

A Discussion with Glen Johnson of Piano Magic

Piano Magic's music comes from a long line of moody balladeers. The baroque folk pop of Nick Drake, the apocalyptic post punk of Joy Division, the stripped down minimal arrangements of Young Marble Giants, Felt and the Durutti Column are just a few of the bands and artists that come to mind when searching for comparisons. No less inspirational is the early new wave and synth pop of Kraftwerk, Eno and the Human League, but later works on such key labels as Creation and 4AD would prove just as influential to the band's sound.

The casual pop fan couldn't be faulted for thinking Piano Magic was a band with many contributing members and not necessarily one central figure. In a sense, that is the case. On any given Piano Magic album, the lineup may vary on every single track, but closer examination reveals a constant thread running through the proceedings. The name Glen Johnson pops up again and again, usually in the role of guitar player, lyricist, or sampler—or as all three. A veteran of other bands over the years, Johnson decided to forsake the more typically regimented ensemble route in the mid 90s and invited different contributors to casual recording sessions, which opened up the possibilities greatly as to what his band could sound like.

Born in London in the middle of 1996 from the home-recording sessions of Johnson and Dick Ransie, Piano Magic was originally envisioned as a shifting ensemble. The revolving door membership of groups like This Mortal Coil and The 6ths inspired him to ask friend Rachael Leigh to sing on two tracks, "I Have Loved A Suicide" and "Wrong French." After some months, three more Johnson-composed tracks were recorded, which, along with the first two, would come to comprise their debut record, the *Wrong French 12"*, released on Che's I label. The record was warmly received, even scoring a Single of the Week nod in *Melody Maker*.

Though the group was never intended as anything more than a studio project, the trio felt compelled by the praise to play out and formed a quartet with Paul Tornbohm. The set-list of their first gig was notable for not including any songs

they'd released up to that point and sounding nothing like what they'd done on record. Two more singles followed soon after, one for the esteemed (and familiar to Terrascope readers) Wurlitzer Jukebox indie, before the uneven but still stunningly assured debut *Popular Mechanics* was released on I/Che. The mixture of



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playful drum 'n' bass programming, warm analogue trance-scapes and fey but still wonderfully alien synth pop was an immediate success to fans of ethereal dreaminess everywhere (those lucky enough to hear it that is), though it was only a precursor to what would be a watershed year for the band.

1999 saw the release of a slew of singles for various hip underground labels (including a split with Matmos on Lissy's and the stunning *Trick of the Sea* mini LP for Darla's *Bliss Out* series) along with the release of the *Low Birth Weight* LP. Besides stronger production and better arrangements, *Low Birth Weight* also boasted the widest diversity of sounds heard yet on a Piano Magic album. With that diversity also came the most varied cast of supporters yet, including Leigh, Peter Astor, Simon

Rivers, Martin Cooper, David Shepherd, Matt Simpson and the list goes on — a 11 veterans of notable UK bands. Most importantly, Piano Magic signed to Rocket Girl records for this release, a label we've always held with high esteem here at the 'Scope, a l s o

allowing the band to reach a slightly larger audience.

The ease with which Johnson and his supporters veered from fuzz drenched shoegaze pop of "Snowfall Soon" to gentle electronic workouts that sounded like classic Felt injected with some of Vinni Reilly's icy minimal guitar lines was inspired. Brief experimental sound collages ("Birdymachine" and "Shepherds are Needed") bleed into slowly drifting home-made synth pop that sounds as if it could've been produced by a young Brian Eno. But it's the heart at the center of his music that leaves such an indelible impression. The intro to "Not Fair" features a strangely touching sample of an old woman that recalls Simon and Garfunkle's *Bookends*. It merely

commences a string of brilliant down-tempo synth-pop knockouts, culminating in the remarkable "I am the Sub-Librarian," whose melody relies on nothing more than a tinkling piano, breathing sounds, sea-sawing bass tones and Caroline Potter's haunting vocal. A brilliant, low-key reading of Disco Inferno's "Wake Up" closes out this fragile, depthless masterwork.

What struck me most initially with *Low Birth Weight* was the bizarre cover art, which appears to be a painting of a family of four small kittens arranged in a tea party setting. But closer examination, and a glance at the first issue of George Parson's excellent *Dream Magazine*, reveals that the photo is actually an arrangement of real stuffed Victorian kittens taken from a museum in Devon!

Like those little stuffed felines on the cover, the characters in Piano Magic songs tend to be gentle introspective sorts, aristocratic dreamers that may be over educated but are still somehow trapped by time, surroundings and circumstances. If one were forced to use a single word to describe the overall quality created, it would have to be nostalgia. Like sonic time capsules of childhood memories or scenes long ago burned into our deepest most private memory banks, the music of Piano Magic is distorted and blurred, but rather than its emotional intensity decaying (as so many have suggested in other write-ups on the band), it actually grows more profound with each passing year. When asked about his lyrical content, Johnson keeps his answer like his music, minimal, offering only a handful of corroborating syllables, "I trade in nostalgia."

