



A picture I took in November 2007 that looks eerily like the cover of the My Bloody Valentine album *Loveless*.

## When Dreams Fade, A Song Remains

by NICK MEADOR

*Seeing one of my favorite bands perform live for the first time – after their 15-year hiatus – was not exactly the blissful experience I had hoped for.*

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“It seemed to me that all through this music there was the radiance of this cool starry brightness and the quivering of this clearness of ether. Yes, it was there. In this music there was a feeling as of time frozen into space, and above it there quivered a never-ending and superhuman serenity, an eternal, divine laughter.” –Hermann Hesse, *Steppenwolf*

Lately I've been having really bizarre, disturbing dreams. They are hard to remember or describe, but I usually wake abruptly with a distinct feeling of fear or panic. I don't often recall places or dialogue, though I'll be certain that I was chased like a fugitive or that, as happened in one recent dream, I was shot with a gun. I've never been shot in real life, yet in the dream I could have sworn that it actually happened. Needless to say, not all dreams are pleasant. Some dreams are absolutely horrifying, and the scariest ones tend to be so abstract that they have no direct counterpart in the real world. All dreams share the common characteristic of

being essentially out of our control, a product of our subconscious brain activity that we're forced to participate in, and usually tricked into believing. Only on the rare occasion do we become aware that we are dreaming, or gain the power to wake ourselves up. The only time this happens for me is when I'm pushed to the edge. The gunshot dream was one of these. I practically shook myself out of bed in order to reenter waking life.

I got to thinking about all this dream nonsense while attending the My Bloody Valentine concert at the Aragon Ballroom in Chicago, Illinois on Saturday, September 27, 2008. The show was part of a short American tour that marked an end to the band's 15-year stretch of inactivity. Their 1991 album *Loveless* is considered to be the pinnacle of the band's career, and many have speculated whether band leader Kevin Shields put off further recording for fear of not being able to live up to their gargantuan reputation. Since its original release, the album has also achieved a sort of mythical status, and is often ranked among the best of that decade. As a result of the inactivity, many bands carried on their spirit, branching off in various directions that Shields ostensibly could have taken. This has been especially true during the indie music onslaught of the last five to eight years.

With only a few full-length albums and a handful of EPs, the group invented – or at least epitomized – the style known as “shoegaze,” a specific combination of dream pop and noise rock. MBV (forgive the abbreviation) is, in a word, a dreamy band. But at the concert, the word “dreamy” could be applied in a more realistic sense than I had hoped for. Let me back up and explain. In 2006 I wrote an essay about the album *Loveless*, in which I professed my love for the work of art and stated how I thought it fit into today's musical world. At the close, I wrote that the album walks “the fuzzy line between reality and dreams. Although the album has a somber name, *Loveless* is a testament to what is beautiful in life. Or even what *could* be beautiful and perfect, even if you don't have it now. It's a simultaneous display of hope and despair. And really, what is truer than that?”

That concept of exuding both hope and despair in a single moment seemed to be a key characteristic of the album, and the primary reason for its longevity. Yes,



Shields had reinvented the way guitars can sound when layered and applied with effects. Yes, the music of My Bloody Valentine has had a tremendous influence on bands today. But it's the emotional core of the album that fortifies it and continues to draw in fans. Essentially, I arrived at the Aragon Ballroom hoping to be stirred into a minor emotional breakdown. I had been carrying a lot of weight, and for one reason or another I hadn't let myself purge the poison and have a good cry. I thought that MBV would assist in that. I hadn't been to the Aragon before, so when I saw the astonishing interior design – like a Mediterranean courtyard under a starry sky – I was confident that the setting was perfect. I was even seated on the second level with a nearly unobstructed view, since my companion had recently torn the ligaments in her ankle. I could just sit there, absorb all the splendor, and let it pour back out of me.

