The Secret, The Pixies

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The first time I heard a Pixies song was at the end of David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999). Both were foundational in the formation of an adult lizard brain that has evolved over the last some years, but back then, it was a revelatory moment. This was pre-9/11 when buildings could triumphantly explode all around an anti-hero protagonist and his macabre love interest in a gothic fairy tale. The couple watched the city crumble to Frank Black's nasally squeals and Kim Deal's howling coos, completely upsetting my understanding of desirable outcomes.

I've been revisiting the Pixies recently, and watched *loudQuietloud* (2006), a documentary made of their reunion tour from 2004. Directors Steven Cantor and Matthew Galkin waste little time, diving right into the meat of the story: a short series of intertitles set up the band's history for the uninitiated, as a roaring crowd cheers behind closed stage doors. The doors open and the credits roll to a performance of "Where is My Mind?" that rips (despite the middle-agedness of all the band members), after which we are taken back to the band's first rehearsal this time around, after many years of estrangement, as they prepare to do it all over again.

When asked about their approach to songwriting as experiments in an 1989 interview with Toronto's *Inner Limits*,[1] Frank Black and

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[1] "Pixies - Interview Toronto 1989," Youtube video, 6:47. Posted June 2, 2011. https://youtu.be/X_HfKuGP3B4

Kim Deal answered with big goofy smiles on their faces, explaining that the experiment was just "to make a cool rock tune." I watch this now with the distance of time, these spritely rockers who had the secret, who had tapped into something otherworldly ('grunge') that hit the very core of the blues, try to explain how that came to be on camera. Refusing to talk about the process is something musicians are quite adept at doing, constantly deferring journalistic inquiries with a matter-of-fact smirk, always a signal to the obvious: if language was enough, we wouldn't really need the song, would we?

Now, five minutes into the documentary, we are given some answers, and they're quite... mundane. Joey Santiago scores low budget films for a living, and is shown playing with his wife, Linda Mallari (in an acoustic version of their band, The Martinis), to a small mall crowd, most of whom are clearly Pixies fans. David Lovering is now a gigging *magician*, and prospects for treasure on the beach with his metal detector. Kim is a year sober, living back home with her mother, and spends her time embroidering, cutting snowflakes, drinking frappuccinos, and chain smoking. Frank Black (née Charles Thompson) makes his "damned Nashville records" that no one seems all that excited for, but he still is able to pay the bills as a musician (as is Kim with her Breeders success). When it is revealed that Linda and Joey are expecting another child at an ultrasound appointment, the scene cuts to a close-up of Joey admitting to us, "You know, it couldn't have come at a better time."

The secret's out: these are just four very normal people who at one point happened to be the best band in the world. How that happened is how the universe was formed, naturally, at random. And now, here they are, mere mortals in an attempt to repeat it. *Can they do it?* is the question posed by the film. Charles is asked by NME how it felt to be in that rehearsal room for the first time after so long, if the tension was still here, and he responds, "Yeah,

totally... I don't even feel like we broke up." Right how they left it: tense, divisive, estranged, but with the humility of years.

Over the next year, the Pixies embark on a world tour, selling out every venue they book, playing to bright-eyed teenagers and ecstatic Gen Xers reliving the glory of the 90s. Nothing too dramatic happens – there isn't a tour manager who destroys anything with a cricket bat, no trouble with the law, no ultimatums between any of the band members. At the Brixton Academy, each band member is gifted a framed poster under which a plaque reads, "Fastest Selling Show in Brixton Academy History." As much of a feat as that is to sell out a 4,921 seat venue four times over in six minutes, the resulting commemoration raises not much more than a murmured, "Wow," from Frank.

Comedic pathos runs deep in *loudQuietloud*. As entertaining as it is to watch these eccentric aged-out teens navigate their lives as revived rock legends, the theme of the movie is one of failed communication – an inability to be present with one another – unless it is onstage. Kim's sister, Heather, says it plainly, in one of the several scenes that feel ham-fistedly scripted, "You guys are the worst communicators." Though when moments of tenderness shine through, like when Charles shows concern for Kim's blistered fingers after their warm-up show, the pressure for narrative tension raises the hairs on my bullshit detector.[2]

What is so exciting about the film is really the music; as it was then, this much hasn't changed. Despite his deepened register, Frank Black still summons images of tumbleweeds, the baking

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[2] Recalling a scene where David fucks up during a show, Frank Black recalls that "they re-edited [it] to look like it happened in the middle of our tour and it looked like this whole tour careened into this drunken stupor with David. It really wasn't like that at all." "David Lovering," last modified February 4, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Lovering



[Fig. 13] "Deal is God" to this fan in *loudQuietloud* (dir. Steven Cantor and Matthew Galkin, 2006).

Arizona sun, and scenes from *Deliverance* (1972). Joey is revealed to be quite brooding and an intent listener, which has always been the strength of his shredding – he listens for where to go, when to go. David's storyline is the most 'crafted,' as we see him gothrough the high of discovering iPods, and the low of pill-popping after his father's death. And Kim, Kim will always be the darling. In a wonderful stroke of luck, the camera meanders from the band and finds a teenage fan who brings a "DEAL IS GOD" sign (scrawled on a 8.5"x11" paper, perhaps given to her very last minute by the filmmakers) to the front row of the show. She shows us the book that introduced her to the Pixies, *Brave New Girl* by Louisa Luna, dog-eared and marked with highlighted passages about the band. As she calls out to Kim repeatedly from behind a chain-link fence after the show, motioning for Kim to take her book, the camera cuts to Kim flipping through it on the tour bus. She looks stunned, a bit flushed, genuinely overwhelmed by the fact that she might be not just a few people's hero, but in fact a God to several generations.

What is so moving about *loudQuietloud* is the naivety and straightforwardness of our willing subjects. The members of the Pixies are unapologetically human, just trying to figure out how to get by. Whose idea was it to shoot a scene of Frank stripping down to his underwear and getting into bed on a tour bus only to recite self-help mantras? Kim is in sweatpants the whole time and constantly checking in with her sister to make sure she is indeed drinking non-alcoholic beer. Joey slogs away at his day-job in his hotel room before shows, falling behind despite his best diligence, and David's adrenalized restlessness and constant drumming and dad-jokes are met with eye rolls, if not completely ignored. Just as their music was completely unique sounding in that every single member did something idiosyncratically themselves, and that every song always had enough space for each of their particularities, this distance is what has lead to much of their tensions. Charles says it the best when he tells the camera, "We don't talk to each

other that much. It's not that we don't like each other, it's just the kind of people we are." Their existence in the recordings, on stage, and in this documentary, reveal the mysterious movement of all things in one direction, clashing often, but occasionally in the most complementary of ways. The filmmakers might have been chasing something more dramatic, more confrontational, but what they got was really the secret: we all grow old.