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Puncture

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Mugazi
a rare interview



VIOLENT FEMMES
*new times,
new ideas?*

frente!

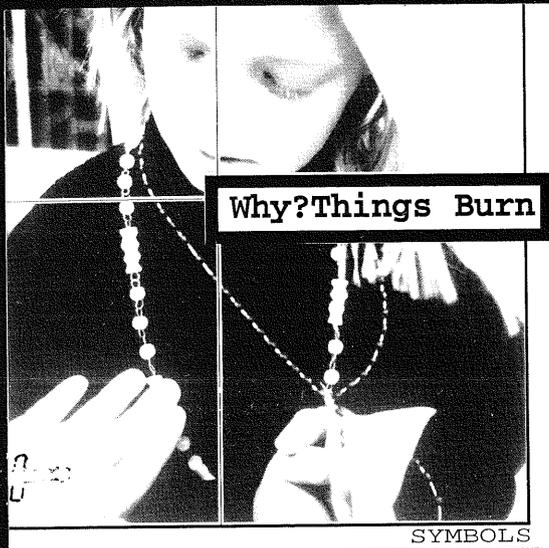
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Every spring, some gut feeling tells me to pack my bags and flee my Austin home before the invasion of music bizzers for that once-quaint get-together called South by Southwest, SXSW for short (around these parts, we call it South by So What, or South by Sucks What). This year, I found two cynical friends with Vegas and San Fran on their minds. We drove west after visions of desert winds, ocean breezes, and big-city fun—worlds where music is music and Mammoth means the mountains of New Mexico and Colorado, not a North Carolina record label.

Let's skip my reasons for avoiding the music fest. Suffice to say I just can't listen and enjoy anymore. I'm more and more aware these days of the A&R reps, lawyers, managers, bookers..... What starts out as a song emanating from some poor soul can become a mass-produced consumer item that's registered several times, bought, sold, itemized, classified, marketed, then bought and sold again, and I'm probably missing a few steps.

I know, I'm a purist and a hypocrite. I'm the first to yell "sellout" at someone for what I'd do myself in a gnat's wink if I had the chance and the price were right. But a world where the lunatic ravings of Daniel Johnston can be mass-marketed is pretty twisted. Of course I love him, and plenty of others do too—but on a large indie? (or now, if his psyche holds up, a major?!). Sure, talk about the marvels of music distribution, spoiling us with a vast buffet of music set out for us consumers. Talk about how labels promote artistry: I'll sell you the Golden Gate and Bay bridges. Which is where my story starts.

There I am on Haight Street, happy as a Deadhead trippin' in Golden Gate Park, struttin' along on the way to hear a duo called Pocahontas. I stop at a pay phone to check my voicemail back in Austin. One message: editorial type Steve rapping in his suave English accent. Some fuck in a car decides to honk his horn right next to me and all I catch is "Australian Band" and "in town at the Ritz." I laugh. Ha, ha, I'm in San Francisco!

A week later I get home to Texas. A package is propped against my door. I open it. It's that Australian band: Frente! Okay, it's not *them*—it's their record, *Labour of Love*.

I play it again. Poppy, acoustic, the way Aztec Camera would sound with a woman singing lead. It's only an EP, in fact, seven songs, clocking in at less than fifteen minutes total, but the title track has a catchy acoustic-guitar riff and a recorder solo (of all things) to put the icing on an already well-sweetened pop

song. And "Not Given Lightly," which I learn later was written by New Zealander and Tall Dwarf Chris Knox, has a really odd rhythm-track loop that cuts the last beat short, which doesn't prevent it from being excruciatingly charming.

My hands-down favorite on this little offering, though, is Frente!'s straight-ballad rendition of New Order's "Bizarre Love Triangle," which you'd have to have been in Tibet not to be familiar with by now. Singer Angie Hart sets me straight on Frente!'s hit single being a cover: "It wasn't our pick, or our record company's, either. We spend so much time writing our own songs: they are really precious to us. I would never have released a cover as a single, but radio and MTV chose to play that song."

Still, Hart is shrewd enough to accept the success of a song the band only covered as "a goof" ("we were in the studio recording a bunch of songs one afternoon and somehow that got thrown in") and take it from there: "I want people to listen to our music. If this is how we get noticed in the US, then that's the way we'll have to go. The good thing is that people are starting to hear our own songs."

