

GARBAGE

Shirley Manson
Duke Erikson
Steve Marker
Butch Vig

When Garbage first appeared in 1995, no one could have foreseen what could become of this most unusual of bands, composed of one superstar producer, his two hometown buddies and an unknown Scottish singer. Lo and behold, Garbage's eponymous debut on the ALMO Sounds label turned out to be one of the most successful - critical and popular - albums of the alternative era, connecting with a worldwide pop audience resulting in global sales of over 4 million copies.

On Garbage, Shirley's lyrics of revenge and hedonism meshed with post-industrial grind, composed of layer upon layer of rhythms, samples, loops, riffs, harmonies and any random sonic ephemera that happened to catch their fancy. The results were a parade of worldwide hit singles: "Queer", "Vow", "Only Happy When It Rains", and "Stupid Girl" - not to mention the chart topping alternative hit, "Number One Crush", three Grammy nominations, two years of sold out gigs, and endless print features.

Almost three years after the release of their debut, Garbage returns with Version 2.0, twelve songs that befit the group's status as surprise stars by avoiding the 'Difficult Second Album' jinx, a sophomore salvo created through sustained growth in both vision and sound.

"When the first record came out a lot of people looked at us skeptically," says Butch Vig, "y'know, having three producers and finding this singer in this kind of pre-fabricated way. But we come closer to the ideal terminology of what a band is than anybody I've ever worked with. We enjoy each other's company, we make all our decisions together, we write all our songs together, we produce together. It's difficult sometimes, trying to operate as a dysfunctional democracy, but that's part of what makes us who we are. Allowing everybody to put their personalities and their idea into the music, and then having Shirley front and center, makes sense to us somehow."

Eventually the time came to end the seemingly endless ride of Album No. 1 and begin the business of Album No. 2 with the band deciding, one spirited evening on their tour bus, that they had to begin work on the follow-up almost immediately. They took a six week vacation then briefly reconvened in NYC for the 1997 Grammy Awards, where, as Shirley delicately phrases it, they "got licked three fucking times!" "I realized that night that I was much more ambitious than I ever thought I was," she says of being a runner up in the Best New Artist category. "I don't think it would matter. If we'd won anything it wouldn't have mattered. I just realized how much I hate to lose."

From April 1997 on, Garbage was firmly ensconced at Smart Studios in Wisconsin. They ventured out occasionally, recording drum tracks in the cavernous halls of the abandoned Madison Candy Company, but for the most part, the four members of Garbage barricaded themselves in the studio for nearly a year. Gradually, the songs on Version 2.0 came together, as they went about crafting and tweaking the multi-layered sonics. Considering their roots as workaholic producers, it's little surprise the recording process grew a bit laborious.

"If we didn't have to, we probably would never stop," Duke says. "It's like a painting, you can put on as many layers as you want and keep changing it. Then people keep reminding us that we have to put a record out. Sooner or later we have to let other people hear it."

The results found on Version 2.0 prove their tenacity to be well worth the time and effort. The Garbage sound is in full effect on songs like "I Think I'm Paranoid," and "Hammering In My Head," which, as the title demands, features over 100 tracks of pounding loops and noises flying in and out of the mix. Along with Garbage's trademark noise pop are subtler, simpler songs like the evocative "The Trick Is To Keep Breathing" and the epic "Medication," which sees Garbage accompanied by a local cellist and violinist. "That was great fun," Erikson says. "It was sort of refreshing to work with real musicians. As opposed to us."

While the first Garbage record was, as Butch readily admits, "kind of piecemeal put together," after touring for a year and a half, the four mates had not only gelled into a band, but had grown comfortable with each other as individuals.

That harmony enabled them to make Version 2.0 a more unified affair in terms of the creative process. "All four of us would sit in a room together and somebody would come up with a chord progression or a loop," Vig recalls. "Then Shirley would start singing a melody and we would just kind of take it and go with it."

Version 2.0 illustrates Garbage's ability to draw from disparate source, yet still sound unified. "There's this weird mixture of old world and new," say Shirley. "We didn't want to make a record where it looked like we'd solely embraced the future. We also love the idea of our ties to the past and all the greats like the Beach Boys and the Stones and the Beatles, even threads from farther back, like Elvis Presely and Bessie Smith. We didn't want to just completely immerse ourselves in what might be, we wanted to keep ties to what has been,"

An example of Garbage's willingness to borrow from the best can be found in the album's first single, "Push It". Eddying under the song's boiling cauldron of a chorus, Shirley trills the three title words of the Beach Boys' 1964 classic, "Don't Worry Baby." Clearances were needed, so Garbage went straight to the source and presented "Push It" to Brian Wilson for his legal approval who gave them his blessing and liked the song so much that he asked to keep the cassette.

That's high praise indeed, coming from a man who knows a thing or two about pushing the envelope via endless recording sessions and the lacing of favorite sounds into the pop idiom. Garbage follow in the tradition of artists like Brian Wilson who try to take pop to the next level by injecting traditional sounds with forward-thinking studio wizardry that skew and screws the melodies until they've morphed into something altogether grander.

"We're a rock band, and we write pop songs. And then we try to inject them with a lot of samples and electronica," says Vig. "But we always craft the song so that you could still play it on an acoustic guitar. I think these songs are accessible...even though they may sound off-kilter."

"We didn't go out and say 'now we've got to do something different and get a bunch of Ukranian square dancing instruments,'" Marker adds. "it's still guitars and drums and a sampler, mainly. But we're restless and the only way we can stay interested is by trying to make things sound fresh to us. Hopefully that results in something that sounds somewhat unlike anything else."

"I don't think we've invented anything new," Vig smiles. "I think that's impossible to do in contemporary rock unless you make an incredibly weird-sounding, avant garde experimental record. But if you're trying to write pop songs, everything has been done so much, all you can do is try and reinvent it so it sounds fresh, and twist it in a way that it sounds new or cool again."

"My life hasn't really changed that much, to be honest," Manson says. "I've been involved in bands since I was fifteen, so I'm very accustomed to this kind of lifestyle. It's not something that's that new to me or the boys. Success has come to us very late, and I don't think it's turned our heads the way it can to younger artists. I think I've got a pretty good grasp of who I am. I'm not going to lose myself in the mix. When the music business spits me out, which it inevitably will, I want to be able to walk back into my normal life and not be damaged by it. The only way you can do that is by retaining a sense of humor about what you do and how you do it."

With Version 2.0, Garbage will undoubtedly build upon the following they developed with their debut. Despite their unanticipated success, the band remains willfully inspired to push the boundaries of pop to their liking. If the mainstream audience wants to come along for the ride, great. If not, well, all Garbage have to do is please themselves and let the chips fall where they may.

"We're well aware of how the pop music business works," notes Butch. "There are no givens. All you can do is make the best record you can possibly make and hopefully, you'll connect with your audience. But who knows? That's what's exciting about it, too."