



ANARCHY IN THE S.D. BELTING OUT THE FLAVOR WITH PINBACK BY PATRICK JAMES



JACKETED IN BLACK and sporting jean shorts, guitarist Rob Crow looks more like a comic aficionado than a post-punk veteran. Of course, he's both. It also seems that he's a bit shy, judging from the meek tenor of his clipped greeting, "Hi. Glad you made it. Let's go." It's difficult not to fixate on his beard, which cascades wildly off his cheeks and chin, as we make our way inside Min Sok Chon, a Korean karaoke bar about fifteen minutes east of San Diego's Pacific Beach. I'm here to learn more about Pinback, a band whose dark undertones and bass driven melodies have helped define the city's still-burgeoning indie scene. Rob's here for the karaoke.

Sometimes, Rob and the band come to this strip mall bar to unwind during downtime at home. "Don't get the fish," he says as we make our way into a dimly lit pastiche of Asian nightlife. I inquire as to why, but

he just repeats himself with a sly laugh. I believe him.

Rob and his partner in all things Pinback, Armistead Burwell Smith IV (aka Zach Smith), have secured a private karaoke room. Zach, Rob tells me, is the shy one. So it's on all of us to make sure Zach drinks enough of what Rob calls "red flavor" (a super-sweet concoction of soju and God knows what else) to afford him the courage to sing. In addition to being timid, Zach's something of a bass prodigy and he shares singing and songwriting duties with Rob while the rest of the band is in constant flux. Zach's not big on music history, and claims not to know any of the titles listed in the large folder that sits next to our drinks.

The red flavor starts flowing. Mics change hands between songs. On a TV screen, the words to Night Ranger's "Sister Christian" are backed by stock footage from Korean films, creating a bizarre version of a music

video to accompany each of our, um, performances.

"Me and Zach don't really agree on anything, or have much in common," Rob tells me. It's strange to hear, given that the two have collaborated together since 1998. At the time, Rob and Zach had recently left their bands (Rob had been playing with Thingy and Heavy Vegetable while Zach was fresh from Three Mile Pilot) and teamed up to pursue a new sound. They got together and recorded on Zach's home computer; a year later, Pinback signed to Ace Fu Records and released an eponymous debut to a warm, if at times tepid, critical reception.

To some, they seemed like a new bastion of depth in an often shallow pool of West Coast indie rock. To others, their nuanced, technical intricacies dissolved into an indistinguishable malaise. It's been an obstacle that the members of Pinback have faced all



along—the opinion that few of their songs seem to stand apart from the others.

Rob shrugs it off: “One of the things we have in common is that we love the music we make. And when we do find something we have in common, we tend to run it into the ground, whether that’s robots or *Star Wars* or whatever.”

Despite what might initially seem like a lack of individuality, there’s a vast array of layers and darker-than-might-be-expected themes (mortality, fear, questions of good and evil) in most Pinback songs that make its entire catalog all the more varied. It has to do with a living, breathing mood, a continuous sensation that can’t be realized over the course of one listen. Even the most compelling individual tracks—such as the immaculate “Prog” from 2001’s *Blue Screen Life* or the early emo-rooted “AFK” from 2004’s *Summer in*

Abaddon—seem not to exist as single works but parts of a much greater whole.

Both *Blue Screen Life* and *Summer in Abaddon* received the same coveted praise: the music was soothing, well-wrought and just short of outright indispensable. But qualified criticism doesn’t seem to plague Rob or Zach much, certainly not while the red flavor flows.

It’s been three years since *Abaddon*, and Pinback now gives us what might be its best work yet: *Autumn of the Seraphs*. Beginning with the single “From Nothing to Nowhere,” there are melodic echoes of Sonic Youth and Devo, and the final track, “Off by 50,” erupts with potent harmonies from midpoint onward. Rob jokes that the album’s more of a cross between Steve Reich and Kylie Minogue, but perhaps his assessment is just a result of the calculated brooding that lies beneath Pinback’s playful rhythms. Regardless, it

sounds distinctively Pinback.

Back in our private room at Min Sok Chon, it’s getting late and we’re getting drunk. Even Zach is in on the action, downing enough red flavor to belt out a heart-stopping rendition of “Oops, I Did it Again” while banging a microphone against his head. Neither he nor Rob is shy anymore and the entire room is a bedlam of debauchery: Rob jumps atop the armrest of a couch and tosses me a mic; he begins to yell into another. Suddenly, as if struck by a sniper, he loses his footing, crashing down and knocking both of us onto our backs. There, from the depths of the soju-soaked floor, without making so much as a motion upward, we scream our way through “Anarchy in the U.K.” to close out the night.

“You can give me a call if you have any more questions,” Rob says later, eyes half-open, “but what more do you need than that?” **F**