

Q



october 2001 music for life

Bumper Birthday Jamboree!



with **Travis** **The Stone Roses** **Oasis** **Nirvana**
U2 **Manic Street Preachers** **Radiohead**
Blur **Coldplay** **Puff** **Duffy** **Buckley** **Pixies**
Stereophonics **Moby** **Texas**
Madonna **N'Roses**
Public Enemy **Robyn**
Beck **ftfield**
Spirit **ssette**
Badly **Weller**
Primus **more!**



The Wild Bunch

If you go down to the woods today, you'll find animal-loving **Mercury Rev** fine-tuning their lysergic sepia-rock and tackling the lethal local grizzly bears. "Crouch into a ball, protecting your face and vital organs," they advise Steve Lowe.

A beaten up black Pontiac containing Mercury Rev trundles along the sliproads out of Kingston, New York, a quaint clapperboard town nestled between the Catskill Mountains and the broad Hudson River. The Q car follows behind and is led towards some magnificent acres of Catskills land, before turning off the free-way at Saugerties and winding west.

It was to this high country that Mercury Rev first retreated, on the verge of collapse, to record 1998's *Deserter's Songs* in a shack-like studio once used by The Band's Garth Hudson. That album saved the group and became one of the most acclaimed in recent years, not least among Q readers.

It was also here that Mercury Rev essayed the creeping, crawling epics on new album *All Is Dream*. You only have to look at their surroundings to understand their sprawling, outlandish sound. Driving home from these sessions after midnight, the road would become a wild fantasia of turkeys, foxes and deer. "You'd see all these eyes shining out at you from the undergrowth," explains singer/guitarist Jonathan Donahue later.

Rising further, the landscape evens out into a rolling plateau. The car ahead, driven by quietly intense guitarist Sean "Grasshopper" Mackowiak (so nicknamed because, apparently, he looks like a grasshopper), turns through a rusted gate into a clearing. The only sign of human habitation is the chimney breast of a burnt-out lodge. After parking up, the four figures – Donahue, Grasshopper, drummer Jeff

Mercer and newly acquired keyboard player Anthony Molena – climb out, stretch and gaze at the open-skied vista.

A gothic cowboy with his leather stetson, dyed-black hair and esoteric rings, Donahue traipses through the long grass, climbing a woodpile to gaze over the surrounding banks of maple and pine. He's checking the way ahead for black bears (his mother, who lives locally, recently found one in her living room). After staring intently, he declares the way ahead safe.

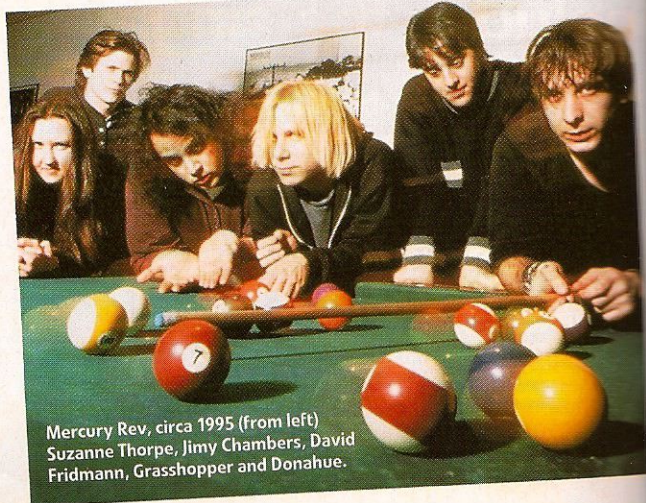
"You have to make noise," he explains. "If you surprise them, they can get a little rough."

Donahue continues, his drawl pitched oddly between weariness and wonderment. "And if you're going to get rolled, crouch face down into a ball protecting your face and vital organs."

This is probably sound advice. When it comes to survival – and, indeed, making noise – Mercury Rev know what they're talking about.

