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Frank Black's tracks

David Segal
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WASHINGTON - Frank Black loves Melanie. Not in the semi-ironic way that a Fellini fan might "love" a Godzilla movie, or a master chef might "love" the fajita burrito at Chipotle. Black - the former Pixies frontman and forefather of grunge - truly loves Melanie, the flower-power gal of '70s AM pop. Especially "Brand New Key," Melanie's kittenish single from 1971 about a girl, her roller skates and her pursuit of a boy.

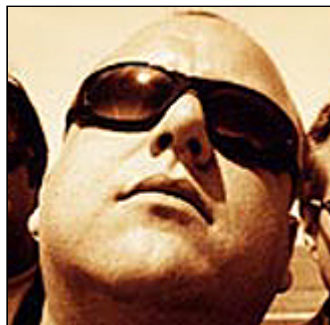
"I don't know if this song is influential in the sense that you can hear a certain kind of sound from it in my music," says Black, looking completely serious. "But your favorite songs, you carry them with you always, and even if you haven't listened to them in 20 years. They're always with you. It's like a high standard. It's like: That's a good one, and I'm going to write a good one, too."

You can't help wondering if Black is joking, and not just about Melanie. Asked to name the 10 songs that influenced him most, this post-punk icon has come up with a list that, at minimum, demands some explanation. Of all the Beatles tunes, he picks the whimsical "You Know My Name (Look Up the Number)."

And it's hard to imagine how "Mellow Yellow" had much impact on the author of "The Sad Punk," a song that ends with Black howling "Ex-tinction!" at a pitch of terror not heard since the Spanish called off the Inquisition.

Alternative rock was born in that howl. The Pixies formed in Boston in the mid-'80s and quietly designed the noose that would eventually hang the hair-metal acts of the era, the Def Leppards and the Motley Crues. The desperation in Black's scream, the infernal guitar tones, the instant leap from murmur-soft to thunder-loud-all of it would become the hallmarks of grunge, which in turn provided the framework for just about everything on rock radio since. The Pixies split up in 1993, their influence far greater than their income. Kurt Cobain once said that Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was simply his attempt to write a Pixies tune.

Black, in short, is the Karl Marx of one of pop's most far-reaching revolutions. It's hard to imagine Marx reading fluff. So: for real, Frank. Melanie?



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Frank Black

Frank Black & The Catholics with David Lovering

WHEN: Friday, Feb. 28.

WHERE: Nita's Hideaway, 3300 S. Price Road, Tempe.

ADMISSION: \$15, available at (480) 784-4444 or www.ticketmaster.com.

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Is this list, you know, a put-on?

"No, not at all," Black says, sounding genuinely surprised. "I wouldn't do that. I'm not real good at that."

Before you meet Black you half expect Satan's little brother. It's more than his wet-your-pants roar. There's a menace and mystery at the core of his public persona, starting with his longago decision to abandon his real name, Charles Thompson IV, and extending to his lyrics, a dadaist stew of Christian imagery, UFO sightings, romantic yearnings and, in one memorable instance, "a wave of mutilation." He's one of those artists who make you wonder: What is this guy thinking?

He rarely speaks to audiences, preferring to play songs in bang bang procession until it's time for a bow. These days his head is shaved and he performs in a suit, which makes him look like a hit man, or that "Spider-Man" villain, the Kingpin.

But there's nothing distant or sinister about Black in person, or at least there wasn't during our 90-minute interview, conducted in his suite at the State Plaza Hotel the day after the first of two nights at the Black Cat. Portly and about 5 1/2 feet tall in his bare feet, the 37-year-old Black is the opposite of steely. He's chatty and polite. Before the talking starts, he calls room service for a fruit plate in case anyone gets peckish.

"This hotel is really a good deal for the money," Black says when he gets off the phone. "That's part of my job now, booking the hotel."

He's here to promote a pair of albums, "Black Letter Days" and "Devil's Workshop," each released on the same day in August. Both were recorded essentially live on a two-track machine with his current band, the Catholics, and both are relatively subdued productions, reflecting Black's ongoing journey from feedback and overdrive to a softer, twangier sound, one that brings to mind the Rolling Stones during their early-'70s flirtation with country-rock. There is nary a scream on either disc.

"I guess it's something I did a lot of in the Pixies, and I became kind of known for it," he says. "It became a little gaggy. Combine that with the fact that I've been taking vocal lessons. I'm learning to be a singer rather than just a shouter."

Black the singer doesn't sell as well as Black the shouter. His solo career is in what he half-jokingly calls "a very slow downward spiral." His older fans perhaps still yearn for the combustibility of his earlier work, and his record-it-live approach gives some of his recent material a dashed-off, underbaked quality. But Black's gifts as a songwriter still amaze, and there are a dozen beauties in the nearly 30 tunes he let fly in the summer. Most are found on "Black Letter Days," one of 2002's best albums.

Even as his sales dwindle, Black's shadow seems to get longer by the year. The Pixies albums keep coming - BBC tapes, B-sides and rarities, a double-disc retrospective and a batch of import singles. And improbable as it sounds, plans are afoot to turn his life and screechings into an off-Broadway musical, titled "Teen-ager of the Year," which would chronicle Black's days in the Pixies and his solo career.

"He came up with this amazing formula that just blew the lid off everything," says Josh Frank, the man who wrote and hopes to produce this show. "He was just this teen-ager in a room and he went out of the room and took a chance and ended up creating something amazing."