

stephin merritt

information compiled by jens kutilek

Let me count the ways

Betty Clarke swoons over Stephin Merritt's tender, bloody-minded diversity

Betty Clarke

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The Guardian

The Magnetic Fields

69 Love Songs

(Circus)

Whether it's falling in it, losing it or trying to find it, the subject of love brings out the best and worst in pop music. For every God Only Knows, there's a My Heart Will Go On, after all. So an "epic" that boasts 69 songs concerned with matters of the heart could be a masterwork of big ideas and strange fascinations or an overblown narcissistic suicide note.

Thankfully, The Magnetic Fields' 69 Love Songs is an album of such tenderness, humour and bloody-minded diversity, it'll have you throwing away your preconceptions and wondering how you ever survived a broken heart without it. The brainchild of American maverick Stephin Merritt, the Magnetic Fields' previous albums, The Wayward Bus and Distant Plastic Trees, have won critical praise and a celebrity fan-club that includes Brian Wilson.

Merritt has attempted to explain his love of love and of music in every conceivable way and in every possible style over this 3-CD set. From loud and proud anthem When My Boy Walks Down The Street to the subtle longing of I Don't Want To Get Over You, Merritt has songs for anyone who's ever been in love or ever wanted to. His heart is despondent, though always strangely satisfied. He's bitter but never completely twisted. He plays at Frank Sinatra in Love is Like Jazz, while he's Johnny Cash advertising for love in the personals in A Chicken With Its Head Cut Off. And while we never get a sense of just who Merritt is, 69 Love Songs reveals his passions as show-stopping tunes - Very Funny will appeal to anyone who's ever longed to be a Butlin's red coat. Gospel, Euro-pop, 60s girl groups and 80s synth come together with an eye for detail and a gift for telling stories to make songs to hum in the dark, eccentric visions of what love is and what it could be. "The endless streets I walk along," guest star LD Beghtol sings in Bitter Tears, "you made them seem pretty."

Merritt's lyrics are cruel and crushing, Goffin-King songs sung by fallen cheerleaders and ugly teenage boys. "Well I'm sorry that I love you/It's just a phase I'm going through," sings vocalist Shirley Simms, while Claudia Gonson observes: "If you don't cry/It isn't love/If you don't cry/Then you just don't feel it deep enough." 69 Love Songs is an essential guide to loving music.

Magnetic Fields

69 Love Songs

[Merge]

Rating: 9.0

There's only one question that really needs to be asked of 69 Love Songs: is it a brilliant masterpiece or merely very, very good? The title alone is enough to send music geeks the

world over into a foamy-mouthed, epileptic frenzy. 69 songs equals 3 CDs equals nearly three solid hours of new Magnetic Fields material-- think of it! That's more than some notable bands released in their entire existence. Add that to the fact that the Magnetic Fields actually followed through with their concept without turning it into the indie-pop equivalent of Lou Reed's Metal Machine Music.

You see, I have this theory that music critics are suckers for novelty, and there isn't much in this world that's more novel than 69 Love Songs. It borders on being a prop in a Mark Leyner story-- it's hyperreal and excessive, yet perfectly plausible when you consider how weird reality is. Because of this, the album never feels like a ponderous, pretentious artistic statement (unlike most multi-CD releases). Stephin Merritt and company sound like they approached this ridiculously ambitious project with the most casual of airs, idly plucking melody after divine melody out of the air like low-hanging fruit from a tree. It's how pop music should sound, really: so natural and feather-light that you never notice the amount of effort that went into it.

Therein lies the paradox of 69 Love Songs-- it's such a basic style of music that it's easy to dismiss it as "just pop music." Of course, that's what it is, so should it really deserve such high praise? Should it rank among the best albums of the 1990s? Or is it too bizarre to be considered culturally important? I mean, Abbey Road is a pretty weird album, too. Then again, Abbey Road isn't three hours long.

Regardless, Stephin Merritt has proven himself as an exceptional songwriter, making quantum leaps in quality as well as quantity on 69 Love Songs. This incarnation of the band doesn't feature much of the densely layered, burbling electro-pop that they're best known for; in its stead are sparser, more acoustic songs that sound as if they're being played on actual instruments by a group of actual musicians (as opposed to Merritt himself playing mad scientist with effects racks and overdubs). It may initially seem like this stylistic decision came due to budget restrictions-- if you're recording that many songs, you can't blow too much money on any one track. But it's probably more likely that Merritt finally realized the limits of tinny synths and drum machines.

On the Fields' previous outing, *Get Lost*, you can hear Merritt beginning to lean toward simpler, more elegant arrangements; 69 Love Songs could easily be seen as a continuation of that trend. Merritt also ensures that the listener will never get bored with any one sound, trading off vocal duties with four other singers and deploying a mind-boggling array of instruments: ukulele, banjo, accordion, cello, mandolin, piano, flute, guitars of all shapes and sizes, a dumpster full of percussion toys, and the usual setup of synths and effects. Among other things.

And the songs themselves? Well, I could write a thesis dissecting each and every song on this album, but that would take months. As a prism refracts light into a spectrum of colors, 69 Love Songs not only refracts love into a spectrum of emotions, but also refracts the love song itself into a spectrum of musical forms. There's a duet between a dysfunctional Sonny and Cher ("Yeah! Oh Yeah!"), a country-gospel tune confusing religious and secular love ("Kiss Me Like You Mean It"), and an amusingly light-hearted tale of a soldier's drunken tryst ("The Night You Can't Remember").

There's giddy lust ("Let's Pretend We're Bunny Rabbits"), romantic longing ("Come Back from San Francisco"), sleazy leering ("Underwear"), and resignation and despair ("No One Will Ever Love You"). There are genre exercises such as faux-beatnik jazz ("Love is Like Jazz"), Paul Simon-ish world music ("World Love"), Gilbert and Sullivan-style mincing harpsichord ("For We are the King of the Boudoir"), Merritt's cartoony, day-glo interpretation of punk rock ("Punk Love"), Scottish folk ("Wi' Nae Wee Bairn Ye'll Me Beget"), and a brief Philip Glass tribute ("Experimental Music Love"). There are also plenty of archetypal Magnetic Fields songs, with those trademark deadpan drama-queen vocals, casually depressive lyrics, and clever rhymes. But Merritt also shows he can pen some surprisingly sincere, moving ballads ("Busby Berkeley Dreams," "The Book of Love"), too.

So, back to the original debate. You know that old saying about the whole being more than the sum of its parts? The sum of the parts of 69 Love Songs adds up exactly to its whole. No more, no less. Each song contains its own small epiphany, but they never quite add up to the one big sweeping epiphany that you'd hope for. That's because it's impossible to reconcile the concept of 69 Love Songs with its execution; it's simply too big. That might sound like a cop-out, but this is truly an album you can get lost in. The individual songs will inevitably distract you from a big-picture interpretation of the album. Of course, the Magnetic Fields don't concern themselves with such matters; they promised us 69 love songs, and that's what they delivered. That it's actually worth the exorbitant \$35 price tag is a bonus.

-Nick Mirov

Sweet singin' woman

Claudia Gonson is both a captivating vocalist and the organizing force behind Stephin Merritt's magnetic appeal

By Barry Walters

From The Advocate, May 9, 2000

Manager, part-time lead vocalist, keyboardist, and former drummer of the Magnetic Fields and its synth-pop counterpart, Future Bible Heroes, Claudia Gonson doesn't hold back when singing the praises of Stephin Merritt. "It became clear to me almost instantly after becoming his friend that he was an intensely talented musician and songwriter.

And I always had a natural inclination toward organization, networking, and being very social," she explains of the duo's division of labor. "I am in many ways everything that Stephin isn't, and Stephin is in many ways a lot of things that I'm not."

Like Merritt, Gonson is classically trained, but she doesn't mind taking a creative backseat. "I see my managerial role as an analog to an editor for a writer," says the Harvard graduate—whose college chums, cellist Sam Davol and guitarist John Woo, flesh out the Magnetic Fields. "The artist is in constant dialogue with you, and if you can't be as versed in technical expertise as he, then you're not going to be able to give him very good feedback."

The extroverted foil to Merritt's dour demeanor, Gonson brightens 69 Love Songs with her enthusiastic vocals, particularly on the '60s-flavored folk-rock anthem "Sweet-Lovin' Man."

"I was straight when Stephin met me, and I'm gay now, which may have been influenced by the openness of hanging around with so many gay people," she reflects. "When we started Magnetic Fields we purposely had one lesbian, one gay guy, one straight woman, and one straight man. The audience could identify with whomever they wanted. I hang out with more gay women now, but I guess I'm more of a fag hag than a lezzie hag."

Whereas Merritt tends to downplay his encounters with homophobia and his sexuality's effect on his music, Gonson—now pursuing her Ph.D. in English at the City University of New York—naturally takes a more analytic perspective. "Regardless of what Stephin Merritt may say in an interview, his songs seem to be about loneliness, isolation, and the need to be recognized by another person," she says. "If there wasn't homophobia, these experiences would be less rampant instead of being so associated with the gay personality. I get tons of letters with people saying, 'As a young gay person who is developing an identity in the world, I go to the Magnetic Fields for words of wisdom.' A lot of our fans are young straight girls who hear his lyrics to men and think about their own experiences. I recently got a fan letter from a gay man who said 'I'm embarrassed to say I think you're a hot mama.' I had tears in my eyes," she says.

Interview with the Vampire

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by Holly Day

An encounter with the Magnetic Fields' Stephin Merritt, the surliest conversationalist in indie-rock

The only thing I remember about 1998's MTV-produced *Dead Man on Campus* is the Corey Page character--a gloomy, suicidal death-rocker who in public moans on and on about the pain of living but in private is a Three Stooges fan who loves fuzzy slippers and show tunes. "Matt" goes on to become a huge smiley pop star, creating music that rivals Tiny Tim's in its sappy, contagious joy.

Like his fictional counterpart, Magnetic Fields frontman Stephin Merritt is a pretty good study of *How to Be a Rock Star*, though he hasn't yet become one. Merritt has cultivated a gloominess that might be informed by beret-wearing poet/artist caricatures on *Saturday Night Live* or *Laverne & Shirley* (the beatnik episodes). Yet somehow he manages to get some of the nicest and most interesting people in indie rock to collaborate with him, from Yo La Tengo's Georgia Hubley to Flare's LD Beghtol. In addition, he has written a surprisingly humane (and critically revered) three-CD opus truthfully advertised as *69 Love Songs*, which compiles gems such as "Let's Pretend We're Easter Bunnies" and the comparatively unpolished "Punk Love" and "Love Is Like Jazz."

So he can't be all that bad, can he? Should we expect an album of silly cartoon music from him in the near future? Close enough: Merritt has written songs for Nickelodeon's *The Adventures of Pete and Pete*, with more Nick soundtracks in the works. He has his cute personal "hooks," too: His Chihuahua, Irving, appears in all Merritt press photos. Still, all his live shots show him chain-smoking cigarettes. "I've always had a deep voice," he says when I ask him if his one-to-two-pack-a-day habit has affected his singing. He speaks in a low, sonorous rasp over the phone from his New York apartment.

"My voice literally changed overnight when I was a teenager," he explains. "I was in the choir and everything, and in one day, my voice dropped an octave. I was four foot tall with this very deep voice, and every time I opened my mouth, people would laugh at me."

Unfortunately for your interviewer, and thus for you, I make the mistake of responding to this little anecdote by laughing at him, instead of delivering the apparently expected sympathetic response of, "Aww, poor Stephin." And so an already cool interview drops below zero.

