

NO MORE SAD TOMORROWS



The Muffs' Kim Shattuck, Part Two

By Joseph Kyle

THE MUFFS CELEBRATE THEIR 25TH ANNIVERSARY THIS YEAR, SO IT'S a perfect time to sit down with Kim Shattuck. And an interesting development has happened since we spoke in Part I last issue; earlier this year, it was announced that her previous band The Pandoras (the main focus of that part) were reforming for a handful of shows this summer, with Shattuck handling the vocal duties standing in for late frontwoman **PAULA PIERCE**. (She died August 10, 1991 of an aneurism, aged 31.) It's an interesting development—one Shattuck is looking forward to, though no firm plans have been made as we go to press. Furthermore, The Muffs' own comeback has been a rewarding one, and successful, too; last year's *Whoop Dee Do* (Burger) was their first to chart in *Billboard*—#32 Heatseeker. In this concluding installment, we discuss The Muffs history and the ups-and-downs of a great little band.

JK: You stated that The Muffs started [in 1990] while you and [guitarist] **MELANIE [VAMMEN]** were still in The Pandoras. Where did you pick up **RONNIE** [Barnett, bassist since 1994]?

KIM: He was a super-fan and he loved The Pandoras. We met him in Austin, I believe, and we hung out after the show and bonded with him. After we left Texas, we became pen-pals. He was this really cool, sweet, nerdy kinda guy. He wasn't like the creepers we were meeting, these hard-rockin' dude types who were all swagger and about getting laid—he genuinely loved the band. When we came back to Texas the following year, it was sort of obvious that he and I had a thing. He moved to L.A. shortly after that. But the funny thing about Ronnie, he's really a low-key guy. We'd been together for about a year, year-and-a-half, and one day he said, "Oh, check this out, I've got a bass my uncle gave me." I had no idea that he played bass at all! You know, after all that time, you think you know someone! [Laughs.] It became natural to have him join us.

JK: I remember that there was a quick succession of singles that came out. Was this an intentional reaction to the hassles and the delays that cursed The Pandoras, by not wasting time getting music to the masses?

KIM: When The Muffs started [1991], I was a very angry young woman. I wasn't mad at the world, but I was pissed off at what had happened to the best band in the world. So in my mind, I rebelled against everything related to the music industry. I was little Miss "Fuck You" about everything we did! [Laughs.] We weren't going to play the game; we weren't going to sign to a major label. I was very steadfast in that, and I wanted the Muffs to be that way as well.

JK: And then you signed to Warner Brothers... [Laughter.]

KIM: Yep, kind of hypocritical, if ya ask me! [Laughter.] Signing to Warner Brothers was absolutely the very last thing I wanted my band to do.

JK: Why did you, then?

KIM: They thought I was crazy! [Howls.] Ronnie and **MELANIE** were like, "Kim, what the fuck are you thinking!" It was really something that puzzled the hell out of them. I think the best offer we'd had beforehand was a label offered us a thousand bucks to record our debut album. A thousand bucks? That was just *crazy*, and so they sort of forced me to think about it seriously. It was all so accidental. We were opening one night, and that particular band had attracted a crowd of A&R guys. For the first time in the history of A&R guys, they actually caught the opening act! [Laughter.] We got barraged by these guys offering us business cards, and honestly, I thought they were lame, and was tempted just to throw them out; but our guy, **DAVID KATZNELSON**, won us over. We fell in love with him instantly. But he had his work cut out for him. I didn't want to be on a major label again! I didn't want anybody telling me I was fat, that I needed to lose weight, and I damn sure didn't want anybody coming in and fucking up my music with shitty producers. So he was going to have to really hard-sell me if he wanted The Muffs on his major label! [Laughs.] The deal he got us was very good. It wasn't excessive, and it worked to our advantage, really. It was his working with **MUDHONEY** that really cinched the deal for us. We were friends with those guys, and I knew that they were way more skeptical than me when it came to major labels. We thought, "Hey, if Mudhoney trusts this guy, then we can, too." That instinct was right. We still held our independent streak, though. When it

came time to go in the studios, we flat out refused to have showcases. We refused to go in and whore ourselves in some corporate office boardroom and pretend we're on-stage rocking out. That's just fake. We weren't going to be fake. If they wanted to hear our songs, they'd have to come to our rehearsal space or our gigs! [Laughs.]

