My Bloody Valentine

Karen Zolo

Over the last 30 years, through their discography of three studio albums, numerous EPs, mini-albums, singles, and compilations,[1] the conclusion that has been reached is: My Bloody Valentine makes transcendental music. They are the canon of shoegaze, and have elevated themselves into a state of Zen maturation that no other band has reached. After breaking up in 1995, it took a 13-year hiatus for the members to reunite, and another five for them to finish and self-release their latest album, *m b v,* in 2013. Upon reforming, their performance of one of their most popular songs, "To Here Knows When" at the Fujirock Festival in 2008, showcases perfectly, the intangible serenity and power communicated by their music.

When My Bloody Valentine began, it consisted of three members; guitarist/band leader Kevin Shields and drummer Colm Ó Cíosóig met in 1978 at a karate tournament in South Dublin, and soon found singer David Conway, whose vocal style registers as a typical '80s goth-wave croon. They sounded like just another member of the new-wave army until bassist Debbie Googe and guitarist/vocalist/keyboardist Bilinda Butcher

---

[1] Studio albums include: *m b v* (2013), *Loveless* (1991), *Isn't Anything* (1988); EPs include *Tremolo* (1991), *Glider* (1990), *You Made Me Realize* (1988), *Strawberry Wine* (1987), *Sunny Sundae Smile* (1987), *The New Record by My Bloody Valentine* (1986), *Geek!* (1985); and compilations: *EPs: 1988-1991* (2012), *Lost Tracks and Rare Cuts* (2010), *Before Loveless* (2009), *Ecstasy and Wine* (1989).

joined in 1985 and 1987, respectively. The band is often discussed in terms of pre- and post- Bilinda, whose role in the band creates harmony between the hard and soft elements.

After the moderate success of their mini-album, *Ecstasy* (Lazy Records, 1987), the band signed with Creation in 1988 and released their *You Made Me Realise* EP — the title track is also featured on their first full length, *Isn't Anything*, out a few months later. *Isn't Anything* reached no. 1 on the UK independent charts, and was greatly praised for its distinct new sound: layers of soft, prosaic vocals folded through more layers of compressed yet nuanced guitar-noise, perfectly mixed into a hard, pulsing rhythm section. The drumming ranges from busy fits of punk showmanship and precision — at their concerts, audience members regularly yell out, "Colm, you animal!" — to simple flutterings as an extension of one's body rhythm slipping into sleep. *Isn't Anything* was simultaneously punk and ambient, intensely romantic and detachedly cool, with lyrics like:

Come just to make you happy
Shot in the head I can see
I can see it
But I can't feel it.[2]

The band was posed for greatness in the independent music world, which at the time was still an emerging industry and less hierarchically regulated than it is today. They achieved that greatness with their follow up album, *Loveless*, in 1991.[3] The

---

[2] "I Can See it (But I Can't Feel it)," *Isn't Anything*, Creation Records, 1988.

[3] The first time I heard it, I was in a cafe somewhere in Greenwich Village waiting for a friend, when "I Only Said" came on. I asked the server (a too-cool rocker type) what it was, and he looked at me with smug superiority and let the answer slip as he passed by with his tray and an eye roll. Greenwich is full of assholes.

introspective familiarity *Isn't Anything* teased the listener with on tracks like "All I Need", "Sueisfine", and "I Can See it (But I Can't Feel It)," becomes fully sated by *Loveless*, a masterpiece that is on every reliable critic's top 10 albums of all time. *Loveless*, for all its sorrow, does not indulge in wallowing. With a sound that is completely its own, the lush undulations and 'shredding-meat' textures invite psychedelic bliss while intimate, forlorn lyrics locate the self in a torturous physicality. Synths, guitars, and vocals swim over each other; the *ahh*s and *ooh*s arch in and out of cognition, disappearing through the tremolo bends and surging keyboards. Their voices are treated like instruments too, layered again and again, the words made to repeat horizontally and vertically. One element of the band's genius is in the post-production, with all instruments mixed to achieve a harmonious and sustained event horizon.