Hell, I'll take Frente!'s "Bizarre Love Triangle" over the original. As a purist-come-lately, I tend to suspect all hi-tech synth sounds that come over sans a sense of irony. Sure, I feel irony when I hear post-*Low Life* New Order, but I get the feeling Bernard and friends don't. You think not? We can argue it until the cows come home and build their

If the Cocteau Twins were to dismount from their high horse and visit earth for a while, they would be Frente!

own fucking barn, but I feel sure Frente! enjoy the twist of fate, with more than a hint of shi eating grins leaping from the laser-encoded grooves. I know I hear ghostly laughs reverberating through the studio at song's end. Wait, I love it!!! Why wasn't I in Austin to catch this band live?

Frente!'s drummer, Alastair Barden, tells me how much he liked Austin, the SXSW music fest, and the reception accorded to Frente! "There were so many bands. I must have seen

popular

Frente!

twenty, and I wanted to see more." Several hundred people packed the floor for Frente!'s showcase at the Ritz Theatre in the heart of Austin's would-be glittering entertainment district, and Barden says the showcase was a rousing success. "I felt bad, though," he says. "We had a packed house, then most everyone left before Glee Club came on. Too bad—Glee Club were quite great."

This charming guy, who broke down my bias against drummers (things must be really different where he comes from), also gave me a brief band history.

Frente! are from Melbourne. Angie Hart, the singer; Simon Austin, the guitarist; and Tim O'Connor, the bassist, got the band together with another drummer in 1991 and rose rapidly, being voted Best New Band in *Rolling Stone Australia's* Readers' Poll within a year and a half of their formation. The "Labour of Love" single spent a great deal of time atop the indie chart in their homeland in 1992, as did their LP, *Marvin the Album*, now out in the states on Mammoth/Atlantic.

Angie Hart's reaction to the band's steep rise is mixed: "I'm petrified of going home to Australia now," says the 22-year-old singer. "even though we're not *that* famous. Have you heard of the Tall Poppy Syndrome? It's when people shun their own artists after they get successful. People feel bad and start to cut them down. Like when a poppy grows too tall."

I ask if anyone back home sees her as a Tall Poppy yet. She says yes. "When we sold a lot of records people started saying, 'You've sold out!' We said 'How? These are the songs we've always played. We just play them in different venues.' It's as simple as that. Then you're in your favorite record store and people are looking at you like you're a dickhead. They think you've changed.

"It's even something I do myself, to be honest. You go see a band and go, 'Oh, I hate that band!' It doesn't mean anything to you to say that, but if they heard you, they'd be hurt. I've learned to deal with it because it can be a good experience once you get past it. I had some friends who were afraid to talk to me for a while. Time passed and they got over it. They realized I was still me."

Of course, Angie Hart is quite the looker. I'm sure that Aussie accent melted more than a few rocks sunk in Jack Daniels around the SXSW conference. But this lovely and precocious frontperson is on guard against being ground up and commodified. Casting her as a sex symbol would be out of the question, she maintains—even though she quite happily

Their name may sound like a new diet soda, and they're making their first splash with a pretty airy cover, but Frente! are no lightweights. Their guerrilla-invoking name, and their own strong songs, add plenty of depth to their work. JOSEPH MITCHELL follows up.



appeared au naturel on the cover of Australian music magazine *Juice*. She seems to view this episode largely as a joke:

"We'd released a single called 'Accidentally Kelly Street' (included on the US version of *Marvin the Album*). It sold heaps in Australia, and people started to hate us for it. Not people who just listen to the radio and buy albums, but people in bands and in the music industry. It really floored me; it made me want to do something that wasn't Frente! I got rebellious against the band and really hated it. Simon and I were still fighting at the time [Hart and lead guitarist Simon Austin were an item for the first year and a half of Frente!'s existence]. *Juice* suggested a cover story about me. They said, How about a nude shot? I said fine, as long as it's not compromising, as long as it's real straight. It's really gaggy, nerdy. I'm wearing lots of makeup. I look at it now and think it's kind of funny." It certainly doesn't mean she thinks she's a sex symbol: "That wouldn't work for me." I told her a *Puncture* intern mentioned that when they were discussing whether to put her on the cover or Gordon Gano, someone told them their readership wants to see "hot indie babes."

She didn't seem impressed. "Some people say that Gordon Gano is a sex symbol! It's a lead-singer thing, isn't it? No matter what your personality is, people decide you have something if you front a band. People glorify you and glamorize you because you're in front of a band."

Why would people do that? "Because they want to be amazed. They look at you and even if you are completely normal, they get amazed about that. People have this tendency. If they like someone's music, they want to like the person making it. They get excited by everything about them."