JK: So you're back on a major label, and you're starting to work on your debut album, [1993's] *The Muffs*. How was that experience?

KIM: Awful! [Laughter.] Warner Brothers co-producing us [with **ROB CAVALLO** and Katznelson] was a nightmare, a total nightmare. They didn't know what they were doing with us, which didn't help, because we didn't really know what we were doing, either! [Laughter.] Here we were; we had a big budget—not extravagant, but pretty big for a band like us. It wasn't the money that was a big deal; it was being able to use a professional studio. More importantly, we had time—time to work on the songs. When you're a little garage band, you don't have the luxury of being in the studio for six weeks. You have a day—or a week, tops—and you're paying out of pocket. We didn't have to worry about that, and that's both a liberating thing and a confining thing.

[On bassist Ronnie Barnett joining the band in 1994]: He was a super-fan and he loved The Pandoras.

We met him in Austin, I believe, and we hung out after the show and bonded with him. After we left Texas, we became pen-pals. He was this really cool, sweet, nerdy kinda guy. He wasn't like the creepers we were meeting, these hard-rockin' dude types who were all swagger and about getting laid—he genuinely loved the band. When we came back to Texas the following year, it was sort of obvious that he and I had a thing. He moved to L.A. shortly after that.

JK: Was the source of the conflict due to misunderstanding The Muffs? You're a garage-rock band; are 50 takes and overdubs really necessary for your sound?

KIM: Warner Brothers, for all their faults, was a very artist-friendly label, and they didn't tamper in *that* kind of way. No, the real problem was that everyone had a say in what we were doing. I had a say. Melanie had a say. Ronnie had a say. Dave had a say. The mixer had a say. The guitar techs had a say. Random dudes walking by had a say. Hell, even the janitor had a say! [Laughter.] There were simply way, way too many cooks in the kitchen. Katznelson produced it, but he was inexperienced, and it was hard for him. What really was going on was I didn't step up and call a stop to it. I really wanted the band to be democratic, but I hadn't really been a bandleader before, and I didn't realize that I had the power to get things back into control. As a result, I have to be honest and say it's probably my *least* favorite of our records. There are some good tunes, but it's really spotty. I don't feel it was mastered right, either, and I just hear it as a disjointed mess. I look at it as a learning experience. So I look at it with a little ambivalence.

[During the 10-year hiatus between *Really Really Happy* with Whoop Dee Doo]: At one of these parties, Roy and Ronnie asked me what I was up to. “Oh, just recording Muffs demos,” I said. Their jaws dropped. They were like, “Uhh, and when were you going to tell us about it?” [Laughter.]



JK: When you finished the record, how did Warners take it?

KIM: They loved it! They were always very supportive—though truthfully, I think they had no idea what to do with us or how to promote us. We were loud and aggressive, but we weren’t like **BABES IN TOYLAND** or **L7** or the other [also-female-centric] grunge acts on the label. So we did what most bands do; we went out on tour, which we were happy to do. We toured ceaselessly, and it was fun for a little bit...

JK: ...but?

KIM: It soon became apparent that **CRISS CRASS**, our drummer, had to go. He’d been a good guy to work with, up to a point, but he suddenly started to get on everyone’s nerves. That we were spending our lives in a van was already stressful enough, but he grew tiresome. And one day I discovered that Ronnie and Melanie were tired of him, too. We took a little break in June, and one day he calls up with a bunch of demands. I told him no—trying not to laugh—and the conversation just ended. A few days later, he called up, and is like [goes into perfect **JEFF SPICOLI** imitation], “Uh, dude, I don’t think I want to be in the band anymore.” And I was like, “Bye!!!” [Laughter.]

JK: You lost Melanie after that tour, too, didn’t you?

