

# Magnetic Fields



*Axe wielding beach boy parodies, nymphomaniac nuns and zombie sex slaves, it must be the new Magnetic Fields - 39 minutes of harmony and 'Distortion'.*

Stephin Merritt, the 'dangerously white' Magnetic Fields front man, perhaps the grumpiest man in rock and roll, is sick. He has what Americans like to call stomach flu. He takes epic pauses between each. New. Sentence. New words are elicited slowly, begrudgingly - the low growls of an aging bear. Merritt is not angry, but bored and irritated. Erving Goffman, the great social psychologist, described how human beings negotiate their interactions like actors on a stage. Each of us holds numerous scripts, we follow notes on how to behave without needing to be told. Stephin Merritt is ignorant, or contemptuous, of such mortal concerns. His pauses are ferocious, his interruptions unrelenting. Were it anyone else, I might simply hang up. Instead I search and cajole, tickle and suggest, because Stephin Merritt isn't like anybody else. He is, perhaps, the greatest songwriter alive.

The Magnetic Fields, merely one of Merritt's numinous projects, are best known for an album released almost a decade ago, the endless and bountiful '69 Love Songs'. '69 Love Songs would have sold just

as many records if it had been terrible. It's just a great title. I probably shouldn't have spent so much time writing the songs, I probably should have put down just any old 69 songs I could think of."

Despite Merritt's protestations, 69 Love Songs was an almost unreviewably epic, instant classic, lauded by everyone from Pitchfork to 33 1/3. 69 Love Songs is so good, so utterly and unambiguously original, bawdy and irreverent, that it basks the rest of Merritt's work in the golden glow of mere association.

And those side projects aint bad neither. When not writing the soundtrack to Lemony Snicket's 'Series of Unfortunate Events' as bubblegum goth outfit 'The Gothic Archies', Merritt is hard at work writing cabaret for Neil Hannon, Marc Almond, and Gary Numan in the 6ths, composing electropop about vampires and aliens with Chris Ewen as the Future Bible Heroes, or collaborating on experimental updates of 13th century Chinese opera.

In his 18 years in the music business, Merritt seems to have collaborated with everyone he considers worthy, producing in the process an output trivialised by the term prolific. Despite this, 'Distortion' is something new; a fusion of his mastery of melody and counter-melody, with the deliberate distortion of an

early Jesus and Mary Chain album. Or so the press release tells me. In truth 'Distortion' is its own thing, baroque pop candy, hazy in the mist of noise, "So you can't always tell which notes are being played, and which notes are happening by themselves." The melodies may lack the instant earworm stickiness of earlier Fields releases, but they're the kind of noisy slow boil classics you'll feed to friends once cracked.

Merritt recently appeared on Bob Boilen's turbo hip NPR show 'All Songs Considered', in a segment where artists write and record a song in 48 hours. The product was the simple but beautiful 'Man of a Million Faces', at its heart a plain but beautiful piano loop. "I certainly only did it as a publicity stunt, but in fact it's not all that unusual for me to have to come up with a song and record it really quickly...The sprint part of it was to do that on camera. I think the song would have been better if it had been worked on longer. But that's kinda the point, it's not supposed to be something that's pretending that I worked on it for a year."

The Magnetic Fields, and Merritt's work in general, has been described as a series of concept albums, from 1994's 'Charm of the Highway Strip' (an electro country snook at the American myth of the road), to 2004's 'i' (a pack of self deprecating love songs, narrated by protagonist who may or may not be Merritt). So why the obsession with themes? "Because I'm making fun of the whole idea. I was told by a Swedish journalist that distortion is actually a concept album I didn't realise I was making about solitude. Almost all the songs are about solitude, which when I look back at it is true. Solitude or impending solitude I guess. But I don't think solitude is an unusual enough topic for that to qualify as a theme. I think probably the first Soft Cell albums would also be considered to be about solitude really, and more than half of Roxy music."

To Merritt, everything has a theme, even Britney. "All of her songs are like 'Hey I'm 15 now, I'm 16 now, and here's my belly button, aren't you titillated.' That's an extremely narrow theme, and so far it's her entire career. If I wrote songs with that theme, I'd be accused of repeating myself." Distortion does seem to buck the trend, substituting conceptual production, "it sounds like the Nuggets albums, it sounds like Garage rock from 1965", for lyrical consistency.

The album drips with references to the history of rock and roll. "I'm happy with the word derivative," Merritt says, asked about the Beach Boy inspired 'California girls', a track whose acerbic lyrics run, 'See them on their big bright screen, tan and blonde and seventeen. Eating non-food keeps them mean...I hate California girls.'

"Certainly California Girls existing in relation to the Beach Boys depends for its effect on you ever having heard the Beach Boys. I suppose if you've never heard of the Beach Boys you can still understand the song, but you can't really understand the point of the song, and you risk thinking that I in fact am telling you to go to California with a battle axe and kill people." Merritt side-steps accusations of satire, "I don't think I would ever admit to mocking it, that's the point of deadpan, if you tell everyone what you're doing..."

That's the other signature of a Magnetic Fields song. Humour. 'Painfully intellectual' humour, sandpaper in the rump of a desert goat dry. "Dr. Seuss was actually a major influence on me, because Dr. Seuss shows you what's wrong

with Bob Dylan, allowing the plot to be lead by whatever happens to rhyme with whatever word was just used. Dr. Seuss foregrounds that and makes it funny. Whereas Bob Dylan sometimes thought about that, and makes it funny, and then keeps it going and we're expected to not find it funny any more. But in Dr. Seuss land its always funny / weird. He finds surrealism in the idea that you would make something up, and he's always making something up right in front of you, in really self parodying ways. Quite brilliant."

After our interview, I thank Stephin Merritt, and set the phone down. I pause a moment, then vent at the nearest body, a publications editor working late, who's foolishly wandered into the line of fire. I'm fuming, tired and disappointed. I've never felt more foolish. I go home and listen to 'In the Aeroplane over the Sea'. There are other geniuses after all. It doesn't last. Merritt's melodies have a timeless draw, and his lyrics, droll as his dysthymic Deputy Dawg baritone, keep me coming back.

Distortion is out now on Nonesuch. You can hear a great deal of Merritt and the Magnetic Fields on MySpace.

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