Merritt, like alt-rock luminaries from Marilyn Manson to Patti Smith, first honed his attitude as a music critic, writing for *New York's Time Out*, and working as a copy editor at *Spin*. Music journalism and dreams of rock stardom often go hand in hand, in case you hadn't noticed--believe me, when you spend half your waking life listening to what makes music go, pretty soon you'll think you have an inkling of how to build the perfect music machine. And as author to some of the most acidic rock criticism to reach print, Merritt apparently decided he knew it all pretty early on. He has variously opined that there hasn't been a truly "studio-recorded" album since the Jesus and Mary Chain's *Psychocandy* and that Tom Waits is nothing but "an erudite wino who finds it so easy to write classic songs that he rarely bothers to do so." (He wrote that in *Chickfactor Magazine* last year.)

Merritt's acerbic wit truly shines in his interviews, however. He allows the music press to

speak with him for the pure purpose of giving his former profession nothing to work with (as well as saddling said press with enormous phone bills with nothing to show for them but half an hour of insults and dead air). And he knows from experience that by doing this he will be seen as a challenge to other journalists who convince themselves that perhaps they can get something useful from him, that they will be the one mighty music writer who can get the perfect Stephin Merritt interview.

As it happens, my own Q&A tape is painful to listen to even the second time around.

"What does that have to do with music?" he demands when I inquire about his personal life. "Are we still talking about music here?"

Ask him about his music, though, and you won't get any better. "Anyone who can reveal herself in 50 to 100 words is appallingly shallow and not worth revealing," he once said about why none of his songs are personal or reflective of himself (Magnet,

January/February 2000). On other topics he's just as succinctly surly: **His idea of a perfect day? "Lying in the bathtub watching the life ooze out of your wrists,"** he told

Chickfactor magazine this year. His snubs go so far as to encompass his musical contemporaries as well. "I have no interest in remaining in the indie-rock ghetto," he told the Village Voice this March (although Britney Spears fans wouldn't know him from the copy editor at Spin). "I think indie rock is over."

But again, this is a show put on purely for the benefit of critics. With little or no radio play or appearances on MTV and less than 15,000 copies of 69 Love Songs sold, Stephin Merritt's work and name is meaningful only to the indie set. Perhaps this proves that there's no real connection between a musician's success and his interaction with the press: While people may like to read interviews, the deciding factor in buying a record or seeing a concert is always the actual music. You may be the nicest person in the world and the most sparkling conversationalist, but if your band sucks crap through a straw, people aren't going to come out and see you play.

Confidential to Mr. Merritt: If you hate interviews, there isn't any point in doing them.

Love's anatomy

What kind of man records 69 songs on one album? The singer of Magnetic Fields, that's who. Maddy Costa meets a tireless romantic

Friday July 14, 2000

Stephin Merritt, the frontman of the Magnetic Fields, is supposed to be contemplating his recently released, critically adored masterwork 69 Love Songs, but instead he's gazing wantonly at a small white dog sniffing at the bushes that line London's Grand Union Canal. "I dearly love my little chihuahua Irving," he confesses, "and when I'm away from him, I'm suddenly very attracted towards small dogs. I want to have conversations with them and rub their bellies." It puts a bizarre new light on his songs about infidelity - not least Fido, Your Leash Is Too Long.

He's nothing like you expect him to be, this man with the lugubrious, debonair baritone voice and most bewitching lyrics in pop. He's slight and tiny - barely over five foot - and seems to drag his deep voice up from his knees. Dressed in various shades of black, resting his feet on a rapidly growing mountain of cigarette stubs, the thirtysomething (he doesn't give an age) is a demanding conversationalist, pausing for several moments of intense thought before he says anything. The seriousness is tempered, however, with an urbane and entertaining wit, as a skip through 69 Love Songs attests.

There's The Death of Ferdinand de Saussure, for example, during which Merritt pictures a self-styled "great composer" shooting the Swiss linguist in honour of Motown

songwriters Holland-Dozier-Holland; and For We Are the King of the Boudoir, a flamboyant rococo flourish that promises "One kiss from me and you'll see God". Both of these might, understandably, have a lot of people stretching for the off button. But there's also the saucy gospel Kiss Me Like You Mean It, and a jaunty response to Irving Berlin (after whom Merritt's pooch is named) called A Pretty Girl Is Like..., which compares love to violent crime: "If you do it wrong you could do time".

The album, a lot of which was written in a gay bar near Merritt's home in New York's East Village, covers every imaginable state of love, from an affair's early uncertainty through nights of emulating rabbits to the memory loss of absence. And, for all its cool acerbity, its songs about dancing and staying up late exude a headiness reminiscent of Katharine Hepburn/Cary Grant movies.

"I like the idea," Merritt muses, "that there could be a 12-year-old whose first record purchase is 69 Love Songs, who would then judge all other records according to it. He will think that others must be brilliant for being able to put out albums of only 12 songs, but that all these other records are horribly missing in romance. He'll miss the lyrics about dancing in faded ballrooms among the chandeliers."

If only someone would employ him to write songs for Britney and the Backstreet Boys, all youngsters could grow up on intelligent, funny, provocative lyrics and the charts would be a finer place. As it is, Merritt is employed as a music critic by Time Out magazine in New York. He's lived there since 1994; before that he travelled with his mother (he lived in 33 houses in his first 23 years) and briefly alighted in Boston, where he and the Magnetic Fields' drummer and manager Claudia Gonson both attended Harvard University. For Time Out, he writes about everything from the Folkways catalogue and the 50s humorous songwriter Tom Lehrer to the Spice Girls.

"I hear a little of everything," Merritt says of his work, "and that makes me jaded in some way, but on the other hand I am very knowledgeable about what is being released and I know what I can do to sound unlike other people. At the moment that is to put out 69 Love Songs. You have to be pretty extreme if you don't want to be just like someone else."

That isn't to say that his music sounds unlike anything ever released: on the contrary, references to music of the past litter Merritt's work. On 69 Love Songs he zooms between rock, jazz and blues, cabaret, synth pop and Swedish reggae. He honestly regrets not tackling rap, heavy metal and raunchy R&B, "styles that I'm not at all suited for doing". Previous Magnetic Fields albums have seen Merritt deconstruct the country song (Charm of the Highway Strip), and he repeatedly returns to the Phil Spector sound. Equal parts music practitioner and theoretician, Merritt feels that, far from being reductive, such references are a vital component of pop. "It would be great if somebody could do something new in music that didn't depend heavily on references to previous music, but it wouldn't be pop," he argues. "Pop is reference to pop music: in the verse-chorus structure and the instruments, and in the phrasing and melodic traditions. What I'd like to do next is come up with something that really doesn't sound like anything else, and yet somehow is within the pop tradition. I won't be upset if I can't figure out how to do it. But it's a noble goal."

One idea he's currently working on is music without drumbeats; another is a 60-person orchestra of modern instruments, such as theremins and Moogs. He's also considering taking accent lessons, so that he can adapt his voice without taking actual singing lessons, which he's never done. Merritt has been the Magnetic Fields' singer since 1991, when the band's first singer, Susan Anway, inexplicably decided to study dental sculpture. He still thinks that his voice is "technically horrendous", redeemed only by the fact that "I can sing lower than anyone else in popular music".

Before he embarks on any of these ideas, however, he is sticking with love songs. The 69 just released were originally going to form a competitive revue show for drag queens - although, Merritt says, that plan only lasted five minutes - which their composer hoped

would open doors into the world of writing musicals. He's taken the initiative, however, and is currently halfway through concocting a screen musical with the Magnetic Fields' accordionist Daniel Handler. "It's called *The Song From Venus*," he reveals. "An aphrodisiac record comes down from Venus and makes people fall in love, screwing up a lot of characters before it takes over the world."

Hmmm. Might the taking-over-the-world part be erased from the final script? "Oh no," Merritt frowns. "It's a successful invasion from Venus in the form of a pretty love song."

STEPHIN MERRITT

Seen as a lo-fi Cole Porter and voted only second to 'Moby' in the US critics poll last year, the triple album '69 LOVE SONGS' is currently one of the most enthused about albums on the globe.

Also dubbed "the greatest songwriter of his generation" by Time Out in New York, his fans include Lou Reed and Brian Wilson.

A real auteur who writes, plays, arranges and produces, he has developed the D.I.Y. ethic and his technological expertise to create indie-pop with a human face that achieves as much bittersweet warmth, symphonic grandeur and diversity as the form can allow. This show will be his only one outside of London !

Raising Standards

Pop genius Stephin Merritt conquered the indie rock world long ago. Now he's left it behind. The Magnetic Fields' 69 Love Songs is his stunning tour de force.

by Alex Mulcahy

For two nights in September, New York City's Knitting Factory buzzed like opening night at a high school play. The critics were there, especially the ones who were awarding album-of-the-year status to the then-impending 69 Love Songs, the Magnetic Fields' audacious triple CD. Also in attendance were the longtime fans, all eager to hear for themselves why the band's evolution was generating so much attention.

Even Magnetic Fields songwriter Stephin Merritt, a reluctant performer ("I loathe touring," he says succinctly, as he says everything) must have felt the warmth of the audience. Decked out in a suit and tie, he played the part of a disheveled school boy unwillingly pushed to the stage. Claudia Gonson, whose role in the Magnetic Fields is both musical and managerial, sat at the piano in an evening gown. The band of thirty-somethings was playing dress-up.

The other two members of the Magnetic Fields, Sam Davol (cello) and John Woo (guitars) played their supporting roles superbly, content to humbly serve the greater good.

And everybody took turns. The shows featured all four of the guest vocalists Merritt utilized on 69 Love Songs: LD Beghtol, a tenor who enunciates with a rain-in-Spain distinctiveness; Dudley Klute, a new wave star during the 80's in his native Belgium; Shirley Simms, a Boston-based singer who excels on the sassy, country flavored numbers; and Claudia, whose airy vocals take on the highest songs. Merritt himself sang forty-five of the sixty-nine, altering his deadpan baritone delivery on several songs-- which is more effort than he ever had invested in his singing before.

The material from 69 Love Songs effortlessly conjured such disparate spirits as Jacques Brel, Fleetwood Mac, the Velvet Underground, Billie Holiday, Wire, Leonard Cohen,

OMD, Irving Berlin and countless others from the last hundred years.

With a snifter of brandy in one hand and a smoke in the other, Merritt occasionally betrayed his close-to-the-vest demeanor. He looked like--possibly--he might be having fun.

Perhaps no writer of pop songs has written so many vengeful, wicked verses about unworthy or unfair lovers. What kind of man writes a song called "No One Will Ever Love You" or "Meaningless," or could write for a departing lover

When your golden loneliness
is heavier than stone

You can call me up and say

"My God, I'm all alone all alone."

Could it be the same man who writes such aching, sentimental songs like "Come Back from San Francisco," "All My Little Words" or "Grand Canyon?"

You never know if you're going to get the sweet or the sour with Merritt, and not just in his music.

"I think he is truly a good person," Gonson says. "And an exciting person to know. Not just musically, but intellectually as well. He's a really great person. I feel very happy about having Stephin as a friend.

People who don't know him well often have a much different impression. Though Merritt articulates well, he often speaks at a volume just above a whisper. His pauses in conversation can seem infinite, ludicrous. While he makes every effort to be precise with his words, he seems either unwilling or unable to make people feel comfortable in a conversation. Some think him rude.