KIM: She made it through the touring for the album, and we were well into preproduction for [1995’s] *Blonder and Blonder* when she left. That was one of the hardest times of the band—at least for me. Melanie was my sister, my best friend, but she was having a lot of drama in her personal life; her relationship was falling apart, and she was bringing that into the studio, which I did not want to deal with. We were young, and didn’t exactly have communication skills, so we started to freeze her out. We’d intentionally say things that we knew would piss her off; the hope was she’d get the hint. Eventually she did, and she left. [Pauses.] It’s kind of hard to talk about it now, because we’re really close again, but it was really hard for me to lose her. If we’d been a little more mature, I think we’d have confronted those personal issues, let her know that she should go work on those things, and allow her a hiatus, so that if she wanted to, she could come back. But the positive thing to come from her leaving was discovering that we were an amazing power trio.

JK: With all these changes, was making *Blonder and Blonder* a better situation?

KIM: Oh god, yes! Much better. We were much more confident. We had a lot of support from the label, and we settled on Rob Cavallo as our sole producer, and it’s really where I started to get into production. While we were making the album, Rob had some work-related drama that he was going through; he was suddenly much more in demand because of his **GREEN DAY** work, and so there were lots of times he would say, “I gotta take this call” or would go off to meetings. When he would do that, I’d sneak in there and mess around with things. And I found I really enjoyed doing that, and that it made things a lot smoother for us working. We’d also learned to stand up for ourselves and not allow outside forces to distract us with their well-meaning ideas—not that Warners ever did that directly. As a label, they were much better about staying away.

JK: Were they enthusiastic about *Blonder and Blonder*?

KIM: They were, but we had gone through some changes. When we signed, “alternative rock” hadn’t become the overwhelmingly predominant thing in the industry. Warner Brothers had been enthusiastic, but I think they were really at a loss as to how to promote us. We weren’t a heavy grunge band, and we had made it clear that we were not going to be a pop band. We quickly realized that what we wanted to do was be on Reprise, a subsidiary. That division had become the alternative-rock minded, younger, cooler label, and everyone we knew there wanted to work with us as well. We begged Katznelson to see what he could do; he agreed with us, and one day [Reprise president] **HOWIE KLEIN** came in to listen to what we were doing. He loved what he heard, and he said, “You aren’t on Reprise? Well guess what, kids—you are now!” [Laughs.] Reprise was a much better fit for us, and I think that really helped *Blonder and Blonder* be the success it was.

JK: Was there a sense that the record could be big?

KIM: No, because really, how do you know? It’s a crapshoot. However, we knew that *Blonder and Blonder* was a better Muffs; we were better as a band because of the lineup changes, and we were optimistic. And you know, for us, that record was a hit; it’s our best-selling album to date,

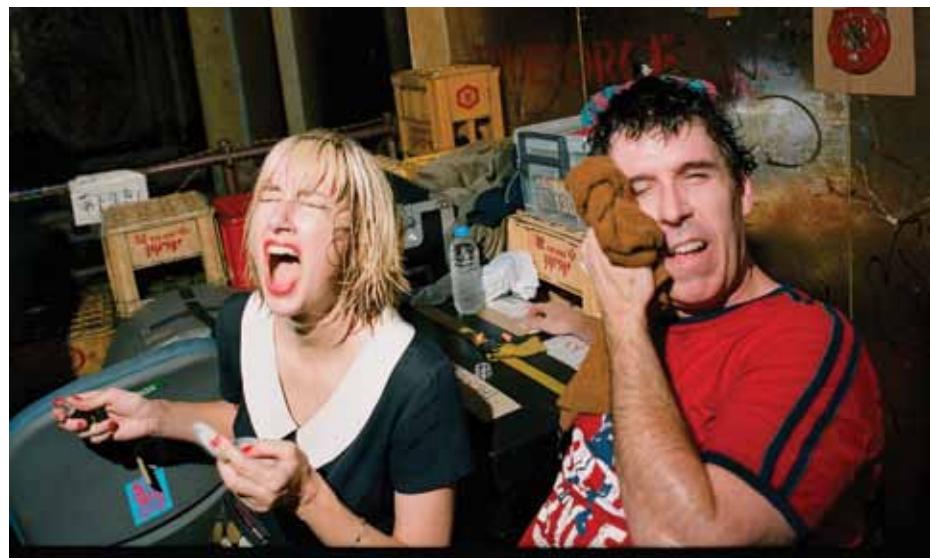
and it was really well received, critically. What's really cool about that success is that it came organically. We had videos, and they got some airplay, but it wasn't saturated. We had radio play, but it was largely college stations—the alternative rock radio format was somewhat out of our reach, and we were fine with that. We built up a great following simply from touring and being ourselves. [The single] "Sad Tomorrow" did well, and we had a hell of a good time making the video, but it wasn't as if we got caught up in the game of trying to intentionally seek out a hit. We weren't afraid of being successful, as long as it was honest success. A major label might think our sales—which were something around 250,000 worldwide—weren't great, but to us, that was the same as selling a million-billion copies, because that's a lot of people listening to our music! It's very flattering. And, really, that album kept us busy, almost right up to the next one.