After *Loveless*, the band fell apart[4] and its members moved outward into the world to explore other musical avenues: Colm started a psych-folk project, Hope Sandoval and the Warm Inventions with Mazzy Star's front-woman; Deb played bass in Stonepony, and recently joined Thurston Moore and Steve Shelley in The Best Day; Bilinda performed vocals on Dinosaur Jr.'s song, "I Don't Think," and became a Flamenco singer and guitarist; Kevin Shields worked on various projects like touring with Primal Scream (the best track on *XTRMNTR* (Epic Records, 2000) is "MBV Orkestra (If They Move Kill 'Em)"), performing with Patti Smith, and soundtracking films. In the meantime, mediocre bands started up calling themselves Kevin Shields, and The Bilinda Butchers, as if doing so would

---

[4] Various tensions (Bilinda and Kevin broke up) and illnesses (Colm was hospitalized) resulted in Colm and Deb leaving the band in 1995, and Bilinda leaving in 1997.



[Fig. 17] Bilinda holds up a chalkboard that reads, 'Turbo Negro,' her favorite band.

secure them a place in music history, which of course, it did.

After two decades of particles, atoms, and molecules coalescing, My Bloody Valentine finished and self-released their third studio album, *m b v*, in 2013. Where could a band go after making an album that felt as complete as *Loveless*? How would they go about picking it back up again after so long? *Loveless* ends with "Soon," a 6-minute song that loops seemingly into infinity. The opening track of *m b v*, "she found now," picks up exactly where "Soon" trails off, as if running into that estranged lover again after so much time (22-years to be exact), only to find that nothing has changed. The words of one critic stick, "Despite the enormous pressure and incredibly high expectations, *m b v* does not disappoint."[5]

Now a completed trilogy, the three studio albums can be viewed in this framework: *Isn't Anything* was the catalyst for *Loveless*, which delivered songs arching through the band's tu-

[5] Juan Diego, "My Bloody Valentine Album Avoids Musical Disaster," *The Captain's Log*, Feburary 27, 2013, http://www.thecaptainslog.org/2013/arts_entertainment/my-bloody-valentine-album-avoids-musical-disaster/.

multuous relationship with their label and with each other — and after a tortuous hiatus, *m b v* is the resolution.

The lost ship at sea has returned with the majestic grace of experience. As a whole, the album sounds more polished than the previous two. While the textures still retain their mass, the edges sound cleaner, less fuzzy. Vocals sit higher up in the mix than before. Their romantic, ambiguous lyrics ebb and flow even more abstractly, announcing a new level of being. Floating for twenty-some years in the ether has advanced their sound into a new space; *m b v* is the band evolving into post-human form.

From "she founds now" to "who sees you," the devout fan is treated to that same *Loveless* intensity: desire, love, loss, grace, tenderness, and acceptance are once again expressed in a way that reassures the listener that the band has not lost its identity. After "who sees you," there comes the sweet reprieve of "is this and yes," a song that features only Bilinda's vocals and synths (with a soft thumping as the backbone metronome), a quiet meditation through which she is the one and only focus. From *Isn't Anything*, "No More Sorry" achieves a similar effect through the prominence of her noticeably un-layered vocal track that sits above the song's vulnerably stripped bare instrumentation, a rare glimpse into a narrative played out as she delivers harrowing, vague lines to a 'filthy Daddy.' "is this and yes" is anything but the aftermath of a devastating encounter, showcasing Bilinda for the first time serenely alone, in a cyborgian state. Her voice is an apparition of a goddess from faraway celestial synth trails.

After this divine cleanse, the next songs unfold a new awakening. Bilinda's otherworldly coos continue on "if i am" over

gauzy post-wah guitars and a bubbling drum shuffle. Deb's bass drives the bouncy and cheerful "new you," on which Colm displays a lighter side, his tambourine jangling as Bilinda's signature *ooh*s and *ahh*s slide perfectly through. For all its breeziness, the song displays intricately crafted mid-album songwriting, designed to feel effortless before a drastic change. "in another way" suddenly revs fast and forwards, with lazer-bagpipe guitar screeches and Colm's restrained yet powerful drumming mixed upfront.

m b v finishes with two profoundly confident rhythmic, looping tracks, featuring only Kevin's voice and sequenced guitar textures folding in and out like waves, crashing against drums that are so precise that they may or may not be a machine. ("Colm, you Animal!") Although the end of the album sounds like sketches, these are the tastiest and most telling bits that cement the advancement in My Bloody Valentine's direction. The tracks no longer belong to our world dictated by time and space, but to a Zen state where their presence in the present is continually renewed. The final tracks of this album confidently and concretely state the band's always-ness as a promise.

