd come up with an eclectic album. Things we liked went on regardless of what people thought. When Rob and I got this band together, it was an accident really. We had an eight-track machine and we recorded some songs and sent them off to a venue, to see if we could get a gig. It was just a curiosity thing. We didn't even really have a band. They called us up and said: 'We want to put this thing out on an EP.' Next thing we knew, we had a record out before we had a band. It got 'Single of the Week' in the papers, and after that we were chased by all these record labels, and we recorded our album. Really, the normal way for a band to do an album was to slop around the country honing these songs to scrape together the money to do an album, which we didn't do, so we really had no time to develop until recently."

Your earlier material seems to be pretty heavily leaning towards a fairly dense, psychedelic sound, but *Happy Days* opens that up a

bit, and it really seems to sound a lot like a metal album.

"Yeah, I guess you can listen to it that way. What exactly is the question?"

Well, damn it, have you made a metal record here?

"There's definitely some metal on it, yeah. Some of my favourite bands have been Zep, Deep Purple, I love the first Sabbath album. I also love the Clash though. I'm sounding like people who say: 'Oh, we love all kinds of music,' but it's true, and I don't think you're being true to yourself unless you actually produce all that material in your own music, reflecting what you like. It would be boring to just do one sound on an album. So maybe not a metal record, but one with a rock attitude, definitely."

You're succeeding where many English bands fail, in cracking the elusive American market. Why you over so many other bands — Suede, Oasis, and so forth?

"We toured. That's the only way to do it. We're playing 1,500 to 2,000 seaters and they're all sold out, which is something at least. The only way we've achieved that small level is by touring, which is intense at times, but it's the only way to break America. Actually, when we were rehearsing and looking at going back out, we were saying: 'Well, what's going to happen in six months?' We just didn't care, but then the album comes out, and all that vanishes as you get swept up in it all again. The album just takes hold of you and you're off."

KIRK GEE