We'd hit a comfortable groove, and it was a great place for us to be. It all felt right, and because we were true to ourselves, we felt good that we hadn't done anything embarrassing to get that success.

JK: Including covering **KIM WILDE**?

KIM: [Loud, long laughter.] Oh god, that! Gee, Joseph, thanks for reminding me! [Howls of laughter.] Our most successful song, and we didn't earn one damn penny from it! That whole thing ["Kids in America"] irks me. You know how I was saying before about how you can't predict what will be successful? That totally proves my point. It was so such not a big deal for us. We've always loved covering songs, so when the people making the soundtrack [for 1995's *Clueless*] approached us, we just thought, "OK, we'll do something dumb and fun," and that song came to mind. I'm not sure exactly how it came to be that song—probably because it was just a really dumb, dorky song, and we thought, "No big deal, we'll record it." So many of our covers, we do them without putting much thought into them. We record it, forget about it, stick it on a single or give it to someone doing a comp. That's what we did. We went in, recorded it really fast, and handed it over. Then it sort of blew up, which was annoying. We've never played it live; we never felt any devotion to it. Besides, it's really stupid, isn't it?

JK: With the unexpected popularity of that song and *Blonder and Blonder*



Blonder's modest success, did Reprise have higher expectations for you guys on [1997's] *Happy Birthday to Me*?

KIM: Actually, I don't think they even knew about it! [Laughs.] We had picked up on a vibe that this was going to be our last record for the label. Nothing was ever specifically said; no suits came in to say, "You guys gotta pick up the slack or you won't have a record deal any more!" We watched as slowly all of the people who had worked with us at the label were losing their jobs. I don't think we knew anyone there when we turned it in. Besides, it was obvious the music scene was changing into something lamer; we were lucky, we lasted a little longer on the majors, but the alt-rock thing was dying.

JK: Did that cast a pallor over the making of the album?

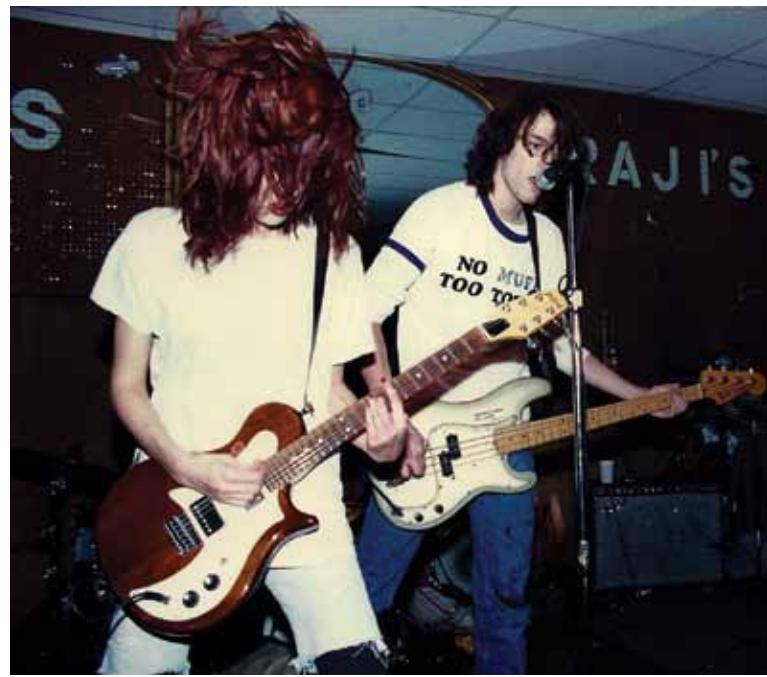
KIM: Far from it! We buckled down and put our best foot forward, and I think the results are really great. It might not have done as well as *Blonder and Blonder*, but to me, it's a really special record. I've always loved melody, and it's a very melodic record. It's a punk record, too, and that's great as well. It blends the best of those worlds. People liked it; more importantly, we liked it. We weren't terribly upset that it was our last record for Reprise, because we were ready to do something new and exciting.