Has she ever been disappointed by any of her heroes? Angie laughs. "I met Gordon Gano. We did some gigs with them around Australia. I went up to him, said hello and did the big gush thing. Said, I love your songs, blah, blah, blah—the big fan thing. And he says, 'Ooh, that's a really interesting mural over there, I've just got to go and have a look at it.' And he walked away. Boy, was I shattered."

Marvin the Album is acoustic, like the EP, with that sparse sound the Mammoth folks refer to as "NAKED." I can't get the Aztec Camera comparisons out of my head. I can't get the songs out of my head, either. Austin and Hart are a hell of a songwriting team. Most of the material will come as welcome relief to American ears inundated by Smashing Pumpkins, Pearl Jam, and other overloud bands. The album includes two EP holdovers: "Labour of Love" and "Bizarre Love

"With what we play, we have to feel good about it and be honest. If we were lying you could tell: it's that kind of music"

Triangle." No problem with that.

The long-player doesn't let up. I fell in love with "Ordinary Angels," a gem with unison slides up the chromatic scale, and vocal flurries punctuated with a wry "but you're only a comet" by Hart that is... sexy. Most of the songs are about the ol' relationship thing: love, broken hearts, long-lost partners leaping out of the past. It's the stuff that makes up pop, and this is some of the strongest pop I've heard in a long time. It could almost restore my faith in music.

Even if the subject matter is mundane, it comes across as pure. This, I'm sure, is in no small part due to Angie Hart, who spent most of her youth in a setting not too unlike some off-kilter Jane Campion short, some of it in a religiously bent convent where she was so sheltered from the world that when at last she got to Melbourne she would melt in tears of

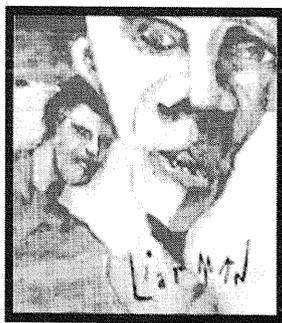
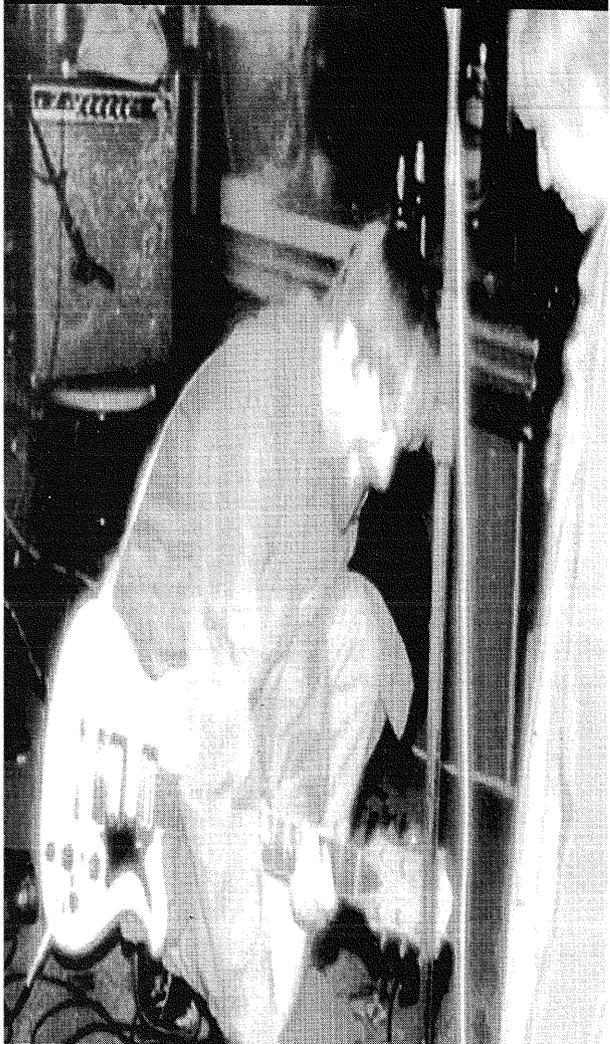


fright. Maybe that's the source of her vocal sincerity. Frente! are fresh—so fresh I may learn to care for music again.