MEETING EARLIER in the lobby of Kingston's Holiday Inn – situated near the site of Bob Dylan's fabled 1966 motorcycle accident – the slim, darkly attired musicians had looked pretty strange next to the wobbly-arsed, white-socks-and-sneakers guests. Nevertheless, Kingston is Donahue's hometown. He now owns a few acres just outside. Grasshopper, meanwhile, lives by the church and Mercer, who joined the group during 1998's traumatic *Deserter's Songs* sessions, has also moved nearby. Mercury Rev are, assuredly, the only early-'90s avant-noise misfits/mid-'90s

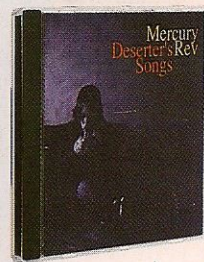
Mercury Rev (from left): Sean "Grasshopper" Mackowiak, Jonathan Donahue, Anthony Molena, Jeff Mercer, Catskill Mountains, near Kingston, New York, 18 July 2001.



Mercury Rev, circa 1995 (from left) Suzanne Thorpe, Jimmy Chambers, David Fridmann, Grasshopper and Donahue.



Photographs by
Daniel Hetherington



**30 Mercury Rev
Deserter's Rev Songs**

V2, 1998
The point at which quiet became, briefly, the new loud. The former New York noisniks holed up in the Catskill Mountains, turned down the amps, borrowed a musical saw and created a contemplative, old-time gem of a record. Mellotron and piano took over from guitars; members of The Band lent a hand, and producer David Fridmann was suddenly in big demand as the mellow makeover man for everyone from The Flaming Lips to Mogwai.
WWST "Full of timeless American influences. Startling." Q146 ★★★★★
WWSN They got remixed by The Chemical Brothers then disappeared to make the just-released follow-up, *All Is Dream*.

forgotten hermits/late-'90s sonic saviours the area can boast.

The group coalesced in 1988 in the Empire State's second largest city, Buffalo, when six experimentally inclined student friends (alongside Donahue and Grasshopper was the mammoth figure of vocalist David Baker, bassist/producer David Fridmann, flautist Suzanne Thorpe and drummer Jimmy Chambers) started jamming along to films about animals.

Their 1991 debut, the dizzily unbound *Self Is Steam*, was recorded over three years during studio downtime obtained from Oklahoma associates The Flaming Lips (who employed Donahue on guitar). "We just thought we were making funny music," Donahue remembers. "Dave

Fridmann did all the mixing on acid."

Sounding like Buffalo Springfield and the Butthole Surfers playing in adjoining rooms, their punk-psychedelia hybrid became a moderate indie success. From the start, the group showed a powerful commitment to drink and drugs. Worse, tensions between the band and the increasingly uncontrollable Baker would see punches regularly thrown onstage.

"Most people wait a while for the clichés," Donahue winces. "We went right into alcoholism, drug abuse and personal conflicts before we were 20 months old."

But Baker was not the sole wildcard. At times, Mercury Rev appeared to consist wholly of wildcards. Fridmann astonished his colleagues by spending their advance

money on a Bermudan holiday for his mother. All were banned by one airline when an in-flight punch-up climaxed with Donahue trying to gouge out Grasshopper's eye with a spoon. They were even thrown off a Lollapalooza bill... for being too noisy.

"Driving past the site, the Mayor of Denver rolled down the window of his limo, heard us and demanded we be stopped," Grasshopper grins. "He said we sounded like a bus idling out of control."

During sessions for second album *Boces* in 1993, the group abrasively vented their frustrations. As a result, it's one of the most deranged albums ever made. Following its release, Mercury Rev supported The House Of Love at the Royal Albert ▶



Mercury Rev in their natural habitat: "It's a strange place, full of strange characters."

"The Mayor of Denver rolled down the window of his limo, heard us playing and demanded we be stopped." Sean "Grasshopper" Mackowiak

◀ Hall and, just to add to the chaos, the resonant clanging from three guitars suspended above the stage was thrown into the live mix.

These years of madness are now the stuff of legend, but they weren't helping anyone's mental health. The insanity prompted Fridmann to quit touring and focus instead on production. Stationed at his own illustrious Tarbox Road Studio near Buffalo, he remains the group's producer and studio bassist.

Baker, the group's public face and founder, left more permanently.