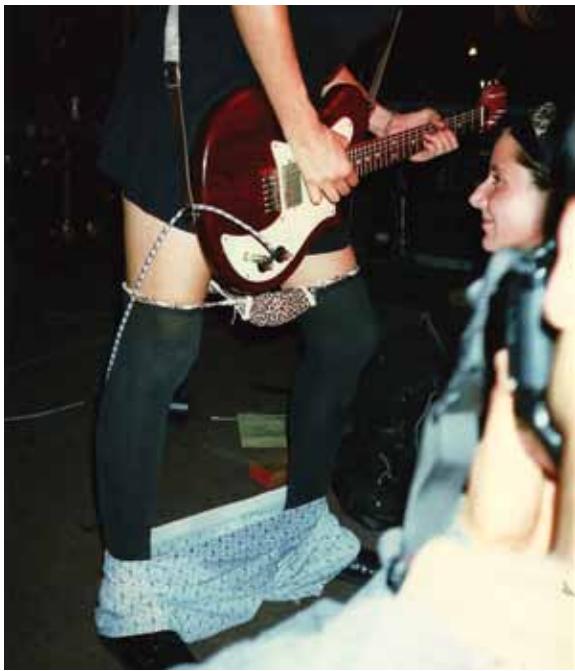
JK: Did you get that with [1999's] *Alert Today, Alive Tomorrow*?

KIM: My god, it was horrible! [Laughter.] It was easily the lowest time for all of us as a band. I don't want to call the album itself a mistake, but I think the way it came about was. When we were still on Reprise, we'd changed management, and our new manager was a real creep. He was a total industry dude, and we liked him at first, but we sort of realized he was bad for us, and even though we had great self-preserving skills when it came to the band, somehow we subconsciously fell under his spell. He convinced us that we had to make a new album. He said we'd built up a great momentum with releasing an album every two years, and touring for a year afterward, and he was right, in a way. He said we'd lose our momentum and our success and our fan base if we didn't go into the studio immediately after leaving Reprise. *Happy Birthday* hadn't done as well as *Blonder*, but it wasn't unsuccessful, either, and he made a case that it was Reprise's fault and not a reflection on us. Which is funny, because we sort of thought he'd alienated Reprise through his interactions with them! Still, we saw the wisdom in what he said, but I wasn't prepared for how hard things would soon become.

JK: What was it about making the album that was so difficult?

KIM: I quickly learned something about myself—that if I had to write something, I couldn't do it. Writer's block suddenly became a major problem. See, when we started out, we didn't





[On getting fired by The Pixies]: I jumped into the pit! [Laughter.] We'd just finished the show, and it just sort of happened. I got carried away in the moment. Backstage, the vibe was wrong, way wrong. Joey and Dave were pissed. Something was said, and I felt kind of bad—I'd forgotten that this wasn't a Muffs show; the Pixies didn't do things like that. It wasn't intentionally done; it's just how I am. I apologized—but it was weird; why apologize for a sincere gesture? Suddenly that cool vibe was gone.

feel pressured to make records. We made music because we loved making music. One of the reasons we liked Warner and Reprise was because they left us alone, so we never felt any sort of looming need to write music. When we came to make *Alert Today*, we suddenly felt otherwise. We felt like we had to do this record; we felt like we had to justify ourselves. It was stupid to think that way, it's totally counter to who I am. Today, some of those songs sound really forced; I don't want to say they're bad, but they're not our best.

JK: Did you split up after it came out?