There are a few well-known details about his childhood that may at least partially explain his social backwardness. His father was a folksinger named Scott Fagan, who recorded albums for RCA Records and Atlantic Records. His mother was a folksinger, too, though she never recorded. His father left when Stephin was a baby and he hasn't seen him since. He was raised by his mother, often in a communal environment, with little structure. Her lifestyle, on the surface, was romantic and carefree, but she struggled with frequent bouts of depression.

Mother and son moved constantly--living in thirty-three houses by the time he was twenty-three years old--which meant that Merritt was perpetually the "new kid." He never had to come out, he told the Village Voice, because "no one thought I was straight." Merritt, in fact, denies having ever been a child altogether. What was he then? After a long pause, he answers, "I was a dwarf."

In his songs, Merritt has an affinity for the outsiders and outcasts. His protagonist in "The Luckiest Guy on the Lower East Side," an Irving Berlin-inspired song, is also the ugliest guy on the Lower East Side, and he knows the pretty girl he loves is just using him for a ride in his car. His current favorite from 69 Love Songs, "Love in the Shadows," shares a similar theme, but without the levity. It's a song about people with grotesque physical appearances seeking love.

"I like the characters [in 'Love in the Shadows']" Merritt begins softly. "I like the woman with no nose. There was a Dear Abby letter that we read in sociology class written by a little girl who had no nose. And nobody wanted to play with her. She had no friends. And people would be afraid of her when she walked down the street. Everybody found her grotesquely ugly. And she wrote in to Dear Abby saying, 'I've always lacked friends. Is it true that I'm too ugly to grow up to be married and find love?' Dear Abby printed the letter, but didn't really have a response for the little girl. Her response was directed at her readers--'Sometimes I get letters like these and they just make me cry.'

"The woman with no nose is that little girl all grown up, and my suggestion as to how she might find some semblance of love."

Merritt didn't always feel his singing voice was good enough to record. His friend Susan

Anway, who possesses a crystal clear voice similar to that of Judy Collins, sang on the Magnetic Fields' debut, 1991's Distant Plastic Trees and 1992's The Wayward Bus. It wasn't until Anway moved to Arizona that Merritt made his way to the microphone.

Beginning with The House of Tomorrow EP, Merritt's impassive vocals became an integral part of the Magnetic Fields' sound. Back-to-back records in 1994, Holiday and The Charm of the Highway Strip, solidified his position as a unique auteur, garnering comparisons to studio visionaries such as Brian Wilson and Phil Spector. Like Spector, Merritt blurred instruments into a reverberating whirl of sound, often making the instruments indistinguishable.

The indie rock community appreciated and respected Merritt, and gave him an audience to showcase his facility for melody, for woeful and witty lyrics, and his unique approach to sound. But he never belonged there. True, he was a do-it-yourself practitioner, but that was really a byproduct of his less than social personality.

Gonson tried, ironically, to parlay his indie cred into some commercial success with the 6ths. The concept was to enlist an army of indie rock royalty--including members of Sebadoh, Yo La Tengo, Luna and Superchunk, to name a few--to sing compositions by Merritt. Though Gonson secured a major label to release it, the 6ths Wasps' Nest failed to introduce Merritt to a much larger audience.

That the compositions were his best yet wasn't the point. Nor was the fact that a few of the singers weren't very good. (Although it's interesting to note that even a generation ago a writer like Randy Newman or Carole King might get a tribute album from a Harry Nilsson or a Dusty Springfield.) The 6ths was an indication that Merritt was unafraid to undertake an unconventional project. And that, despite his leave-me-alone disposition, he had ambitions.

"I guess what people might find as a shock comes from the three years that come between this record and the last Magnetic Fields record," Gonson says when asked about the possibility that 69 Love Songs might alienate longtime fans. "We started to work out tons of different kinds of sounds in our band that just hadn't been released to the public. So for me, it's a little less jarring, but that said, there are some songs on the new Magnetic Fields album that are really quite new for everybody."

"I'm a lifelong popular music junkie," Merritt states, explaining why he has exited the rock world. "My interest in popular music history is getting to go further and further back, as I know more and more of music."

Merritt was sure that he wanted to incorporate the music that was captivating him into his own compositions. He discussed with Claudia the possibility of writing a musical.

"There was a time when I was quite heavily soliciting people who worked in theater for ideas," Gonson says.

Slowly the idea for the triple album began to take shape.

"One idea he had had was called 100 Love Songs, which would be performed in a piano setting with a candelabra and a large goblet of cognac on the piano, and a woman in a long black velvet dress with a rose tucked to her bosom. Then we happened to notice that if you did 100 songs, even at three minutes each, it would be several hours long. People would be incredibly exhausted--probably not even there--by the end. So Stephin kept thinking about this idea for a musical revue and thought of doing 69 Love Songs, 'cause he's like, 'Well, 69 is a good number associated with love.'

"Then Merge [Records] came along and reminded Stephin that he hadn't made a record in three years, and Stephin turned around and said, 'Ok, I'll do 69 Love Songs for that.' And everybody said, 'Oh my God, are you crazy?' But, surprisingly Touch & Go [Merge's distributor] were really positive about the whole idea, and were even excited by the idea. So we started working on it.

"And his writing of it was obscenely fast. He began writing it in May of '98 and he finished it by the end of July. He wrote all 69 songs in two or three months. Some of them are rehashed from previous songs he had written over the last few years. But very few.

Surprisingly few. Most of them are new songs that he wrote in that period of time. Basically he just stopped everything and he just wrote music. And he started doing things like writing two or three songs a day. It was incredible to watch."

Stephin knew that diversifying his music, both sonically and lyrically, was essential to keep his epic undertaking interesting.

"No one is going to complain that the songs are too different from each other, because there are 69 of them. So far nobody has complained that the songs are too similar to each other. The number one goal of the record was to make sure that the songs were different from each other. And the arrangements and the singers. Who wants to listen to anything even remotely familiar for three hours?"

Though he still recorded much of the music unaided in his Lower East Side apartment, the music doesn't sound as aggressively synthetic as his previous records have. The varied instrumentation is given more breathing room, which means, ultimately, that the pianos on 69 Love Songs sound like pianos.

Having so wide a canvas allowed Merritt to expand on his humor, too. Some things on 69 Love Songs are simply funny--not funny in his usual bleak, cosmically absurdist way. Finally, the vocals were placed higher in the mix than ever before, making it easier to decipher the elaborate and intricate rhymes of songs like "Reno Dakota."

Reno Dakota

there's not an iota

of kindness in you

You know you enthrall me and yet you don't call me

it's making me blue

Pantone 292

"Ordinarily I find it kind of annoying to have the vocal to be the loudest thing in the mix," Merritt explains, "because I don't see the need to hear all of the lyrics the first time through, and I'd rather have the instruments carry the piece along, usually. But with 69 songs, clearly the songs are the focus, and it's important to get the lyrics available the first time through to hook people into that."

A recurring theme in Merritt's statements about 69 Love Songs is consideration for the audience. Of course it wasn't his audience--the audience already enamored by his unique pop sensibilities--that he was thinking about during the conception of this album. It was an audience that didn't exist yet. Or maybe it was an audience that existed before: the everyday folk Irving Berlin--his favorite songwriter--worked tirelessly to reach.

"I hope someday to be compared to Irving Berlin, even though I keep getting compared to Cole Porter. I kind of think Irving Berlin did better Cole Porter than Cole Porter did.

'Puttin' on the Ritz' is actually too clever for Cole Porter to have come up with."

Given the path he is on right now, it becomes more and more likely that Merritt will no longer be confined to the indie rock ghetto, and that eventually, he will take his place alongside the great American songwriters.

"I don't think I'm going to make another rock record," he says dryly. "I'm tired of making rock records. I'm sure everyone else is too--everyone else who ever made a record."

Stephin Merritt With Monica Lynch

We've been listening to The Magnetic Fields for quite a while now. Long before the critical blast-off of their 69 Love Songs album, we were dancing around the house to "Technical (You're So)" and choking up to every gorgeous synth whoosh of "Save a Secret for the Moon." With that much awe on our sleeves, the thought of interviewing their leader, Stephin Merritt, has always seemed a little daunting.

Hailed as an authentic pop renaissance man, not a press week goes by without note being taken of Stephin's dazzling way with a lyric. Comparisons have been drawn with the greats: Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, even Cole Porter. He's prolific too, enough to supply work for The Magnetic Fields and three other projects. One of these, The Sixths, has just released a new album. Hyacinths and Thistles matches 14 new Stephin Merritt songs to a panoply of hand-picked "executants" — Gary Numan, Sarah Cracknell, Bob Mould, Melanie, Momus, and Odetta among them.

Then one day we thought of the perfect interviewer. Monica Lynch has a grasp of pop that's impressed us for years. Her weekly WFMU radio show is as eclectic as Stephin Merritt himself, and jumps with ease all over the twentieth century. Last but not least, she's a friend of his. So we asked, and they kindly obliged us by getting together to free-associate on some favorite subjects.

MONICA: There've been a million articles where people refer to you as the Cole Porter of your generation.

STEPHIN: Actually, I'm not big on Cole Porter. And I don't think comparison is a good idea—it's misleading. But Cole Porter is shorthand for a good lyricist, so I take it as a compliment.

MONICA: What description would you prefer?

STEPHIN: I wish they'd put Cole Porter in lower-case letters, to make it clear that they're not making a direct comparison. Cole Porter was cheating on his songs that people think of as having great lyrics. "You're the Top," etc. They're list songs. Anybody can write a list song.

MONICA: "You're the top/You're the ..."

STEPHIN: "You're the A/You're the B/You're the A/You're the B ... You're the C/You're the D ..."

MONICA: Is there a songwriter that you think is a better comparison?

STEPHIN: Annie Lennox, actually, but I don't expect anyone to know what I'm talking about. The Eurythmics had an album, Savage, on which possibly every song was a simple subversion of an existing cliché. She sings "I Need a Man" in the voice of Mick Jagger as he would sing "I Need a Woman." It's unmistakably a male lust song with the genders reversed. It's sexist and demeaning to men. And there's another one, "Do You Want to Break Up?" instead of "Do You Want to Go Out with Me?" Also a dance song, "I love to/Listen to/I love to/Listen to/I love to/Listen to Beethoven." And her song "I Need You" goes, "I need you to break my spine."

MONICA: Irving Berlin said that if he had to pick one person to get his songs across, it would be Alice Faye.

STEPHIN: That was before Ethel Merman.

MONICA: Who's your Alice Faye, Stephin?

STEPHIN: For me it would be Odetta. No one has ever taken a song of mine and catapulted it into the stratosphere like Odetta. Who is, I guess, the folk version of Ethel Merman. Not that she's loud and brassy, but she's superhuman. She's more serious about music than Ethel Merman, and she gets taken more seriously about being superhuman than Ethel Merman.

MONICA: So Odetta is your Ethel Merman.

STEPHIN: But Ethel Merman is wrongly reviled. No one has ever sung like Ethel Merman except in pale imitations, such as Bette Midler. Other versions of "Gypsy" are pathetic in comparison to hers.

MONICA: By the way, I met Odetta recently at an awards ceremony. She received one, and the bass player, Carol Kaye, who ... oh, boy, would you love her!

STEPHIN: So I hear. I saw her described somewhere as the most popular person in Hollywood. The only popular person in Hollywood.

MONICA: She is a complete sweetheart, and she's seen it all and done it all and has both

feet on the ground. She wrote the book.

STEPHIN: Did she?

MONICA: Oh, yes. Her books on how to play bass are the gold standard. She used to wear a spandex leopard-print outfit when she was playing bass, and now she just looks like somebody's grandma. She's so cool. She had a bunch of kids to support, so to make a living she worked as a session musician. She didn't have these dreams of rock stardom or glory. That would have been damn near impossible, given the fact that she was a white woman playing bass in a black man's world.