Not only was the concert not what I was expecting from MBV the band; it also wasn't what I expected from the purveyors of shoegaze music. Instead of gazing at their shoes, Shields and vocalist/guitarist Bilinda Butcher stood at their microphone stands, staring straight into the audience almost the entire show. It's true that they didn't speak more than a few words to the crowd, but they definitely weren't hiding. I had seen singers in other bands – some under the shoegaze umbrella, like James Graham of the Twilight Sad; and some, like Maynard James Keenan of Tool, who were way outside of it – sing facing stage rear, with little to no light illuminating their bodies.

I imagined the music being calmer and more serene, still loud and echoing, but not at all muddled or overbearing. I had read about the 20-minute wall of noise during "You Made Me Realise" that usually concludes their sets, so I gladly accepted the free earplugs being distributed at the door. But some part of me hoped that "The Holocaust" – as that segment has come to be known – would be the only time I'd need to guard my eardrums. In short, I felt more like I was watching a metal band than an indie rock or dream pop band. I know that's partly due to the band's noise rock roots and their close stylistic ties with other late '80s noise groups like Sonic Youth. However, I've always held firmly the idea that the live setting is the truest test of a band's abilities. I'm not suggesting that MBV aren't

respectable performers, but their priorities for a live show didn't match my expectations. They seemed much more concerned with creating thunderous white noise than accurately reproducing the songcraft as it was captured on the albums.

I know that in some ways this will come off as passive venting, but I can't be the only one who feels this way. The finale was terrifying, to say the least. And I've seen a lot of scary loud music live. Growing up in the shadow of Detroit's FM radio, I ended up at Lollapalooza or Ozzfest each summer, and after either daylong festival, my ears sometimes buzzed for more than 48 hours. I've seen Slayer and Pantera, two of the loudest metal bands in history, and neither was as dedicated as MBV to churning out droning, atonal noise. The Holocaust was more felt than heard – kind of like sitting in an electric chair that's situated in a wind tunnel – and despite its intense, blob-like nature, it actually came in stages, or at least it produced different kinds of sensations or emotions.

The first was a state of awe. It seemed like nobody in the crowd could believe how loud the band was playing. The second was a state of fear. It was a combination of fears actually: like the moment in a zombie movie when your father or mother becomes infected and you or someone near you has to kill them immediately; also, I felt like Raymond K. Hessler in *Fight Club*, the convenience store clerk whom Tyler Durden pulls out back at gunpoint and asks, "What do you want to do with your life? What do you want to be?" I guess the two scenarios aren't that different after all. There was another fear that I couldn't clarify until after I left. There used to be a rumor that Tom Morello pumped so much voltage through his guitar that, if he made a mistake, it would kill him. Well I felt like MBV were blasting so much sound through their amps that, if they pressed a secret button, it would kill *me*. This chaotic fear was so pervasive that, as a momentary escape from the situation, I tried to think of the last time I was so afraid of a musician. In the late '90s I saw the music video for Aphex Twin's "Come To Daddy," in which a giant-mouthed monster screams point-blank at an old lady. It practically gave me nightmares.

This brings me back to the idea of dreams. The My Bloody Valentine show was like a dream, or a trail of



different dreams sequences, in which some parts are pure bliss, and some rank among the darkest night terrors of your life. Unfortunately, the finale was long enough to allow a third state: annoyance. By the 12- or 14-minute mark, the faces in the crowd looked exhausted, bored, or frustrated. The applause and clapping seemed to be done perfunctorily. We had been facing some dark demons for a while, but from whence did they come? Were they our own demons mirrored in the music, or the band's interpretation of a demonic world? Personally, I had driven four hours to see MBV because I thought they would evoke the same optimistic soul-spark as a band like Broken Social Scene. Only during a few songs did I feel like the drive was justified, and those were songs from *Loveless*, specifically "To Here Knows When" and "Soon."

If anything, the show was a demonstration of how much time has passed, and how much has actually changed, since MBV's hiatus began in 1993. Perhaps it's their analog versus our digital recording method. Maybe I've gotten too used to live performances that feature sound quality on par with the recorded albums. Shields uses stacks of Marshall amps that more closely resemble early '80s arena rock than the single-amplifier, laptop-altered hook-ups of the new millennium. And the band was borne of the "me generation," not the "YouTube generation."