KIM: No! It was so tempting, but then we thought, "We're a band, a tight band. We're really close friends. We just need some time off." Looking back at it, the '90s had been a busy period for us—four albums, lots of touring, and, really, no time off. We just jumped from one thing into another. Something has to give. It affects your relationships with people, your friends, and your family. It had happened with Melanie, which was sad, because she was my best friend. When you're on a major label, and there's a whiff of success, they aren't going to let you take some extra time off. We'd gotten good reviews and enthusiastic responses to our live shows, so Warners had a vested interest in keeping us busy. We were willing to do so, but it cost us—and that was hard. Unless you're a super successful band, going on the road becomes diminishing returns. It can be really depressing to go to a city where you sold out a big club, only to play to a smaller club that's nowhere near sold out. We didn't want to deal with that, and it was that decision that really hurt our relationship with Fat Wreck Chords and [their subsidiary] Honest Don's.

JK: What happened?

KIM: Well, they weren't really thrilled when we told them that we weren't going to spend very much time out on the road. A label's gotta sell their product, and touring's how they do that. We made our case—we were tired and needed a break—and they begrudgingly accepted that. We didn't want to gyp our fans, though. We knew it was our 10th anniversary, and so we decided to put out a compilation of our early singles and b-sides [and demos, covers, outtakes, and compilation tracks], via Sympathy For The Record Industry, as a thank-you for their decade of devotion. [2000's *Hamburger*.] Fat really freaked out. They got super mad at us. They told us we were undermining them, that we were hurting *Alert Today*. We weren't, of course—that's just stupid! Our relationship quickly fell apart, which really bummed us out. We'd been on the majors and were treated well, and then we were on a punk label, and got treated like shit. Going back to a major wasn't going to happen, yet those who should have been on our side were acting worse than the seemingly "evil" major labels they were against! We saw it wasn't going to get better, so we just said, "Fuck

it," and went our separate ways. At the time, it was really hard, but now that I look back at that era, I think I realize now that I was much more OK with it, and that it was the right thing for us to do.

JK: Were you tempted to go solo? Were you still making music?

KIM: I still wrote songs. Not all of them were good. Many of them weren't. I had a crisis of confidence. So I decided I wouldn't force myself. If I only wrote one song a month, so be it—that was better than writing a shitty song every day or so. So I had about a dozen or so songs, and I'd recorded demos, but I had no plans for them. I started to think about a solo album, but then I thought that would be really lame of me. What's the point of a solo album if it sounds just like your band? Besides, if I had done that, I'd have needed a drummer, and I would have called Roy [McDONALD, drummer since 1994]. And if I called him, it would have been wrong to not call Ronnie. I'd shared a few of these songs with some friends and the boys, and we were into the idea of making a record, but we had no label or prospects, so we were stalled. [**THE GO-GO'S**] **CHARLOTTE CAFFEY** called me up; she said she and **ANNA WARONKER** had started a record label [Five Foot Two/Oglia]. She'd heard the demos and asked me if I wanted to do a solo album. I said I wasn't sure if I wanted to do that, but I was still on the fence about The Muffs. She said, "OK, let's do a Muffs record, then! We'll wanna put it out, and you can do whatever you want, zero pressure from us!" So she made me an offer I couldn't refuse! [Laughter.] It was so nice knowing that we could make a record free from all the bullshit; we could release it, and not have to deal with the industry or the pressures that come along with making a record. The boys were excited, too, and it just felt right. We were really, really happy to make music again, hence the album title! [2004's *Really Really Happy*.]

JK: After the album, you guys went dormant again for this last decade.

KIM: It wasn't intentional! Sorry about that! [Laughs.] It just sort of happened. We all got involved in our own things and time simply marched on. When we were making *Really Really Happy*, we sort of realized that we should focus on doing The Muffs because we wanted to, not because we had to. We didn't have any real plans, and because we didn't, we went off and did our own things. I didn't talk to the boys for a long time, maybe a year or two, aside from some casual chats. Then our old friend [and ex-drummer] **JIM LASPESA** decided to have a dinner party. We had a fun time, and it sort of became a regular thing with The Muffs and our families and friends. At one of these parties, Roy and Ronnie asked me what I was up to. "Oh, just recording Muffs demos," I said. Their jaws dropped. They were like, "Uhh, and when were you going to tell us about it?" [Laughter.] They asked to hear them. I sent the boys a song via email. Roy said, "This is great! Let's record it!" Ronnie said, "I don't know how to listen to it!"