In the pop-music world, and the media in general, human beings get turned into objects to buy and sell. Commodification takes place. Image becomes as important as music and is bound up inextricably with what is recorded on the disk. Someone like Madonna makes rather mundane recordings, and sells mountains of them, her outrageous image making up for the music's shortfallings. Michael Bolton? a sex symbol to Avon-drenched women in trailer parks and cookie-cutter suburbs across the nation. Like the panty-baring one, his image is tantamount to his music. Even cool bands are caught in this loop. Buying a Bikini Kill LP can be a riot grrrl act of feminism as well as a few songs and laughs. Objectification is not just encouraged, but promoted. For \$12.99 you get music and a whole lot of cool.

But Angie Hart wants to make one thing perfectly clear. "I want to say that I'm definitely for feminism. I'm just not a strong person. I'm not a loudmouth. I can't say brash things and be rebellious. I hate to hurt people's feel-

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ings. I'm never very outspoken. People should let women be what they want to be."

Objectifying and commodifying Frente! would be an easy task for the pop-music world. Hart is a cover-girl dream come true. Her face is not one of disaffected arty coolness. It is shiny and welcoming. It is strangely, wonderfully dichotomous in its combination of a cosmopolitan nose-ring and a big warm Australian smile. Her eyes sparkle like a delighted child's. This face would be as much at home in the outback as on the streets of her hometown of Melbourne. She's very smart, but also very shy—a deadly combination of qualities that will make hip guys swoon at college radio stations across America. Her vocals are, to say the least, seductive—even outright libidinous. To listen to *Labour of Love* and *Marvin the Album* is to be captivated by seraphic lilting, woven into a fabric of impish churlishness. In a subversion of the *Exorcist* storyline, it's as though the naughty girl down the lane had been possessed by a host of angels. If the Cocteau Twins were to dismount from their high horse and visit earth for a while, they would be Frente!

Frente! are also a dream come true for commodifying record labels that package and distribute their bands. Not only is Hart of the highest order of dishyness, the music itself is strong and catchy. Yet not too dangerous. It doesn't wallow in the mire of self-obsession like Nine Inch Nails or flaunt the weight of the world like Slayer or Metallica. The songs Hart and Austin write stick to the subject of intimate relationships between people; how vulnerable it leaves them; how volatile the dynamics between them can become. It is a subject everyone can relate to without being incited to go out and burn down government or corporate buildings. The revolution stays home. Instruments are acoustic, and the sound ensconcing this subject matter is stripped down, beckoning rather than attacking the listener.

It seems a nice, innocuous package. But Angie Hart has ideas. Trying to turn her into a pop commodity might be no easier than turning Syd Barrett into Paul McCartney. In our interview, she came across as very real, demanding sincerity from herself and everyone around her. For Hart, music is music and image be damned. She's no consumer product. She's a musician, singer, and songwriter and a damned good one. She's seen the commodification process close up and wants no part of it. She does want their records distributed. Sincerity is tough in the pop-music

world. Not compromising yet getting your records sold is like having your cake and eating it. Luckily, Angie Hart has a strategy for baking it, sharing it, and still having more than enough left over for herself. Asked if there is an identifiable Mission of Frente!, Hart gives a firm and cogent answer. "I'd like to be a band the size of, say, the Cocteau Twins. That's a nice size popularity-wise, and they don't compromise by doing a lot of publicity. They play beautiful songs and have a following of people who love music. There's no hype."

After four years, are Frente! close to that point?

"We're at a really good stage. We can take it a fair way now, because we've had that time in Australia. We've had a bit of experience at taking off, and now I know more about how to handle things.

"We like our gigs to be very personal. To get some communication going with the audience. To do a gig, get a nice feeling, and say, 'Hey, that was great!'

"With what we play, we have to feel good about it and be honest. If we were lying you could tell: it's that kind of music. Other kinds of music—a good guitar sound, or a great drum track—may be completely different, but our sound is based on feeling good about what we do."

Not every band can bring that off. My guess is that some writeups have put Frente! down for being simplistic. "I do get affected by things like that," Hart admits. "I'm not tough, and you know how at the moment strong women are in fashion. I get the feeling sometimes people don't like our band because I am shy onstage. We're really happy, and a lot of bands don't act happy. We act happy. There are lots of bands who want to seem intelligent; to be taken seriously, they have to talk about what depresses them. And be morbid about it. I like some of those bands because I think they are good at it, but it doesn't come naturally to me. I don't like to be criticized for being happy."

"Even if you're happy now, is there something you want for the future?"

Angie Hart says, "I'd like to write my own record. That would be fantastic. Simon and I write together a lot; it's a safe thing to do. We throw out different structures and then we push and pull over how things should sound. I want to take a structure and run with it. But I don't want to leave and be the Angie Hart band. A solo album would be purely on the side. I love Frente!" ★