STEPHIN: And in the Phil Spector world.

MONICA: By the way, you and Irving Berlin actually may have had a career in common. He was a singing waiter, right?

STEPHIN: But I was a waiter for only two hours, and I didn't sing. There was a lot of disco music going on, though.

MONICA: Did that contribute to your downfall as a waiter?

STEPHIN: No, the strobe lights contributed to my downfall. I was epileptic until I was three, and I have a special relationship to strobe lights. So it might have contributed to the accident.

MONICA: The accident?

STEPHIN: I poured a tray of drinks and beers directly onto the front of the Mafia-connected owner of the nightclub I had just been hired to work for in Boston. On opening night.

MONICA: Did you have to wear designer outfits?

STEPHIN: I'm sure I just had to wear black. It was the '80s. One had to wear black anyway.

MONICA: You know, I've never heard you talk about disco.

STEPHIN: Well, as with any genre of music, I don't like the genre, I like songs within it. Do I like rockabilly? I like "The Green Fuzz" as done by The Cramps. In fact I like practically all of Psychedelic Jungle. But do I want to listen to The Complete Gloria Gaynor? No.

MONICA: Okay, let's talk a little bit about songwriting. (Pulls a group of books from her bag, including The Clement Woods Unabridged Rhyming Dictionary.)

STEPHIN: Jimmy Webb recommends that one. And so do I.

MONICA: What are the particular virtues of this dictionary?

STEPHIN: It's phonetically organized, rather than some cutesy system that you have to memorize. If you know phonetics, you can use it immediately. And if you don't know phonetics, it won't do you any harm to learn.

MONICA: That includes schwas and umlauts?

STEPHIN: Yes. On the top of each page is a list of the vowel sounds used in the book.

MONICA: I just read this review of the Future Bible Heroes EP. It said that on one song you rhyme "hula hula" with "dancing fool-a." And that you may have topped yourself with "luau" and ...

STEPHIN: "Like, wow."

MONICA: [laughs] I take it you didn't get that from the rhyming dictionary.

STEPHIN: No. It's not technically a perfect rhyme. When I interviewed Tom Lehrer, the satirist and musician, I asked him what he thought of my record. He said that my standards of rhyme are lower than his. But I actually think it's funnier if they're not true rhymes. It also provides more variety. Tom Lehrer said that he and Sondheim are the last bastions of true rhyme. But I was just singing a Sondheim song to myself a few days ago and I noticed that there were two instances of false rhymes in it.

MONICA: Do you remember what song it was?

STEPHIN: "America," from West Side Story. "I like the island Manhattan/Smoke on your pipe and put that in." It's not a true rhyme, but it really wouldn't be funny if it were. Like in the song "Manhattan" — "I'll take Manhattan/The Bronx and Staten/Island too."

MONICA: Lorenz Hart wrote that?

STEPHIN: Yes. Larry Hart tried to work with only real rhymes, whereas Ira Gershwin didn't feel that he had to. So he has, "Just another rhumba/Why did I have to succumba/Could you imagine anything dumba." You can be funny by fudging the rhymes. I believe in that.

MONICA: Did Irving Berlin have a sense of humor about rhyming?

STEPHIN: "Come let's mix where Rockefellers walk with sticks or 'umbarellas' in their mitts — Puttin' on the Ritz." The last thing you expect to rhyme with Ritz is mitts. But Rockefellers and umbrellas is only rhymed in Irving Berlin's accent, which is the accent of the place he's writing about. I think that's permissible as a true rhyme, actually. Except that he then says "umbarellas."

MONICA: I've never seen anyone standing on 23rd and Lex in the rain selling "umbarellas" for five dollars.

STEPHIN: But it's plausible.

MONICA: It's plausible. [laughing] What rhymes with that?

STEPHIN: Plausible? Causable. Gauzable. In-lawsable would be an apartment over the garage.

MONICA: Are there any names of groups that you thought were just ... oh my god, that's amazing?

STEPHIN: In the Boston Phoenix guide to local bands in 1978 or so, there was a listing for the Raspberry Dinette Sets of Love and Joy. I've never loved a band name more than that.

MONICA: I notice that people don't seem to use nature as a muse so much anymore.

STEPHIN: [long pause] Don't they?

MONICA: When I turn on the radio, I don't hear it.

STEPHIN: If you mean Urban radio — Puff Daddy is not going to record "Take Me Home, Country Roads" by John Denver. Not until he reads this interview, anyway. But the hit parade isn't filled with songs about suburbia either. People don't want to think of themselves as living in suburbia, even though that's where slightly more than 50 percent of the American population is. They want to think that they are about to move to the city, or they want to think of themselves as living in winding-English-country-lane rural areas — there just happen to be other houses uncomfortably close. Whereas urban music does celebrate urban life, and that's probably why suburban teenagers buy it. It's also why Urban is not really an inaccurate term.

MONICA: Whereas, the term R&B ...

STEPHIN: It's too close to "Race and Black." What does R&B mean to you?

MONICA: It's an attempt at a polite euphemism for Black. Urban radio, technically, should include anyone that lives in an urban area.

STEPHIN: Urban would be the opposite of Country, then. I gather that until the Billboard charts were first divided in the early '30s, everything had just been Pop. Then they started having the Race chart and the Folk chart, Folk meaning what we would now call Country. In between there was Country & Western, but then the Western fad disappeared. No more yodelers or cowboy music.

MONICA: You're a fan of cowboy music.

STEPHIN: I never built up a collection, though. I liked it all indiscriminately, so one or two records was fine for me. But I'm a sucker for yodeling.

MONICA: You're also a big fan of science fiction films. I'm curious whether the soundtracks have had an impression on you.

STEPHIN: Only Forbidden Planet. I'm always disappointed in the script, though.

MONICA: Do you dance, Stephin?

STEPHIN: I love to dance. I will dance again when I can find the shoes in which to do it. I am very disappointed with my feet. But I took dance in high school.

MONICA: Really? Did you have to wear leotards?

STEPHIN: I don't remember what I wore. But I was liable to be wearing leotards in high school anyway. Or jumpsuits. There was one point when my entire wardrobe was jumpsuits.

MONICA: It was interpretive dance that you took in high school, I suppose.

STEPHIN: Yes, we would invent dance routines to various Bowie songs.

MONICA: Like what? "Ashes to Ashes?"

STEPHIN: Oh, no, no, no. "Moss Garden" from Heroes. We were into Heroes, and side two of Low.

MONICA: What were some of your big moves?

STEPHIN: Actually, I was a minimalist. I didn't make any big moves. I was known for my fingers and toes. I could move my toes well.

MONICA: Did you dance at the new wave clubs?

STEPHIN: I used to dance at Danceteria. I used to do Gothic Whirls, and ...

MONICA: [laughing]

STEPHIN: ... just before Madonna had 12-layer clothing, I had 12-layer clothing. Ripped, torn, interlocking. I would have a shirt full of big, big holes, and another shirt underneath it that would be connected to itself with safety pins. Madonna didn't get to that part.

MONICA: She used to hang out at the Fun House.

STEPHIN: What's the Fun House?

MONICA: A very popular Electro palace in the early '80s. The DJ was Jellybean Benitez, who was one of Madonna's first major boyfriends. But the Fun House was primarily Latin with a lot of black and white kids, too. It was during the period where people would wear tight, razor-ripped t-shirts. At the Fun House they got into very masculine choreography that was done as a group — extremely intricate foot movements, almost like a b-boy version of Seven Brides for Seven Brothers ... and these were some of the most macho guys.

STEPHIN: Did they practice?

MONICA: They must have practiced. They used to dance to groups like Planet Patrol. You would have had a ball. I used to go there every weekend.

STEPHIN: Was this Brooklyn?

MONICA: No, it was in the West 20s. The DJ booth was built into an enormous clown face.

STEPHIN: What happened to popular culture? How dare people even attempt popular culture without imagination? In the 1950s they had DJs, but they didn't generally have DJ booths in the shape of a clown face. You want to have a nightclub and say that your image is absolutely underground — "We don't have any money and therefore it's underground." — fine. But if you have a line going down the block, and you have money, you owe it to the customer to: a) stop pretending you're underground and b) start providing them with some imagination, some fantasy that says you have gone out to an exciting night in a fancy land.

MONICA: What would the nightclub of your dreams be like?

STEPHIN: Infinite number of floors.

MONICA: Infinite?

STEPHIN: You could wander from floor to floor and it would be all the genres of music that people seem to like for some reason, a bit on each floor. But there would be no way of finding out what the genre was going to be before you actually got to the floor, so you'd have to wander around.

MONICA: What might be some of the genres available on the various floors?

STEPHIN: It wouldn't be genres in the way we know them. There would be a 120 beats-per-minute floor, a 100 beats-per-minute floor; "I'm tired. I'm going downstairs to the 90 bpm floor." Or to 20. The ground floor would be zero.

MONICA: Would there be a spoken word floor?

STEPHIN: See, I'm a Danceteria guy. The third floor and the roof were the spoken word floors.

MONICA: Everything is so fragmented and formatted now.

STEPHIN: Whatever happened to the mixed crowd?

MONICA: I used to work at the Empire Diner. I was a waitress, graveyard shift. And in '81 or '82, you had the Roxy Roller Rink, the Mudd Club, Plato's Retreat, and the denouement of Studio 54 and Xenon, which was the poor man's Studio 54. Plus all the leather bars were going strong — The Eagle's Nest, the Spike. So we used to get Eurotrash, the leather boys, new wave-y punk kids ...

STEPHIN: How do you expect to meet anyone in the world now?

MONICA: Personally, I've had it up to here with the Hamptons mix — you know, the ghetto fabulousity, the fashionistas, the media mafia, and that old guard Hamptons crowd. It's nothing but a glorified photo op. Sure, you have all creeds, races, and different occupations now. But if you're not monied, you're out of there. You cannot go.

STEPHIN: There are only two races, rich and poor.

MONICA: What music are you listening to these days?

STEPHIN: I've been listening to the EMI Classics Centenary box set.

MONICA: It covers 100 years?

STEPHIN: Yes. It's a ten-record set, by decade. Last night, I listened to a piece from it which is a Russian singer and choir doing a liturgy from 1931. The liturgy is monotonous, sung almost all in one note. And it was so moving. These people had escaped from the Soviet Union, and I'm not going to say you can hear that in the recording, but you can certainly imagine that you hear that. I also really like the '40s for the sense that you can hear World War II. When Vera Lynn's voice breaks in "I'll Be Seeing You," it's obvious why.

MONICA: Can we talk about Doris Day for a moment?

STEPHIN: I'll talk about Doris Day for as long as you like. I would say she's probably my favorite singer.

MONICA: Why Doris Day? Why "Dodo?"

STEPHIN: Well, her voice fascinated me. I would sing along with her, trying to catch the subtle way she sang the words. In turn, Doris Day's favorite singer is Ella Fitzgerald. I tend to like a more conversational tone. Ella Fitzgerald is, of course, one of the major singers of the twentieth century. I love Ella Fitzgerald. I love the Songbooks.

MONICA: Are there particular decades that you find to be less interesting than others?

STEPHIN: I think the '90s were particularly awful, because what was going on politically in the artistic world was AIDS, which was simply killing people off without giving them anything to sing about. Or at least not anything that they could get away with commercially. The only major response to AIDS in the music world that I know of is Diamanda Galas, who was certainly not trying for pop stardom. But in 40 years, if you want to go back and hear what the '90s were about, I think you're going to go back and listen to Diamanda Galas. Certainly not to me. Certainly not to Beck. Also, everything popular in the '90s was established in the early '80s.