[Laughter.] Then I sent them another one, Roy said it was great; Ronnie said he couldn't figure out how to listen to it. [Laughter.] So we decided to record them. But it was a bit harder, because we didn't have a label and weren't thinking of looking for one. We'd save up, record a few songs, and go back to our routines. We'd play shows, save the money from the gigs, and record. It was a slow way to work. That went on for a few years.

JK: [2014's sixth LP] *Whoop Dee Do* came rather quickly after your brief tenure as a member of **THE PIXIES** [replacing **KIM DEAL**]. Was the album finished when you joined, or was it all delayed because of it?

KIM: We finished it in late 2012, and after we'd sent it to get mastered, I got a call from **CHARLES THOMPSON** [**BLACK FRANCIS/FRANK BLACK**], who tells me about what's going on with The Pixies and with Kim Deal, and he asks me to come and audition for the band. I was shocked; that was a weird call, especially out of the blue, and because Kim was such an integral part of the band. So he tells me about what's going on with Kim, how they're recording material in Wales. I was really flattered; they needed a bass player so they could go out on tour. They had an audition for me, but, really, I think it was a formality. Charles wanted me in, but **JOEY SANTIAGO**, guitar] and Dave [**LOVERING**, drums] wanted **PAZ LENCHATIN** who eventually got the job]. This sudden turn of events was really exciting! So after the New Year, I met with their manager, and they put me together with Joey and Dave, and we rehearsed. We rehearsed like crazy. From January until the tour started that fall. Three to five days a week, four to six hours a day. Insane! [Laughs.] It was grueling—that's a lot of practice time. Unpaid practice time, at that! [Laughs.] It kinda felt really unnecessary after a while.

JK: So what happened?

KIM: Well, we go out on tour, and it's great. Everyone's really cool, especially the crew, who were awesome. But there was a kind of an awkward vibe around, too, mainly because Kim was gone, and I'm like the new girlfriend or something; but that subsided after the first few shows. My reservations started lifting, and there was talk of recording and a new album going around, and it all seemed like I was going to be working with them. Perhaps, getting swept up in the vibe, I shouldn't have done what I did... [Laughs.]

JK: What did you do?

KIM: I jumped into the pit! [Laughter.] We'd just finished the show, and it just sort of happened. I got carried away in the moment. Backstage, the vibe was wrong, way wrong. Joey and Dave were pissed. Something was said, and I felt kind of bad—I'd forgotten that this wasn't a Muffs show; the Pixies didn't do things like that. It wasn't intentionally done; it's just how I am. I apologized—but it was weird; why apologize for a sincere gesture? Suddenly that cool vibe was gone; Charles was nice, Joey was standoffish, but Dave was just—he hated me and didn't talk to me at all. We completed that first round of touring, and we took a little break. Their manager, who I hadn't really gotten along with, kept calling, and I had a bad feeling. So when we come back, all of a sudden, Dave is really nice to me, and that right there told me I was gone. It was so fake, and he was so transparent, and then I get a call from management that I'm gone. It was upsetting. There was a lot of dysfunction going on there, and though I was upset about what happened, I'm glad I got out of it before it got too insane. [Laughs.] I don't regret the experience. [Pauses.] I just wish it had been handled better. Maybe they hadn't really come to terms with losing Kim, and weren't honest about what they needed, which is to drop the pretense of hiring someone to replace Kim Deal—how do you replace an awesome person like her—and just continue on as a three piece. So after that, I threw myself into finishing up *Whoop Dee Do*, to keep myself from being too bummed.

JK: But the silver lining to that dark cloud is that you've had a hell of a comeback.

KIM: There's no such thing as bad publicity! [Laughs.] I wonder how things might have gone for The Muffs had I not had that diversion, but you know what? Doesn't matter. Life happens how it happens. I've been doing this thing for 25 years. A quarter of a century...shit! How'd I get so lucky to make music for so long, with my best buds at my side? That's the real reward of it all, ups and downs be damned. ☀