Then it hit me. I didn't even find My Bloody Valentine until around 2005. I had been approaching their music from the perspective of this decade, which is, in terms of music, infinitely different than the 1990s. Music writers like me had been attributing very much credit to the band for their influence over the past 20 years. Maybe the credit was unwarranted. Maybe *Loveless* was a fluke. Their other recordings certainly wouldn't top any decade lists. I had noticed that *Loveless* fails slightly when heard on vinyl, and that's not something I can say about my other favorite albums. Like any music junkie, I'd readily claim that my favorite albums sound *better* on vinyl.

It's possible that I was over reacting, but I was still confused and somewhat angry. The only sense I can make out of the experience is this: it seems like Shields wants to demolish the popular conception of MBV, and issue a big "fuck you" to all those who held the band's

name in high regard during the hiatus. Maybe Shields thinks that the hardcore fans are the reason he never released any more music. It's as if the band wants to discard the illusions on their own, and banish themselves to an unperturbed existence in the barren depths of musical wasteland. After this short reunion tour, a stretch of no expectations and no pressure for Shields might be the hot ticket.

No matter what other people want, inspiration can only come from within. It's possible that Shields emptied his reserves long ago, and has found no source of replenishment. I read on AllMusic.com that he actually completed, and subsequently tossed, two albums after the band broke up. Why? What was the reason? Why not go on as a solo artist? Probably because the world of music is so volatile, and music fans are so fickle. Most legendary bands end before they fade, either due to death or irreconcilable differences. When that happens, the group's accomplishments are frozen in time, protected from any future backlash. Another example from the same era is The Smiths, who, due to the clashing egos of Johnny Marr (now with Modest Mouse) and Morrissey, might never again play together. But I have a feeling that if they did, they would fulfill my mind's image of them. This could be because I have *Rank*, their officially released live album, which stands as evidence of their ability on stage.

Up until now, I never understood why my brother doesn't like attending concerts. I've always thought that the live performance was as important, or even more so, than the album recordings. But my brother doesn't always want to risk breaking the illusion afforded by private album listening. If you worship a band's albums alone, when you can control everything – the volume, whether it's played through speakers or headphones, whether you're driving or sitting still, etc, etc – you must relinquish most of your control in order to attend a live show. Two of the biggest upsets for me in recent years have been the shows that I built up the most in my head: Daft Punk at Lollapalooza 2007 and Radiohead at Lollapalooza 2008. Neither instance had anything to do with the band not playing well. It was mostly the crowd: the number of people, the fact that at least half of them were present for the event itself and not just the band, and the excruciating lack of intimacy. Especially during



Radiohead, I felt like I was watching a DVD of the band being projected on a screen in front of almost 200,000 people.

However, this MBV show is one of the strongest instances of finding myself in agreement with my brother. This show could have very well ruined *Loveless* for me. It won't, but it could have. I sacrificed that in order to see them perform live, since it might have been my only chance to see one of my favorite bands. Instead of leaving with a face wet with tears of joy, it seemed that I should have left with a shirt that said, "I survived My Bloody Valentine's Holocaust." In an environment filled with the rare people who herald MBV as the best band ever, I somehow felt like an outsider. There's no excuse for that. I should have felt like a guest of honor, even if I wasn't given any special treatment.

I'm not going to stop listening to any of the band's recorded material. I'll keep playing *Loveless* (and, to a lesser extent, their earlier album *Isn't Anything* and some of the EPs) for the same reason I have thus far: because it's evidence of the divine, wrought through the minds and hands of human beings. It's a reminder that, no matter how low we sink or how terribly we're treated or how painfully we hurt or how badly we fuck up, *there is still hope for recovery*. Despite the relentless despair, the flashes of brilliant redemption are worth the wait and struggle. Every once in a while, the air illuminates in bright pink and purple waves, electricity beams through us, and all feels well. My Bloody Valentine's recorded music will always remain, and no one – not even Kevin Shields himself – can take it away.

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