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what's so scary about the...

SMASHING



PUMPKINS?

LISA JOHNSON

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BY LAUREN SPENCER • There's a raging thunderstorm in Chicago. Big forks of lightning split the sky as the rain pours. I'm sitting on the floor of a rehearsal space situated deep inside the bowels of a National Car Rental garage, wondering what I've gotten myself into. The cork-lined room is filled with musical gadgetry, equipment cabinets covered with stickers from around the globe, and four not-so-happy people very much in the mid-



dle of a huge fight. Welcome to the scary world of the Smashing Pumpkins. • Today, the Pumpkins—(from left) singer-guitarist Billy Corgan, guitarist James Iha, bassist D'Arcy Wretsky, and drummer Jimmy Chamberlin—are trying to rehearse songs from their first major, but second full-length, release *Siamese Dream* (Virgin). When the Smashing Pumpkins first entered the college/alternative arena with the 1991 release



Deep inside our National Rental Car Rehearsal space: (L to R) Jimmy, James, me and D'Arcy



James

marriage between T-Rex and R.E.M., ABBA and the Pixies.

Right now, though, I'm in the middle of a pretty heinous marital spat. It seems Billy is pissed at what he feels are less-than-stellar performances from the rest of the band. He's been nothing but straight up about the fact that it's been his responsibility to write most of the lyrics, compose most of the music, and make sure everyone shows up at rehearsal knowing the songs. In other words, Billy doesn't think the rest of the band is giving enough.

"We thrive on chaos," Jimmy says, almost apologetically.

"We've never worked without it," adds Billy.

"We'd be four happy people," muses D'Arcy. "How weird."

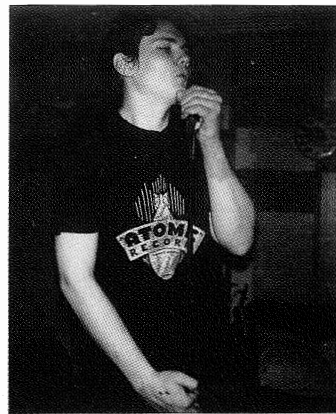
The fact that it takes all three of them to complete a single thought about how they don't always get along says a lot about the Smashing Pumpkins.

Billy, D'Arcy, Jimmy, and James first got together in 1988. After building a small following playing the Chicago clubs, they scored an opening slot for Jane's Addiction and caught the eye of cool indie label Sub Pop. After putting out a Sub Pop single called "Tristessa," they got signed to Caroline Records and released the critically acclaimed *Gish*, which went on to sell 350,000 copies.

That's the history. If you were unlucky enough to miss *Gish*, which is being rereleased in anticipation of a Pumpkin explosion, or the best song on the *Singles* soundtrack—their amazing "Drown"—please, please indulge in *Siamese Dream*.

After hearing them rehearse a good portion of the songs—searing tunes like "Cherub Rock" and the blissful "Today"—I just want to hear them

"I Love You"



all again, but *louder*. The lyrics are unabashedly raw, layered deep with mystery and emotion, about experiences that have left scars on 26-year-old Billy Corgan.

"I was definitely an outcast in high school," he says. "I was a punk rocker in a school that only had maybe two other punk rockers. But I was into The English Beat and they were into the Sex Pistols, so I was even an outcast from them." That could explain song titles like "Geek USA" and "Spaceboy."

With the rehearsal winding down, I decide to leave my camera behind with the band, hoping they'll document their inevitable kiss and make up. We meet up later over at Billy's new house—which is just down the block from Wrigley Field—where I finally have a chance to ask the band some really dumb questions. Here's what I learn:

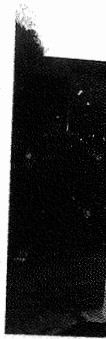
NAME CALLING:

Billy—who has a large birthmark on his left arm—once played in a band with a drummer who had a large birthmark on his face. The name of that band: The Marked. The name Smashing Pumpkins is not even slightly Halloween-related. In fact, it doesn't mean anything at all. Billy says he just wanted to put together two words—one active, one passive—that had nothing to do with each other.

ALL IN THE FAMILY:

Billy got married last May to his on-and-off sweetheart of seven years, Chris. The band did not perform at the reception. Before that, Billy briefly dated Hole's Courtney Love, right before she got together with Nirvana's Kurt Cobain. Both *Siamese Dream* and *Gish* were produced by grunge king Butch Vig—the guy

of *Gish*, they were labeled "ebb and flow" rock. I've never quite been able to figure out what that means, but I think it has something to do with the band's ability to conjure up songs that move seamlessly from muscle-packed minutes of heavy guitar, bass, and drums into tender chords and whispered lyrics. It's kind of a double-shotgun



Me ar.



