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MUSIC

Dave Segal Interrogates Ash Bowie of Polvo

On the Avant Rockers' Decade-Long Hiatus, Not Blowing Up, and Wonky Guitar Sounds

Polvo, Trans Am and guest

at **Neumo's**

More info »

What prompted you to re-form Polvo, besides Explosions in the Sky asking you to play All Tomorrow's Parties?

It was really the ATP invitation that got us to re-form. We never ruled out playing together again, but previous opportunities did not work for everyone, logistically. The timing of this ATP was good for everyone, and we actually had enough advance notice to practice a few times. We all felt that the material was sounding good; hence the decision to book some U.S. shows and keep it going.

Aside from your Libraness project and contributions to Helium, Dave Brylawski's involvement with Idyll Swords and his and Steve Popson's time with Black Taj, what else have Polvo members been doing since the split?

I play bass in current Polvo drummer Brian Quast's band, the BQs. Brian and I have also recorded a bunch of my own newer songs, but haven't finished them. I have also recorded and played a few shows with Fan Modine, a band/project led by my friend Gordon Zacharias.

Around the time of Today's Active Lifestyles and Celebrate the New Dark Age, I thought Polvo were going to be big... Sonic Youth big. Alas, that didn't happen. Did you ever feel like Polvo were on the verge of blowing up? Any thoughts about what you could've done differently to make that happen? Do you think now that the musical climate is more open to a band like Polvo?

No, I never thought we were going to blow up. And I definitely don't have any complaints about the trajectory of our career. We had more "success" than I ever thought we'd have, and we stopped at the height of our modest popularity. We didn't talk about getting huge or how to go about it, and it always felt like things were going shockingly well for us. It definitely did not feel like the world was rejecting us at any point. Had achieving larger commercial success and fame been a goal for us, we might have worked with commercial-minded producers, taken voice lessons, invested in better equipment, hired a manager

and publicist, and things of that nature. All of which would have seemed laughable at the time.

I don't know that we were ever capable of making a record that would have put us on a bigger stage, frankly. I can imagine a couple of them being rediscovered as "cult" records in the future, but I don't think any of them could truly appeal to the masses, then or now. So it's pretty hard to speculate on how things could have been different, without the band being somehow different. Things could certainly have been a lot worse.

I guess I'm not sure what you mean by "musical climate [being] more open to a band like Polvo." There is clearly a receptive audience for nonmainstream rock music today, as there was when we were releasing our previous records, but things don't seem insanely different to me. Obviously, the big difference today is that the internet has made it easier for hip new bands to get a lot of exposure and hype in a way that completely transcends the word-of-mouth and fanzine and college-radio exposure of the '80s and '90s. On the other hand, a lot of hip music fans get their music for free now, so it's a trade-off for bands trying to get somewhere. If you're hooked up, you have a shot at getting a song in a soft-drink commercial or a movie or whatever, so maybe that's a more realistic goal than racking up massive record sales, and I don't think that's terribly cynical. Anyway, I don't see how things could have been different for us. I'm just glad we were able to join the party at ATP and Primavera Sound this year.

Is there something you want to accomplish now that you weren't able to do during your initial run?

I'm looking forward to going into the studio when we have more new material. I don't want to disparage any of our old records, but I think there are ways to get a better result now than in the past, and so hopefully we can come out with something really good, less flawed.

What spurred your interest in various Asian musics? How about with prog rock? Were there certain groups/albums that really sparked your imagination?

I would credit Dave more than myself for bringing that element into our music, although I am the half-Asian one. All those short transitional instrumental pieces on our records were his creations, for example. I've always liked droney music, be it Krautrock or Indian ragas, and so most of my guitar tunings have a drone element, which is probably what people perceive as exotic sounding in the rock stuff, in lieu of actual ethnic folk melodies. We are not prog-rock fans, though. I don't hate it, per se, but I have never really listened to any prog rock, except for a couple Soft Machine records and some Mahavishnu [Orchestra]. A couple of our songs were noodly and weird, and people mistook that for a prog-rock influence, that's all.

How do you and Dave get your distinctive guitar sounds? They sound like exotic cats being electrocuted.

It's a combination of using cheap, shitty guitars and goofing around. I think we've left some of the weirder noises behind, along with the worst guitars, but hopefully there's more to the music than that.

What criteria are you using when choosing songs to play during this tour?

We have chosen songs that we collectively liked the most, and then added a couple of the more-requested songs that we don't mind playing. Actually, none of the songs has been particularly difficult to relearn, though we have reworked a few of them where we felt improvements could be made. Unfortunately, our first album is underrepresented in the current repertoire, but we can play at least a couple songs from all the other releases.

Will you be busting out any new songs for this tour? If so, how will they differ from previous Polvo material, if at all?

We do have a few new songs, and will probably play around two per show. I'm not sure how they differ from previous material. I think our older material spans a wide range of styles, from pretty weird to poppy, so it's hard to say if there's any real stylistic shift that characterizes the new songs.

The music industry has changed a lot over the last decade, much of it being for the worse. What do you think of those changes and do they effect how Polvo will operate?

I don't think about the music industry very much. Of course, I am interested in what is happening, but I probably can't discuss the topic in an educated or insightful way. I suspect that the bad news is probably a lot worse for the Next Big Thing than for any project I'll ever be involved in. Anyway, we are really just playing again for fun, and we will probably continue as before, albeit in a less active way. We will hopefully make another record and then play a few shows when our schedules and lives allow it. We'll do whatever we can to help our record label navigate the waters, but otherwise I don't think about the business side as much as I could and I'm not sure how the band would do anything differently. We don't even have a website.

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