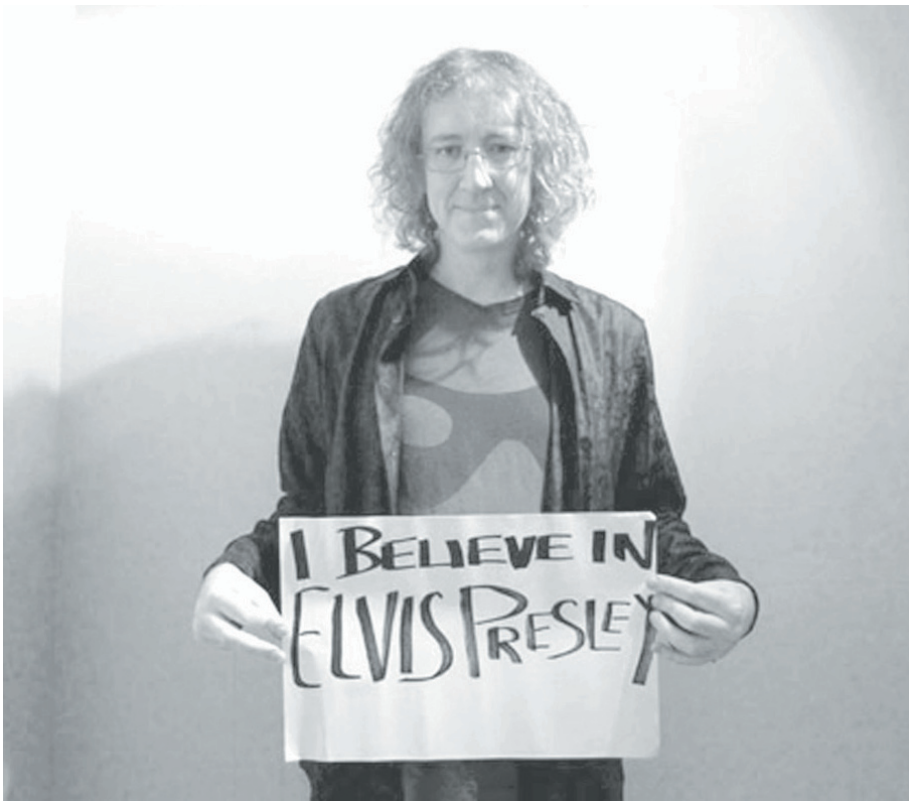
My Bloody Valentine keeps its promises, it has just taken a long time for them to do so. It has been over three years now since the release of *m b v*, and it did not take long after their world tour for Shields to announce work on a fourth. When that will be released is as good as anyone's guess. In the mean time, listening to the band's discography in different ways forms '*all kinds of new you, oooh*.'

Consider the final two songs of *m b v* as a new direction, but also listen to them against "Gilder," a 10-minute lovesick loop that grows and grows like nausea, like sex — a psychedelic

experience of repetition. Those last 30-seconds of "To Here Knows When" swerves and swirls, and can fade perfectly into the shimmering take-off of "Moon Song," the convulsive tremble of "No More Sorry," or the mysterious warble of "Rare Demo Song"[7] (DJ's choice). Both *Isn't Anything* and *Loveless* start with snare hits on the opening tracks, but on *m b v*, this recognizable trait is withheld until the third song, the most *Loveless*-esque of the album. The question posed by the title, "Isn't Anything[?]" is contemplated and processed over the next two albums (two decades), to be answered by the second to last track of the band's oeuvre, "nothing is." The lower case lettering of *m b v* irreverently ignores the hierarchy of grammar. As the music moves towards enlightenment, it shifts from the emotional violence of the past towards freedom from being without love. To elaborate on the three-word review that *m b v* "does not disappoint": no one really wanted another *Loveless*, but we couldn't imagine anything else that could measure up. The fact that *m b v* isn't and does, is more gratifying and reassuring than anything else I have experienced.

---

[7] Only available on Youtube, uploaded by user camillamorelli, it sounds authentically like them, but the comments section is loaded with disbelievers and know-it-all fanatics, "Rare Demo Song," *Youtube*, September 19, 2013, https://youtu.be/Cx4SG9hKRkw.



[Fig. 18] Kevin Shields believes in Elvis Presley.