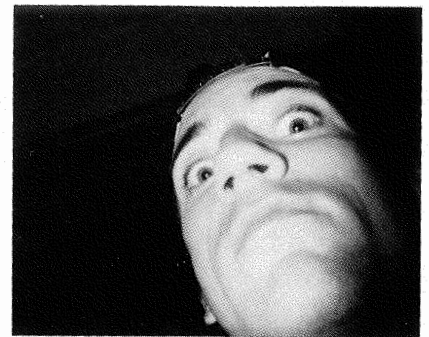
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Me and my new toy

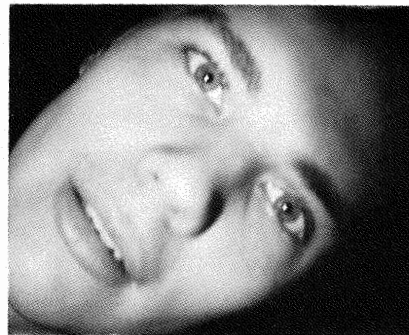
Some things Landed on D'Arcy's neck!



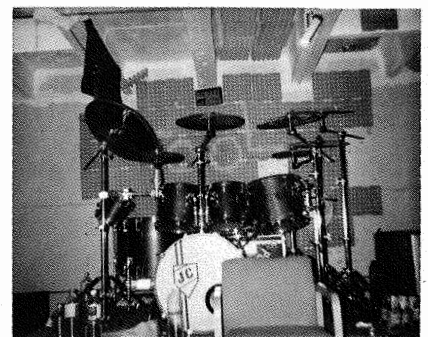
Jimmy in your face



Vince, our road manager, He fixes things



Me



This drum set has circled the earth

who produced Nirvana's album *Nevermind*. Small world.

WHAT THE BAND LEARNED BETWEEN GISH AND SLIMESE DREAM:

D'Arcy: I learned how to hold my pick correctly.

Jimmy: We learned how to insult each other without actually speaking.

Billy: We learned a bunch of five-cent words.

WHAT WOULD THEY DO IF THE SMASHING PUMPKINS DIDN'T EXIST?

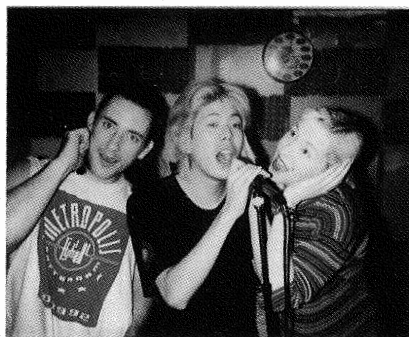
Billy: I'd want to write books. Jimmy probably wishes he could ride a horse. D'Arcy probably wishes she could paint those sad clown pictures.

IF YOU COULD BE ANYONE ELSE, WHO WOULD YOU BE?

Jimmy: George Bush.

D'Arcy: I could have lived Katharine Hepburn's life and not complained—or Roseanne Barr's.

Billy: I think Angela Lansbury. She's got an Emmy and a Tony—she's got it all. Let's face it, I pretty much *am* a boy trapped in a fat girl's body.



Portrait of 3 vocals touching their ears



D'Arcy's Prize

THE FINE ART OF SONGWRITING

Billy: The rhyming dictionary is a lot harder to use than it would seem. It's amazing how many rhymes there are for like *bring*: sing, thing, ding. You think it would help, but it actually makes it worse. You start contemplating rhymes you would never go for. My favorite rhyme is still "I'm feeling so *thin*, I want to do it *agin*"—that's a Robert Smith/Cure thing, because he has that English accent.

Jimmy: Smoked my first cigarette at ten, and for the girls I had a bad yen.

WHAT GIVES A PUMPKIN PLEASURE?

Billy: It gives me great pleasure to bypass the pay-per-view boxes in hotels and watch the movies for free. I also enjoy playing Nintendo every night before I go to sleep. James, unfortunately, gets great pleasure from making works of art out of our deli trays. When we're home, we've been known to dress up like penguins—but on off nights only.

Lauren Spencer was a guest at Billy's wedding. She's also a New York-based writer.