MONICA: What about the indie/alt rock movement?

STEPHIN: Frankly, Beat Happening peaked in the '80s. And anyone who thinks Nirvana is important in any way doesn't know anything about the history of music.

MONICA: I'd certainly credit the '90s as being the great era of the reissue, though.

STEPHIN: The '90s were a fantastic time to collect old music, and a terrible time to collect new music. These things swing back and forth.

MONICA: What about the rest of the decades?

STEPHIN: I only like the even-numbered ones. Also, I automatically like everything recorded before 1920.

MONICA: Even the aughts?

STEPHIN: Even the aughts, yes. Even the zero-zeroes, the noddies. I also like major hits

from the teens, '30s, '70s, and some of the '90s. But I tried to look at the upper half of my record collection a few days ago. I was struck by how little I had kept from the '90s.

MONICA: I understand that you're writing a musical.

STEPHIN: The Song from Venus.

MONICA: What's that about?

STEPHIN: It's about a record that's sent from Venus to invade the Earth. It's a song that makes everyone fall in love.

MONICA: Is there a song that made you fall in love?

STEPHIN: Actually, yes. ABBA's "The Day Before You Came." And then again, Doris Day's "Secret Love." But I'm not sure I wasn't in love beforehand.

MONICA: Can we talk for a moment about the nature of crushes?

STEPHIN: We can try.

MONICA: You've had crushes in your life.

STEPHIN: I've had a lot of crushes in my life, yes. **I wish I'd never had a crush in my entire life.**

MONICA: Painful?

STEPHIN: Very painful. **I wouldn't be interested in love as a subject if it weren't so scary. I think of love as something dark and horrifying, and love and death as nearly the same thing. I think of Poe and Colette as very similar writers.**

MONICA: Do these crushes inspire you?

STEPHIN: I'm sure they have some influence on my lyrics. I don't think they have any influence, necessarily, on my music. But it's very hard to tell in music. Stravinsky said that emotion isn't possible in music. And then there is the singer/songwriter tradition in which emotion is everything in music. And either position is untenable.

SENTIMENTAL TYRANNY

Stephin Merritt Is a Big Gay Composer

by Jeff DeRoche

FILE THIS ONE UNDER Big Gay Record--not surprising from a songwriter who publishes under the moniker Gay and Loud, but then Stephin Merritt has never been the most flamboyant of people. On the previous 6ths album, *Wasps' Nests*, a deliberately "indie" record upon which Merritt asked indie rock luminaries like Barbara Manning and Lou Barlow to sound deliberately bored, there was no real tiptoeing through the tulips happening. In fact, though Merritt's lyrics are always sentimental and invertedly campy, he's never actually revealed himself as a big nelly queen in his music--until now. If you're not familiar with the 6ths, it's the Merritt (Magnetic Fields, Gothic Archies, Future Bible Heroes) project in which he collects singers and manipulates them into delivering vocal performances to suit his every brilliant whim and fancy. Perhaps the comfortable distance of having other people deliver his lyrics has given sureness to his ambitiously toying, playful nature, enabling him to girl this one up a bit.

Bob Mould is transformed into a crooning balladeer on "He Didn't," a song wrought with homosexual longing. Though trademark Merritt cynicism abounds ("It'll end in tears, but not for years, if you'll dance with me"), the cynicism only supplements the lovelorn despair underlying the lyric, which is by no means ironic or distanced. You may recall that Mould was heroically homophobic enough to throw chairs during the recording of "Pride," the Hüsker Dü track in which he bemoans the implicit self-absorption involved in the coming out process of his fellow gay people. "He Didn't," needless to say, is a departure for Mould, who is the antithesis of a crooner, and also a champion of the gender-unspecific "you" pronoun in his own songwriting.

What happened to Mould that convinced him to deliver such a song without a scream or even an insinuation of affectedness? Stephin Merritt happened. It's ingenious, and very simple. Through a string of obsequiously received, and yes, outstanding albums recorded under the guises of so many different projects that it's becoming difficult to keep track, Merritt has apparently garnered so much respect that he can convince nearly anyone to do just about anything for him.

The name of this CD is *Hyacinths and Thistles*, and the other 6ths CD was *Wasps' Nests*. Say that lispy last sentence aloud three times to yourself. It's Merritt's clever joke; understandable coming from a former copy editor at Spin, who is educated in semiotics and notoriously snide in chiding the language of interviewers as they question him. He's a bitchy gay prodigy (a tyrannical brat), who happily plays with people, likely for the sheer pleasure of getting away with it.

Such brattiness appears on track seven of the CD, a charmingly restrained number performed by Miho Hatori of *Cibo Matto*. I can't help but wonder why Merritt has chosen to give the only Japanese performer on the CD the lyrical refrain of "Lovely Lindy-Lou." It's funny, it really is, listening to the song, waiting for baby to miss an "L," feeling an empathic surge of pride each time she determinedly nails the chorus. It's even more amusing when she falters on the word "diamond," delivered as "dy-und," and also on "really," which comes out "ree-ree."

That said, the album sublimates the giddy listener in the process. Sally Timms gives a shiver-inducing vocal performance on "Give Me Back My Dreams," one of the album's sentimental high points ("You can take my heart, it was always yours, but give me back my dreams"). The lyric is accompanied by a circa-'80s, synth-pop performance so melodically accessible it would cohere on the next Erasure album. Odetta chimes in on "Waltzing Me All the Way Home," accompanied by a lone accordion, her thick voice a stupefying old-school warble. Gary Numan and French singer Dominique Á immerse themselves in campy melodrama on "The Sailor in Love with the Sea" and "Just Like a Movie Star," respectively. Katherine Whalen of *Squirrel Nut Zippers* joins Miho Hatori in the ranks of surprisingly understated performances, exuding a breathy "You You You You You" that sounds instantly classic. In fact, the only disappointment on the CD is the Marc Almond blunder "Volcana," in which he forgets he's no longer Soft Cell's youthful tenor, while providing ample fodder for the argument that two aging queens should never be allowed in a studio together.

Hyacinths and Thistles is a bright, star-studded example of masterful songcraft and lyrical sentiment. It's also an exercise in human tyranny.

Artificial intelligentsia

By Randy Silver
(September 1994)

It's a lovely weekend, and half of the music industry is wandering around a hotel in New York City. It's the annual College Music Journal Music Marathon, and one of the conference's highlights - the Songwriter's Panel - is being held in a medium-sized conference room with a small stage.

As in other years, the panel is distinguished: Lisa Germano, Barbara Manning (late of the S.F. Seals, *World of Pooh*, and *28th Day*), Lida Husik and Franklin Bruno (*Nothing Painted Blue*, the *Extra Glenns*) are all on stage, playing a song or two each on acoustic guitars and answering questions. But the panel is dominated by their companion, a short, dour fellow whose hair is more animated than his manner. This is Stephin Merritt. Before long, Merritt goads Bruno into a gentle debate about lyrics: Bruno -- a philosophy

doctoral candidate that could be likened to a wordier, American Elvis Costello - decries the use of cliché in his songwriting, preferring to find new ways of expressing his emotions. Ever the counterpoint to the thoughtfully animated Bruno, Merritt explains that he likes to use clichés as a sort of emotional shorthand, a way of expressing something with a few words rather than a whole verse.

I'm confused. "Do you ever worry that people might not pay that much attention to your lyrics if you load them with clichés?" I ask. "That they might overlook the meaning of what you're trying to say?"

Merritt pauses, dramatically. He often does this before speaking, though whether he's collecting his thoughts or intentionally increasing the tension in the room is anyone's guess. The effect is the latter. "Are you familiar," he asks, his voice monotone, "with the works of Andy Warhol?"

I sit down. Quickly.

(April 1997) Stephin Merritt is on the phone; we're negotiating a time and a place to do the interview for this article. "We can do it over the phone," I offer, "or we can get together somewhere."

"You're in New York?" I tell him that I am. There's a (dramatic) pause.

"Let's do it over the phone," he says.

(interlude: a Brief History of Stephin Merritt)

Stephin Merritt was inevitable. Sooner or later, the world of indie rock was bound to spawn a perfectly antithetical character, someone who shares virtually no qualities - save an absolute conviction in his own iconoclastic musical tastes - with the crowd of people that he's both lumped in with and revered by.

The simplest explanation of the underlying quality that Merritt brings to all of his projects (the Magnetic Fields, the Future Bible Heroes, the 6ths, and the Gothic Archies) is a certain level of impersonality: though Magnetic Fields and 6ths live shows have featured a full band, he uses machines extensively in the studio. Sometimes, especially with the Magnetic Fields, he uses machines to sound like he's not using machines. The end result sounds kind of like a perfectly soulless band; Merritt himself comes across as the Mr. Spock of the indie world - a man denying the emotions that others know -- or at least suspect -- that he has.

At the same time, Merritt writes some of the most beautiful melodies around, combining pieces of ABBA's fabulously plastic melodies, the easily-forgotten (or never known) Frazier Chorus and a certain cool from New Zealanders like Chris Knox and Robert Fraser.

Merritt's been most prolific as the leader of the Magnetic Fields. The band functions as an autocratic collective that has weathered a number of changes and experiments over the years; the most important of which is probably Merritt's somewhat begrudging inheritance of the vocal chores after original vocalist Susan Anway moved away. The most interesting might just be the House of Tomorrow five-song EP, in which each song is constructed out of a single, repeated loop.

Other projects tend to be Merritt's collaborations with others, a concept taken to the extreme with the 6ths - a project in which Merritt enlists other vocalists to sing his songs in his monotonal style. A single album released to date, Wasp's Nests, features, among others, Sebadoh's Lou Barlow, Yo La Tengo's Georgia Hubley, Luna's Dean Wareham, the Bats' Robert Scott and Superchunk's Mac McCaughan singing appropriately morosely.

Merritt's latest release, Memories of Love (Slow River) is with the Future Bible Heroes, a project that features music by Christopher Ewen and vocals by Merritt and his manager/drummer/keyboardist Claudia Gonson (though Merritt writes all of the lyrics himself). Unabashedly electro-pop - a style, Merritt notes, "which is designed to show off its artificiality" - it may be the first time that Merritt allows a hint of emotion to creep into his voice. It may be that the emotion he expresses is as artificial as the

instrumentation; maybe that's the reason that the album is curiously unrewarding.
(April 1997, part 2)

Despite anything else, Merritt is not shy about sharing his opinions. In conversation, the (still dramatic) pauses give way to long, deeply considered explanations; in print (primarily in his frequent contributions to Time Out New York) his observations are drolly hilarious - his article about attending a Spice Girls press conference was an instant classic.

He's especially eloquent about the stagnation he perceives in electronic music: "I think electronically-oriented music is stalled right now because there's no new music technology. It's probably the first time since the invention of the synthesizer that there hasn't been anything new for several years. Electropop has always relied on the newest technology to make itself sound futuristic - or even new. And now there isn't that to fall back on. Other than the stylistic change of jungle having a lot of snare drum slams, there isn't really anything new sounding in electropop, so for several years, everything has been deliberately retro. The new Depeche Mode album sounds well, really unimaginative for a Depeche Mode album, because they've always been at the forefront of electropop technology and now there's no forefront to be at."

So what piece of technology would Merritt's dream studio come equipped with? "A really accurate voice synthesizer," he ruminates, "One that would sing lyrics you typed into it according to notes that you played into it. Something that would allow you to control the singing style and the inflections from a computer. That would be very useful to me."

