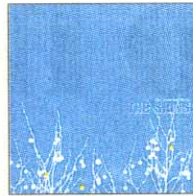


Bluebottle Kiss, *Revenge Is Slow* (Nonzero/Shock)

The Shins, *Oh Inverted World* (Spunk/FMR)

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Gomez, *In Our Gun* (EMI)



SOUNDS
Noel Mengel

IF YOU thought Bluebottle Kiss was a band from those far-off '90s whose time had passed them by, you'd better start paying attention.

Revenge might be slow but it will also be sweet, judging by the quality of their excellent fourth album.

Bluebottle Kiss started in Sydney as a three-piece with a taste for atmospheric guitars and heavy feedback, somewhere out on the fringes with Dinosaur Jr and the rest of the world's Crazy Horse fans.

They signed to Sony's Murmur label but their experimental noise-nik bent and sometimes bleak rock never found a commercial niche beyond their live following. But it turns out that being dropped by their label was the best thing that ever happened to them, and their songwriting, melodic flair and sense of dynamics have developed so that they are now making music with much wider appeal.

This transformation comes with the band's expansion to a four-piece, with former bassist Ben Fletcher moving to second guitar alongside singer and songwriter Jamie Hutchings. This opens up the sound to the point where they can be considered alongside other like-minds with an ear for a solid pop tune like Augie March, Sparklehorse and Neil Finn.

They can still work up the intensity of old — check out *Last Cinema* and the sonic explosion of *Prussian Blue* for proof — but this is now matched with tunes that are built to last.

Father's Hands is an aching acoustic-guitar-and-piano song with added flavour from pedal steel guitar; *Ounce Of Your Cruelty* a gently rolling thing of beauty; *Invent The Summer* and *Love As Fiction* hang in a languid haze, the uncluttered arrangements leaving all the space required to let their melodies linger.

And if there is space in the world for something as intricate and powerful as Mercury Rev to prosper, why not Bluebottle Kiss?

AFTER a couple of listens to The Shins, the obvious conclusion to draw is that their album is an unreleased gem from the vaults by some cracked band circa '70, and one with a healthy fixation in the collected works of Syd Barrett, Arthur Lee, Brian Wilson and Moby Grape, at that.

Happily, no. The Shins are of our time, even if their record collections are not.

The band was formed in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1997, and you might surmise they are

ingesting more than the clean desert air from early singles with titles like *Nature Bears A Vacuum* and *When I Goose-Step*.

But *Oh Inverted World* finds songwriter James Mercer and friends in a pop-psychedelic heaven, from the fragile guitar-and-organ singalong of *Caring Is Creepy* to the eerie, folkie *New Slang*, the shining harmonies of *The Celibate Life* and the cracked choirboys (with harpsichord) of *Your Algebra*.

It's unusual but there is a dreamlike sense of logic at work, and perseverance unlocks the key to classy pop-rock tunes such as *Pressed In a Book* and *One By One All Day*.

While you don't have to know a Moby Grape song from Syd Barrett to love The Shins, it probably helps.

GOMEZ have delivered a solid third album rather than a great one, and given the top-notch quality of their early albums *Bring It On* and *Liquid Skin* — with their swampy soul, gruff blues and Grateful Dead-with-acoustic-guitars feel — anything else is a tad disappointing.

In Our Gun kicks off in fine fashion with the growling brass-and-bass riffing of *Shot Shot*, and the title tune is undeniably magnificent. It starts as a smoky jazz-blues in the style of Nick Drake's *Bryter Later*, slowly evolving through one of their most elegant chorus melodies before going off on a tangent with a howling low-tuned guitar and electronic whoops.

Miles End, with its delicate finger-picked guitar, and *Sound of Sounds*, a summery acoustic guitar ballad with banks of harmonies, are also strong, but there are times when this feels like a band waiting for inspiration to strike.

Next time around they need to mix it up some more. A gospel choir, a visit by Dr John, a villa in the south of France? Perhaps, but more tunes in the class of *In Our Gun* would be the best place to start.