

My Favorite Album: Psychocandy, by the Jesus and Mary Chain

<http://thewoostervoice.spaces.wooster.edu/2012/02/10/my-favorite-album-psychocandy-85/>

Now that the hipster end of the musical spectrum is dominated by contemporary “Noise Pop” acts like Animal Collective and Wavves alongside the well-pedigreed My Bloody Valentine, it’s refreshing that music nerds are beginning to recall the beginning of these movements, which is the 1985 debut album by the Jesus and Mary Chain, “Psychocandy.” Much has been made of “Psychocandy” being the progenitor of subsequent generations of shoegaze and noisy guitar pop, but honestly there never has been anything that really sounds like it before or since, not even later releases by the Jesus and Mary Chain.

The level and character of heavily reverbed guitar noise on the record is as mind-blowing (or intolerable, take your pick) today as it was 27 years ago, and bears little resemblance to its many imitators in the indie rock movement. Behind the squall of distortion lies songs that are alternately dissonant diatribes and crazily pleasant Beach Boys-style pop tunes, all delivered with the coolest, most unceremonious detachment of the post-punk era (which says something).

And God, they were so cool. When I discovered the album at age 15, mid-80’s Jim and William Reid, along with pre-Primal Scream Bobby Gillespie drumming (sort of) and bassist Doug Hart playing bass (sort of) instantly became the highest paragon of cool I could hope to imagine. Make of that what you will. But when you watch old show footage of four intoxicated Scots barely playing their instruments with backs turned to a frenzied audience, seemingly indifferent to their reception, you’ve got to at least recognize that their quiet braggadocio in this era captured the essence of rock fatalism and rebellion in a truly unique way.

The musicianship is minimal even by punk standards, but the real show is the heart of the songs themselves. Beyond the gloom and doom of much of the album, “Psychocandy” has an amazing capacity for pure joy. The opening track “Just like Honey” has finally gotten its due recognition as a classic, but it is just one of many highlights. “My Little Underground” remains the most joyful pop song to ever emerge from layers of formless and abrasive noise, and “You Trip Me Up” forgives the existential terror suggested by “Never Understand.”

“Psychocandy” still gets heavy play among my Spotify and iTunes, but I don’t think I can ever really enjoy the album in quite the same way I did when I first discovered it. A song like “Never Understand” can only be fully appreciated when you’re a lonely and angry 15-year-old, and it becomes your anthem for a year. There’s not much I miss of that part of my life, but I wish that chorus still inspired the same knot in my stomach, and I could still grasp the dark and liminal underworld alluded to among the torturous screams in the song’s coda. I no longer listen to Psychocandy all the way through or every day, but the songs on it are tattooed on my brain forever. I’m glad they are.