Admittedly unhappy with his own singing voice, Merritt attempted to use real people as his analog on the 6ths album, though it didn't come off as well as he had hoped. "I don't think that [it] shows the singers' voices off very well. A lot of them are singing too low or too high because I didn't pitch the songs in the right key for them. But I'm working on a new 6ths album now, where I'm paying a lot more attention to that."

While he won't share the identities of who might be participating on the new album, Merritt is quick to identify a short wish list of vocalists that he'd like to have available to him on a full-time basis: "Scott Walker, Doris Day (circa 1957), KD Lang in terms of realistic singers, Jeffrey Underhill (Honeybunch, Velvet Crush)."

"I like singers who don't express emotion directly, who don't ham," he offers by way of explanation. "Scott Walker has a very dramatic voice, but he doesn't use it to correspond to the particular emotion he's singing about."

Unfortunately, barring divine intervention, it doesn't look as if any of the above will submit to being locked in Merritt's studio full-time. So he'll continue to press on in his own way, waiting for someone to invent his perfect voice synthesizer.

"I have as ambivalent a relationship with technology as everybody else," Merritt says. "I don't understand why my computer isn't as intuitive as a toaster."

Hit me with a flower

by Anni Banani

"Excuse me if I make fun of how pathetic you are, but I do this sixteen hours a day, every day of the year, with the air conditioning turned off and the windows closed so that I can record," snapped Stephin Merritt, to his bandmates, over the radio waves of Georgia State's WRAS before a show at The Point June 5th. The stuffy, reclusive mastermind behind the Magnetic Fields is the type of pop eccentric who would just as well have nothing to do with the world except give it exquisitely sad, romantic carousel-type songs, and then return to his suffocating New York City apartment/studio to play with his bizarre toys and odd instruments all over again. Overly convinced of his own superiority, Merritt's condescending remarks and confrontational stabs in his deadpan voice were

turning radio entertainment into an excruciating performance that afternoon! Snobbish comments such as "It's funny how people think you're a nerdy loser one minute and suck up to you the next," and "I love arguing... it makes me feel so superior," possibly made listeners question whether this dry humor was coming out of a sarcastic whiz or a pompous ass! Well, there came a moment in this radio interview that reminded me of the latter...

"This friend of mine was watching the Magnetic Fields play up in New York two years ago," said the DJ. "And she was talking very loudly in the audience and claims that you, Stephin, pelted a water bottle at her head to shut her up." Bellowing sounds began to vibrate from an adjusting microphone in the agonizing dead air that followed. Then, in his Lurch-like voice, Merritt s-l-o-w-l-y hissed, "You're friends with that person?!" Well, little do you know, Mr. Merritt, that your next interview is scheduled with that so-called "loudmouth" victim of your evil water bottle. You may have had good aim that night but so do I! And so off I went, in a nervous fit, to finally meet this man, who out of spite, embarrassed the livin' hell out of me many moons ago.

When I arrived at The Point, my eyes fell upon an unexpectedly smiling little guy with tired but kind eyes, pleasant mannerisms, a friendly handshake. Wait a minute! Was this the real Stephin Merritt, out of character?

"I think I sounded really mean," admits Merritt about his earlier radio persona, and then ponders, "Maybe I'm supposed to be living up to some image of the Magnetic Fields. I'm a music critic for Time Out in New York, so when I'm being interviewed I'm more in the role of music critic than I am in the role of self-promoter. And it's not even an ongoing conscious decision!" Sensing that there was a good conversational vibe between us, I decided to hold off on admitting to him that I was once his bull's-eye and first grab this story about him and the Magnetic Fields

While experimental DJs muse about the future, imagining instruments yet to be invented, Merritt, a confessed early '80s electropop nostalgic, pines for the past. He is enamored with all kinds of gizmos and enjoys testing their noise-making properties, using odd and dated technology: ends of a Slinky hooked up to a guitar pickup creates a spring-like "doi-oi-oing;" a Playskool plastic bell sounds like an antique pinball machine; percussive touches such as programmed maracas and bongos, sampled doors slamming, clocks ticking, and pencils hitting desks leave the listener wondering just what in the hell they're actually hearing. Such imaginative recording methods remind one of idiosyncratic '60s producers like Phil Spector and Joe Meek. "Well, they were doing what was popular at the time and I'm doing what was popular then, so no, I'm not like them in that I'm like them now rather than being like them then!" says Merritt, who "clearly" makes a point.

Mating these homemade "nostalgic futurism" sounds with Merritt's drowsy baritone croon creates clunky, junkshop-synth melodies. With the addition of ukulele player/drummer/manager Claudia Gonson, tuba player/guitarist/banjo player Johny Blood, and flutist/cellist Sam Davol (who all signed their lives away to the world of Stephin Merritt back in the mid-'80s when forming their first band called the Zinnias), the Magnetic Fields (named after the title of a Andre Breton novel) complete their gorgeous, fresh sound with rich textures and symphonic backings that would spin any music box ballerina into ecstasy!

Formally trained as a musician, Merritt didn't start writing pop songs until he had an early musical epiphany, claiming he never would have picked up a tape deck without hearing Abba. "I listened to them and wrote songs about marital difficulties at the breakfast table, things I knew absolutely nothing about!" Still, over the last few years Merritt has come to be regarded a one of the best songwriters of his generation, capable of melding completely opposite emotions together in his music. "I have a lot of songs with depressed lyrics," Mr. Glum explains, "but it's almost impossible to actually write a song when you're really depressed. So I pretty much write the music when I'm happy,

using mostly major chords, which makes the song sound happy even with the wistful lyrics!"

Merritt has also made himself an anomaly with his graceful witticism and impressionistic wordplay that would make one wonder if he was either a prominent novelist or a magnificent filmmaker in a previous lifetime. Dreamy hideaways, scenarios with odd details, and silly tales about openly gay love that turn dark and upsetting reveal a mysterious humor inside Merritt's deep well of loneliness, whether describing a nighttime sky with "more stars than there are prostitutes in Thailand," telling someone "a vodka bottle gave you those raccoon eyes" or stating with blunt despair, "After all those days on God-forsaken highways/The roads don't love you/And they still won't pretend to."

Those first two lines come from 1994's *Holiday* album, the latter from '94's *The Charm of the Highway Strip*, which were the first two *Magnetic Fields* albums to feature Merritt's deep Leonard Cohen-meets-Ian Curtis voice. After their recorded debut on C'est La Mort Records' 1990 compilation *Marvels of Insect Life* (when they were still based in Cambridge, Mass.), '91's *Distant Plastic Trees* and '92's *The Wayward Bus* featured angel-voiced Susan Anway (from the late-'70s Boston punk band V) as Merritt's mouthpiece, with Merritt playing most of the instruments and telling her how and what to sing, sometimes even casting her as a boy. "I liked her ability to leave out her personality," he says dryly. "Eventually, she got too expensive because she moved to Arizona. It cost us a thousand dollars to hear her sing a note we had to get rid of her and she hasn't been singing since!"

These days, despite the presence of Gonson, Blood, and Davol, Merritt says that "the *Magnetic Fields* records are mostly played by just me with bits of other people. I have to do it all myself, so everything I do has taken a very long time, and making things more difficult than they need to be is a major skill of mine." Perhaps his meticulous, self-absorbed approach to recording helps explain why, despite a track on a Bowie tribute last year, and one on an upcoming Gary Numan trib, we haven't seen a new *Fields* album since '95's *Get Lost* (Merge Records). Well, one is in the works, the chain-smoking Merritt promises, but also slowing things down is his involvement in a handful of interesting bands other than *Magnetic Fields*, with varying degrees of participation: The Gothic Archies, he says, are "intentionally obscure," and it's obvious from his terse description that they'll likely remain that way.

Future Bible Heroes are a long-distance collaboration between Merritt, Gonson, and Boston-based Chris Ewan (ex-keyboardist for '80s band *Figures On A Beach*), who bring back exotic, classic-sounding electropop without the exaggerated puff. After tracks on the *Red Hot + Bothered* compilation and the *Welcome to the Dollhouse* soundtrack, the Bible Heroes' debut album *Memories of Love* was released through Slow River in May. Finally, The 6ths perform Merritt tunes, played by him and sung by a slew of indie all-stars. On the sole 1995 London Records disc *Wasps' Nests* (which, as a phonetic fact, are the two most difficult words to say together in the English language), guest singers included Mitch Easter, Georgia Hubley, Chris Knox, Barbara Manning, and Mark Robinson to name just a handful. "It reflects [Gonson's] taste in music and who slept on Claudia's floor and who owes Claudia a favor," says Merritt about how this group of "strangers" appear on the album without him ever casting his vote. Gonson, who chose them all and organized the 6ths, will continue to be the ringleader for the second 6ths LP, which is presently in the process of being recorded.

And what does music critic Merritt think of those 6ths performances, or of other versions of his songs like Superchunk's "100,000 Fireflies"? It's one of the few subjects he chooses to not voice his opinion on: "Music criticism is very important to me, but it has to stop somewhere, and that's where I stop! I don't like to talk about people's recordings of my songs, because some of them I like and some of them I don't, and I want people to cover my songs without feeling like I'm going to criticize their versions"

Although he feels that "Being a musician is almost all about being a music critic, [because] potentially, you're playing your record collection for other people when you play a note." he clarifies that "I don't know that [criticism] is much of a talent. I'm just a journalist. I'm not writing novels, I'm just writing articles." He adds that Time Out "has a semi-confrontational style, and so do I, so my style fits in pretty well! It's important when you are a music critic, or simply a human being, to not like some things, and talk about it. How dumb would it be to listen to music and like all of it equally?"

Merritt sees little hope of his offbeat, literary songs catching the ears of another form of "music critics," i.e. commercial radio programmers. Still, he doesn't get too riled up about the tired, predictable nature of such stations: "The function of commercial radio is to sell advertising, so maybe radio programming should be all about bland and terrible bands and not the truly best music." As for the non-commercial end of the dial, obviously college stations give Merritt what limited airplay his music receives, and he appreciates and acknowledges such support (the Point gig was in fact a benefit for 88.5). But, interestingly, he doesn't take the usual boring liberal musician stance when it comes to taxpayer-funded broadcasting: "I think national public radio is and should be a crock of shit!" Merritt proclaims. "I hate the fact that my tax money goes to supporting it. And I think that people who send it money are assholes, but I do know such people... my mother! Radio controlled by the government should be only pro-government but then it also shouldn't exist in a free country. It's a horrible idea!"

More horrible ideas: Merritt's early transient life may have taken a toll on him (while growing up, he moved in and out of 33 houses in 23 years between six different states), because now he feels that touring is a living hell, "and I don't care who knows it," he groans. "But I pretend not to show it while I'm on stage," he insists. And actually, he seemed to be having a great time at the recent Point show. In front of a demographically-diverse crowd of die-hard Fields fanatics, the band played a fantastic, intense set that went well past two in the morning. While not the most animated of frontmen, Merritt cracked a few between-song jokes, and kept the crowd enraptured with his cinematic songs. By the encore, the band was charging through somewhat tongue-in-cheek cover versions of "Bela Lugosi's Dead" and the old Move/E.L.O. chestnut "Do Ya," and Merritt's mouth even curled into a natural smile several times. Hmm...perhaps he's not such an insolent, brooding artist after all. "Please don't make me sound like I'm vicious," he pleads, laughing, as the interview comes to a close. "I said a lot of harsh things. I guess I'm just in the mood for harsh things today!"