When asked about his recording style, he's more willing to expound a bit, though reluctant to even admit to having any such thing: "I don't know whether we have a 'style' as such. We have an approach, but it's all we know. We've certainly not sat down, textbook in hand and observed anyone's production techniques as such, though I felt there were some parallels with the earlier *His Name Is Alive* stuff like Livonia. That's basically recording cheap but using effects to the max; using guitar pedals for the effects instead of professional effect units." The first two albums did just that, recorded entirely at home on 4-track cassette, 8-track cassette, using Logic and Cubase computer recording software. At the same time Johnson is quick to mention the

drawbacks to such an approach, "it's limiting, particularly if you want to record loud drums or amped-up guitars, but these restrictions tend to have a welcome-surprise impact on the overall sound." It's true, the resultant warm shroud of ambience that accompanies all of Piano Magic's work perfectly compliments the emotions being conveyed.

The following year brought the release of *Artists' Rifles* (Rocket Girl), a much bigger sounding record that marked a departure for the band in that there's a loosely connecting theme that runs through its ten tracks. But the most notable change this time out was Johnson's decision to record in a studio with outside producer, John A. Rivers, who'd worked in the past with Felt among others. As he explains, "We were just aiming for a bigger sound...a huge, monumental sound - like Dead Can Dance with guitars - something that, at that point, we were easily achieving on stage." The album is roughly split down the middle between lumbering, near ambient instrumental interludes and delicate chamber pop numbers which rely on plaintive guitar, bass, drums and cello arrangements. One could say that being a concept album of sorts

about World War I does add a more intense degree of sombreness to the proceedings, but the rewards are still plentiful, with the sadly defeated "No Closure" and the spiralling noise of "Password" serving as standouts.

2001 saw no let up in the hectic release schedule, with a brilliant though more subdued EP on Madrid's *Acuera* records followed closely by the soundtrack to Bigas Luna's *Son De Mar* issued on 4AD soon after. The soundtrack was a natural progression for Piano Magic, a band that has probably been described as "cinematic" as much as anything else, but Johnson has mixed feelings about the experience now, summing it up with a rather colourful metaphor, "It's like trying to get your dick to fill a hole in a dam wall but the hole keeps getting bigger (or smaller)." No matter how constrictive the experience may have been, the results did not disappoint, marking a return to the kind of liquid soundscapes that had first been explored on their *Trick of the Sea* mini LP, a segment of which is incorporated into the soundtrack.

Johnson was also pleased to see the record released on 4AD Records, an obvious inspiration since the 80s: "I very blatantly approached Chris Sharp (head of 4AD) one day and

said, 'Will you sign us?' I was a total 4AD-nut in the 80s and early 90s - they released some of my favourite records, and I wanted us to be in that company, amongst that catalogue. The whole thing that goes with 4AD...the V23 designed sleeves, the worldwide ad campaigns, the, dare I say, 'concept' of being on that label."

Roughly at the same time, the indispensable double CD "Seasonally Affective" was released on *Rocket Girl*. The collection gathered all of Piano Magic's mostly out of print and hard to find singles into one economically priced collection

On the new Piano Magic album, *Writers Without Homes*, Johnson has once again assembled an impeccable cast of supporting characters. From the German band Tarwater, there's Bernd Jestram and Ronald Lippok. Simon Raymonde, once of Cocteau Twins and now running the excellent Bella Union label, lends his production prowess to the ethereal proceedings. And the incredibly talented John Grant from The Czars, who Glen claims, "...has the best voice I've heard out of America in years" are just a few. But perhaps most exciting is the inclusion of the great Vashti Bunyan to the lineup for one track, whose

Just Another Diamond Day (recently reissued on Spinney records) is rightfully regarded as a lost classic at Terrascope Towers [proceed directly to #30 of PT for an in depth interview with the British folk chanteuse].

Upon hearing from Paul Lambden, the owner of Spinney records, that Vashti was interested in making music again (after a 30 year layoff!), Johnson leaped at the opportunity and quickly composed a track: "I, drunk, wrote a song for her ('Crown Of The Lost') and sent it to her within 24 hours. That she liked it and, moreover, wanted to make her return to recording with it is...beyond belief. She is absolutely a darling - totally lovely, shy, beautiful and that voice....She's a dream to work with." It only makes sense that a band, which specializes in aurally documenting images and moments from the past, would be integral in reviving the career of this lost treasure in the crown of folk music for audiences today.

For further information, see the official Piano Magic site at <http://www.piano-magic.co.uk> and *Rocket Girls'* site devoted to the band: <http://www.rocketgirl.demon.co.uk/>