Ever since Henry Hudson first sailed down the Hudson River in 1609, this region has been renowned for its eerie and enchanting atmosphere. In the famous tale by 19th-century author Washington Irving (who considered the valley a perfect place to "dream quietly away the remnants of a troubled life"), Rip Van Winkle went into the Catskills and, after imbibing a keg of liquor from a stranger, fell asleep for 20 years.

This is where, following the poor reception afforded 1995's third album *See You On The Other Side*, Mercury Rev fell off the musical map. They had become what they remain, a collective revolving around Donahue and Grasshopper — with a spellbinding mix of Wurlitzers, clarinets and bowed saws — but now resembled The Beach Boys and Gershwin playing in adjoining rooms. But the album bombed.

"We put everything we had into it," Donahue recalls, "but nobody bought it, nobody came to the shows."

The earlier madness was now turning into sadness. Close relatives had died and Donahue's relationship with his girlfriend was collapsing. Hard drugs and alcohol filled the emotional hole and, returning to his hometown, the singer eventually suffered a nervous breakdown lasting over six months. Chambers and Thorpe fled the group and Grasshopper disappeared to a Jesuit monastery on the Hudson.

"Grasshopper works in mysterious ways," Donahue recalls. "So it was never acknowledged even to me where he had gone, he was just gone. And I just dove into whisky for a while."

So what altered this situation?

"Probably just desperation. I realised the next record would be our last and it probably wouldn't do any better. But I didn't want to go out with a whimper."

With financial assistance from V2, the sporadic recording began in 1996. The songs buoyantly charted Donahue's faltering attempts to rebuild his life and the band he loved. "The sessions were very strenuous, so we created this other world which became the record," explains Donahue. "It was almost like, Boy, imagine if things were like *this!* We were almost transferring what we wanted into the music but it never seemed to transfer into actions between each other for a while."

Embracing half-remembered music from Donahue's youth — American popular songs, Polish folk music, even Disney themes — *Deserter's Songs* was an hallucinatory river saga of a record. The title itself derived from a derogatory remark in a review — quoted in Greil Marcus's *Invisible Republic* tome — about The Band's music.

"It had many levels of meaning," says Grasshopper. "We'd deserted each other, we'd deserted the music scene."

"There's a lot of emotion tied up in that one," Donahue admits.

The sun has begun dipping. The group ambles back out of the woods towards the parked cars. Taking the shadowy forest and 350-million-year-old peaks, it becomes only slightly fanciful to suggest Mercury Rev music draws on something latent in the landscape. Certainly *All Is Dream*, with its moonshine visions of prickly thorn vipers, spiders and dragons, feels directly linked to this locale's magisterial mysteries and hidden treasures.

"It's a strange place, full of strange characters," Donahue agrees. "I think that seeped in without us even thinking about it."

Despite their recent success, the portents for the album were worrying. Returning in 1999 from a brain-fuddling world tour, Mercury Rev were still dallying with catastrophe. Sitting in local bar Arties one night, Mercer collapsed with acute appendicitis. Only a month earlier

Grasshopper almost lost the use of his left hand following a knife attack in New Orleans. Then, tragically, their planned collaborator, celebrated arranger Jack Nitzsche, suffered a fatal heart attack. The band spent last year's punishing winter recording in Tarbox. It wasn't always easy.

"At the end of six days recording, you're ready to go home," relates Mercer. "Then you find out you can't because all the roads are closed. Then you feel defeated, it can break your spirit."

"But when you're forced to stay another night, unexpected things happen," adds Donahue. "A lot of songs came from those Fuck It moments."

Finally, with the spring melt, the band emerged full of fierce pride with a finished album. If *Deserter's Songs* was a sweet, light wonderland, then *All Is Dream* — veiled, arcane and disquieting — often feels like a cobwebbed underside.

Surveying the exulted scene before returning to the car, Grasshopper breathes deeply and exclaims: "I think I've found peace with myself!"

There is a reflective pause.

"I think I've found pieces of myself," Donahue rejoins.

Mercury Rev are, without doubt, better now. But there remains a fragility about the jagged progress that puts you in mind of those lines in *Deserter's Songs* opening Holes: "Bands, those funny little plans, they never work quite right".

"Yeah, when you're younger you always have this mental picture of where you could be," explains Donahue. "But nothing ever does go exactly according to plan. Especially in this group."