So maybe it'd be a good time to, uh, let Merritt in on my identity as his boisterous bottle target from a few years back. After all, he seems to have let his "vicious" guard down a bit. "Oh, by the way," I said before leaving, "I just wanted to, uh let you know that that it was I who, uh will send you this story when it's published!" Well, so I chickened out. But at least I'll be far away from him, when he's reading about it.

What's Your Worst Memory of Playing with Yo La Tengo?

Stephin Merritt, Magnetic Fields

When we played with you at NYU, there was a convention of Baptists in the building. The Baptist students were having a Ben & Jerry's eat-a-thon on the rooftop patio, blasting Christian rock, directly under our dressing room. As everyone knows, the Magnetic Fields don't like rock. **We disapprove of rock and Christianity, especially in combination.**

Stephin Merritt

Born 1966.

US rock and pop singer and songwriter.

His mother was a German-Irish member of the 1960s counter-culture, and was an amateur songwriter and guitar player. She brought him up within the doctrine of Tibetan Buddhism. He did not know his father, Scott Fagan, a folk singer.

At one time he worked as a copy editor on the US Spin magazine.

He formed the group The Magnetic Fields in 1989 in Boston, MA. He and The Magnetic Fields drummer and manager Claudia Gonson were both attending Harvard University.

The group's base changed to New York when he moved there in 1994. He has been the writer, producer, and since 1991 the singer of all their material. He has also played most of the instruments.

He has also been involved in several other projects. In 1994 he formed The 6ths. and wrote and produced as well as playing much of the music on Wasps' Nest in 1995. In the late 1990s he and other members of The Magnetic Fields and The 6ths. worked on albums as the group The Future Bible Heroes. Stephin Merritt also produced the album New Despair in 1997 under the name of the band Gothic Archies.

He has been employed by Time Out magazine in New York as a music critic.

He has been rare as a pop artist who is happy to be publicly known as gay.

Press cuttings

- ‰ **Not Out Loud** by Paul Flynn in Attitude, June, 2000, pages 54-55. Unlike Fowler, George Michael and Neil Tennant, there is an element of quirky music hall about Stephin Merritt. There is, truth be told, an element of quirky everything about him. He could be the most important gay male pop star that the world has known. Most interestingly, much of the world that will get to know him will probably, mercifully, be none the wiser of his gayness. Because it just doesn't matter. Apart from to him, obviously."
- ‰ **Stevie Wonder** by Tony Barrell in The Sunday Times Magazine, 25. June, 2000, pages 24-27. "An articulate intellectual who lengthens interviews with Pinteresque thought-pauses, Merritt is nevertheless unembarrassed to lay the iffier aspects of his highly catholic taste on the line. During our first conversation, in the bar of his hotel in west London, we touched on a dizzying diversity of artists - Irving Berlin, Fleetwood Mac, Brian Eno, Cole Porter, Marc Almond, Joni Mitchell, Ru Paul, the Buzzcocks, the Pet Shop Boys, Rick Wakeman, the Bay City Rollers, Radiohead, Rolf Harris - but we were always destined to end up in Sweden. 'I'm a big Abba fan,' he says, extolling the band's 'extreme dedication to mathematical simplicity. They knew what they were doing to such an extent that they often lapse over from high emotion into actual psychotic dream states - for me.' As a child, it was their music alone he loved, so much that it fuelled his early attempts at writing songs." "Isn't it a cliché for him to like Abba, because he's gay? 'I like to think I've contributed to that,' he jokes, poker-faced. 'Well, there are some ways in which gay men have good taste in music. There are other ways in which you can't possibly defend that point of view. But gay men know good lyrics when they hear them. they tend to be good on lyrics and production'."
- ‰ **Love's anatomy** by Maddy Costa in The Guardian: Friday Review, 17th. July, 2000, pages 14-15. "He's nothing like you expect him to be, this man with the lugubrious, debonair baritone voice and most bewitching lyrics in pop. He's slight and tiny - barely over five foot - and seems to drag his deep voice up from his knees. Dressed in various shades of black, resting his feet on a rapidly growing mountain of cigarette stubs, the thirtysomething (he doesn't give an age) is a

demanding conversationalist, pausing for several moments of intense thought before he says anything. The seriousness is tempered, however, with an urbane and entertaining wit, as a skip through 69 Love Songs attests."

- ‰ **A brilliant head rules the heart** by Louise Gray in The Independent on Sunday, 16th. July, 2000, page 8. " 'My interest in 'keeping it real' is pretty nil,' Merritt says. 'Being a Gary Numan fan, I find artifice more fun than pur confession. I'm not sure if these are opposites, but I'd rather see Oklahoma! where people burst into song than Oklahoma! where people don't burst into song. Music is inherently artificial.' The apotheosis of this view is realised on one of the album's [69 Love Songs] most beguiling catchy pop songs, 'The Death of Ferdinand se Saussure'. De Saussure was the Swiss linguist whose 19th century theories lead to the development of structuralism. Chief among his work was the realisation that an object - the signified - is not the same as its appellation - the signifier. In other words, an eternal separation exists between everything and the price of the ability to use language is to accept this."
- ‰ **'A genius? No, I'm actually a fungus...'** by Sam Taylor in The Observer Review, 23rd. July, 2000, page 10. "I start taking notes, he stares at my writing hand as though he has just noticed a couple of extra fingers. Is anything wrong, I ask. (Long pause.) 'Uhh... you have... Interesting handwriting.' I decide to take this as a compliment. I am, after all, talking to a 'genius' (New York Times), a 'visionary' (Village Voice) and 'the greatest living American songwriter' (New York Observer). He has been compared to Cole Porter, Randy Newman, Irving Berlin and Oscar Wilde. The critical reception afforded 69 Love Songs in the US dwarfs his healthy press profile on this side of the pond."

Biography

By Tim Alborn

Stephin Merritt has been writing and recording songs since he was a teenager living in suburban Boston. He started doing so as "The Magnetic Fields" in the late-1980s, after experimenting with the bands/band names The Zinias and Buffalo Rome (referring either to two cities in New York or a pun on "where the deer and the antelope..."). In 1989, along with his co-conspirator/drummer/manager Claudia Gonson (who met Stephin in summer camp), and played drums in the legendary Boston band Lazy Suzan in the mid-80s), he took England by storm with his "Distant Plastic Trees" CD (on Red Flame Records). For this project, he enlisted the help of Susan Anway on vocals -- she had previously been a vocalist for the Boston band V; which released an EP on Propellor Records in the early 80s. At the time of the recording, Susan was training to be a knife maker in Arizona, and was flown into Boston for the recording session.

In 1990 Claudia started shopping around the CD to American record labels. The first to bite was Harriet Records, a Cambridge label, which released the first two Magnetic Fields singles in the US -- "100,000 Fireflies," which was taken from their British CD, and "Long Vermont Roads", which would later appear on the Merge CD "Charm of the Highway Strip". Shortly after the first Harriet single came out in the fall of 1991, the Magnetic Fields started playing live shows in Boston -- the first was opening for the Mekons at TT the Bear's Place, where Stephin at one point had four cigarettes lit simultaneously, and where the rest of the band read his music on music stands. These performances in the early 1990s featured Claudia on drums, Johnny Blood on tuba, Sam Davol on cello, and Filene (ex-Pop Smear) on bass guitar. In 1992 they released their first American CD on their own label, PopUp Records. This featured all but one song from "Distant Plastic Trees" and 10 new songs -- the whole thing (which has been re-issued on Merge) was called "The Wayward Bus" -- named after a 50s movie featuring Jayne Mansfield.

In 1992 the band started to work with the Chicago label Feel Good All Over, releasing their next CD with them ("Holiday") and the "Loop" EP -- featuring four songs which were each exactly 150 second long. Shortly after that, following a cover version of "100,000 Fireflies" by Superchunk, Merge Records began its relationship with the Magnetic Fields, which continues to this day. In the mid-90s, the band moved to New York, with Stephin settling in Hoboken, NJ. The basic line-up of Stephin, Claudia, and Sam has remained more or less constant, with the exception of a semester when Claudia was at graduate school in Berkeley. During that period Stephin performed with a drum machine which he fondly dubbed the "Claudiatron". Other instrumentalists, playing oboe, banjo, etc., took part in various shows. Other band names, like The Sixths, The Gothic Archies, and Future Bible Heroes, absorbed the surplus songs Stephin has written over the past decades. A double album with 69 love songs is allegedly in the works. Who knows what the future (with or without bible heroes) holds in store?

Onion Interview

by John Krewson

The Onion: Going on tour soon?

Stephin Merritt: Um... yeah. As The Magnetic Fields, not Future Bible Heroes.

O: The difference being...?

SM: The Future Bible Heroes record [Memories Of Love] is an album of pop songs in the electro-pop tradition with two singers--me and Claudia (Gonson). The instruments were done by Christopher Ewen, and I wrote the lyrics and vocal melodies. I sang on some and Claudia sang on some.

O: How is that different from making a Magnetic Fields record?

SM: Oh, I make the Magnetic Fields records [myself]. Claudia plays drums for some of them, and does background vocals, and sometimes does other things--like on Get Lost, she played ukulele. Claudia's a classically trained pianist, and she can play better keyboard lines than I can. She also, because she's primarily a drummer, sometimes plays rhythmic lines that need to be steadier than I can play them. Except for lead guitar, Claudia can play basically anything I can play. She has that hidden contribution. We can refer to her as a drummer, though.

O: How do you decide to make one Magnetic Fields record different from another?

SM: You know, other people seem to find them all very much the same. I'm mystified by that. I find them all very different. The Charm Of The Highway Strip I set out to be about country music. There was one review of Charm which basically said the record was a total waste of time, and that I never should have tried to replicate country music. I didn't think I was trying to replicate it. I was just trying to adjust it enough so that I could make different sounds which would replace traditional country sounds. I wasn't trying to change it, to do an interpretation of it. Also, that reviewer doesn't understand that the things he thought were guitars were synthesizers. And this reviewer wasn't stupid; he's quite intelligent, actually... Excuse me, this phone...

O: Are you on a cordless phone?

SM: Yes. Aren't they horrible? Such a stupid invention. They're a bad idea. I can never find the phone.

O: Plus, people can hear you coming over their radios.

SM: Yes. I never say anything on the phone that I don't want the world to know... There. Where were we with the interview part?

O: Did you try to do something specific with each of your records?

SM: I can describe them as I see them, if you want. Distant Plastic Trees is a small record, intentionally small, influenced by the Young Marble Giants, an electro-pop record. The Wayward Bus: The first half is influenced by Phil Spector; it's a comment about Phil Spector songs. The second half is whatever I had lying around. Most people listen just to the first half of the record and assume it's all like that, a Phil Spector tribute or something, which it really isn't. The House Of Tomorrow EP has no synthesizers, just keyboards, drums-guitar-bass-cello. All looped songs, one chord progression over and over. No deviation. Holiday is synthesizer, almost all manually played, no MIDI. Charm Of The Highway Strip is an album of travel songs, road songs, which is necessarily an album about country music, alternating between all-electronic and Phil Spector-style, [with] dozens of instruments layered on top of each other. People keep telling me that everything on Charm Of The Highway Strip sounds the same, and I point out to them that every other song on Charm Of The Highway Strip sounds the same. But there are definitely two different short records literally alternating all record long between two different things. Get Lost is all over the place intentionally, because I really liked the Pavement record Westing (By Musket And Sextant), until I realized that it really was a compilation instead of just sounding like a compilation. I loved the fact that every minute it would completely change, as if it weren't the same band and there was a completely different way of recording every few minutes. The fact is that it is what that record is, so my replication turned out to be a little more work than I had to do. So I recorded it in a lot of different ways and recorded it in a lot of different styles, from rock to new-wave dance songs to ukulele... Irving Berlin-type front-porch serenades on ukulele. The Sixths record, Wasp's Nests, is an intentionally indie-rock record, although it came out on a major label, with indie-rock singers singing my songs. I'm working on another one right now.

O: With the same people?

SM: Different people. I can't talk about the people beforehand, because the legal stuff has not been completed yet.

O: Is it true that you asked the singers on Wasp's Nests to sound bored out of their minds while they sang?

SM: Well, not out of their minds, no. Not really really bored, just bored.

O: How often do you, and your band in one of its incarnations, actually play live?

SM: There would be lots of problems if we tried to duplicate the records at all. It would cost a great deal of money and time to duplicate the record live, and the records are also considerably electronic and would therefore be boring to watch. So what we do is have two guitarists, a cello and drums. We don't try to sound especially full or large. I saw... I

believe it was the Charlatans, or the Chameleons, at CBGB, and they sounded exactly like their record, only much louder, of course. And I was really impressed by that. I'd never heard someone sound so exactly like their own recording before. But evidently they record their records so they can sound exactly like them, using the same equipment live as they do in the studio. They sound precisely the same. Right down to the echo, just like the record. To do that myself I'd have to spend all of my time in the studio, and they probably do spend all of their time in the studio.

O: What do you yourself listen to most?

SM: What I listen to most would probably be ABBA. An important band. And basically the people who are doing what I'm doing, which is plagiarize. Stereolab, for instance. There are dozens of people who are sampling and then rapping over the samples, but I don't do any rapping. There's no reason to add anything new if you just take from a few different sources. If you sample George Clinton, and you layer George Clinton on top of that, you're going to end up with a record that sounds like George Clinton, and what's more, you're going to give George Clinton all of your royalty money. But if you sample the Hilliard Ensemble, it's not going to sound all that familiar. I think records should sound somewhat familiar. They should grapple with what's gone before. Right now, there's been no new technology in music for the first time in a long time. There's been nothing new for three or four years, and three or four years before that there was something trivially new, a MIDI control tilter, which Daft Punk uses all the time. There being no new technology, we have only the old stuff to recombine all the time in hopefully slightly new ways.

O: So you're forced to be an electro-pop traditionalist.

SM: In electro-pop there is only tradition now. There is no innovation. There's no cutting edge. Do you have a candidate? Can you think of anything even remotely new? You can be dumb as a doornail and know there's nothing new at all right now.

O: Perhaps you noticed that Entertainment Weekly chose electronica as the next big thing.

SM: Well, it's still new in that it isn't popular in the U.S. Entertainment Weekly standards of new are probably not my own.

O: And your standards of new, or cool, are...?

SM: Well, a few months ago I thought the idea of cool had completely died. But then I started listening to all the records that I get in the mail for free, and I realized that there are some people and some things that are really, really uncool. You don't actually appreciate cool until you've heard uncool. There are some industrial bands who think they're the new J.D. Salinger. [They think] that aggression and dissonance are still avant garde, when in fact, they sound like it's 1981--or they haven't listened to anything since 1981, but their producer has, unfortunately. I don't want to single out industrial bands as particularly uncool, because there are plenty of popular bands that are uncool. Alanis Morissette is obviously uncool. She's popular because she's uncool. Erasure. Most people who are successful are fairly, marginally, cool in some way. But there are lots of people who are not successful because everyone knows how uncool they are. Whitney Houston is in touch with her gospel roots, as we now know from *The Preacher's Wife* soundtrack. She may not be the coolest person in the world, but she's not completely clueless, although there are lots of people who are completely clueless. I try to be like

Sarah Cracknell, the lead singer of St. Etienne. She's sexy and hip, she cares what people think because she likes people and she wants them to be happy, not because she's afraid. I want to fashion my records out of what people's expectations have been in the past, and usually not what they are now. Sarah could easily fit in back in 1963, but she always seems contemporary.

O: Do you try to live your life so that you could have fit in in 1963?

SM: I would have been very unhappy. Being gay, for example, would have been a huge problem in 1963. Also, the technology that I use wouldn't have been around. A lot of it was around in 1973, and almost all of it was around in 1983.

O: What do you spend your time doing? **What are your recreational drugs of choice?**

SM: **Alcohol. I don't like marijuana. I've done ecstasy a few times, and that mostly makes you realize the next day that it was a mistake. I did acid once, and I lost my keys. That's my entire drug history. Oh, and I had morphine, but it was in the hospital, and I had some weird reaction to it.**

O: Twice you've mentioned that you wrote songs about songs--songs about Phil Spector songs and about country songs. How is that different from writing an actual country song, or a Phil Spector pop album?

SM: That's a pretty involved question... Um, well, those genres are really pretty tightly confined, and I'm not in the situation those people are in. I'm not in Nashville. I'm not with country pedal-steel players and fiddlers doing it the way they do it every day, a pedal-steel player who knows to make just the right ghostly slide into the chorus. In my case, if I write and record one of these songs, it's completely out of context. If I write a song for Ronnie Spector to be produced by Phil Spector, it's not going to happen. I have to do it myself. And if I write a dance-pop hit, it's not going to be a dance-pop hit. So, basically, anything I do is just going to be something like those things. It can only pretend to be something else. And it almost always does pretend to be.

O: Then how do you actually go about writing Stepin Merritt songs? Do you consider yourself primarily a lyricist?

SM: I suppose I consider myself primarily a songwriter. I'm involved with both lyrics and music, intertwined, usually. The lyrics are about the same thing the music is about, usually. They comment on each other, and if I wrote one without the other, like I did on the Future Bible Heroes record, it wouldn't mean the same thing. Which it doesn't on the Future Bible Heroes record.

O: Do you prefer to sing yourself, or have other people sing?

SM: I prefer to have other people sing, because it's a lot easier to judge how well they're doing. Everybody hates the sound of their own voice when it's played back. My voice in my head sounds completely different from how it sounds recorded and played back on tape. I always have a horrible problem with interviews, for instance, done on the phone. I always sound like I hate the other person, like I'm on drugs, I sound dumb, I can't stand it. I naturally talk so slowly... I've only done one radio interview, and I hope I never have to do another one. It was on CBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Company, and my speech didn't speed up at all.

O: Are you big in Canada?

SM: No. Our biggest fan base, for no apparent reason, is in Florida, where we've never played live. Odd.

Stephin Merritt Names A Color

"Carolyn Eve" Green
PANTONE® 7498 C

"I named this color for my friend, Carolyn Eve. She lives in the pine-addled Rocky Mountains. However dark things grow, she is still green. If vegetables were Carolyn Eve Green, children would be happier to eat them. This is a good color for camouflage, carpet, a wristwatch or the book jacket of a collection of Russian writings, for example, Chekhov's plays. It is not advisable for lampshades, eyeshadow or milk cartons. Using it in stripes on a field of pale salmon (PANTONE® 197@50%) could be quite shocking. It would be great for biotech business cards."

Stephin Merritt is the New York-based songwriter-producer-musician of Magnetic Fields. "You make me blue, PANTONE® 292," is a lyric from his new album, "69 Love Songs," which was listed #4 in Spin's Top 20 albums of 1999 and #9 in Rolling Stone's Top 10. Time Out New York has called him "the Rogers and Hart of independent music," and three separate reviewers have recently dubbed him the "Cole Porter of his generation."

Interview with Stepin Merritt by Elisabeth Vincentelli

Q) What is the first song you remember hearing?

A) "Where The Bee Sucks (There Suck I)." We had a record of Elizabethan songs my mother took out of the library. It was on Angel. I vividly remember the Angel logo.

Q) First record bought?

A) Sweet: Desolation Boulevard.

Q) Most significant moments in musical development?

A) I think probably as a kid when I looked at the credits of Bay City Rollers records and realized that all the good songs weren't written by them. It made me think about what makes good songs good.

Q) when did you start writing songs?

A) the first songs I wrote down, at the age of ten or so, were clumsy imitations for my then and now favorite band, Abba. The lyrics concerned marital problems against a background of European history, and mentioned breakfast tables.

Q) Do you think your sound has become more "organic" (ie: using fewer synthesizers, more "real" instruments)?

A) I don't think I have evolved toward a more organic sound-- I now use synthesizers much more than before, instead of samplers; I use electric guitars instead of acoustic guitar samples; and I use obvious rhythm units, vintage rhythm units instead of acoustic drum samples. But I have changed from one "organic" electronic sound to another. I'm fascinated by the enduring cheesiness of all electronic instruments. By outrageously magnifying this cheesiness, I produce sounds which sound too complex to be electronic, that's why it sounds "organic".

The Merritt Principle of "Warmth:" Warmth in music is a function of the degree to which extra-musical periodicities can be confounded with musical ones at the levels of rhythm, frequency and timbre.

Thus, routing a synaesthetically "cold" digital organ sound (playing a simple repetitive

figure) through 1) an echo unit modulated to go in and out of phase with the rhythm; 2) a pitch transformer tuned to some non-diatonic or microtonal intervals; 3) a phase shifter slightly out of phase with the rhythm, we find that our "cold" sound as become "warm." Lack of warmth, then, is not a problem resulting from too much technology, but too little.

Q) I see. About the 6ths album: Do you see yourself as the Burt Bacharach of your era?

A) The 6ths is my songs and arrangements sung by a clan of popular college radio heroes. Some of the artist I've recorded are Lou Barlow (Sebadoh), Barbara Manning, Chris Knox (Tall Dwarves), Robert Scott (Bats), Amelia Fletcher (Heavenly), Dean Wareham (Luna), and more.

Although I seem to be the current singer for the Magnetic Fields, I prefer to have other voices singing my melodies for that Brechtian distance (Verfrumdungseffekt)- because otherwise my scaffolding of lyrical cliches teeters on the edge of the chasm of schmaltz.

I don't see myself as Burt Bacharach yet. I see myself as the Cindy Sherman of college radio: I enjoy finding cliches you didn't know were cliches and peeling their skin off till they lose consciousness.

Q) Some of your songs are written with a man in mind. Are you a homosexual songwriter, a heterosexual songwriter, or both?

A) I am not writing with another man in mind. The genders of the characters are whatever sounds good- see the words for "Joesephine," "Candy," and "Sunset City." I like to let the listener imagine, and maybe identify with, the characters--but if you can only identify with members of your own gender then you don't have enough imagination for Western civilization. Singers rarely sing lyrics from the standpoint of the other gender, probably because they think it will be too funny. But it's only funny the first time.

Q) Why do you record in a home studio?

A) It's not necessarily cheaper to record at home (although every expenditure on equipment is only spent once if you're buying it). But doing it yourself allows the freedom to develop a production style other than the usual one.

I'm continually irritated by every record having the same production idea--false realism. The only record of the last ten years that isn't trying to sound "live" or "real" (in an idealized form, since no recording is actually live) is the Jesus and Mary Chain's "Psychocandy".

I am proud of the fact that my records have nothing to do with the sounds instruments happen to make. The guitars aren't guitars, the synthesizers aren't synthesizers, the drum machines and drums aren't drums. In general, you are unable to tell with conviction what anything is. This I can do because I have about 70 instruments and a room full of electronics, but so do a lot of studios.

False realism is like Cinema Verite. As Cinema Verite should be left to academic documentary filmmakers, false realism in music should be left to those making demonstration recordings of historical instruments.