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Black's Tracks

Ex-Pixie's Faves Get To the Point: No Fluff, No Fuss -- Tough Songs. Then There's Melanie.

By David Segal

Washington Post Staff Writer

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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*? 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

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Former Pixies frontman and pioneer of grunge Frank Black at 37 -- you were expecting maybe Satan's little brother? (Larry Morris -- The Washington Post)



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roar. There's a menace and mystery at the core of his public persona, starting with his long-ago 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 "Teenager 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 teenager in a room and he went out of the room and took a chance and ended up creating something amazing."

An Elemental Darkness

Black sits in the kitchen attached to his hotel suite, sipping espresso. He's been asked to discuss the songs on his Top 10 list, which we'll play on a portable CD player sitting atop a chair. We start with a song he found in his mother's tiny record collection: Peter, Paul & Mary's take on the mournful farewell standard "**500 Miles.**"

"Their version is pretty damn haunting, you know, the bass and her beautiful voice and the harmonies," he says after savoring a verse of the tune. "It's a sad song and it has mystery. The use of the minor chord and the note of regret, it has a dark note in it, which gives it credibility. You'll hear that on nearly every album of mine. It's not explained, this thing with the train, and it doesn't matter. It's just 'I'm splitting, man.' The open road. Gone."

That the darkness in Black's music springs from the trio that popularized "Puff (The Magic

Dragon)" will not surprise Pixies fans. In 1985, when Black bought an ad in the Boston Phoenix to recruit a drummer and bassist for his then-nascent band, applicants had to like Minnesota post-punk band "Husker Du and Peter, Paul & Mary." He was a University of Massachusetts dropout who had recently returned from a miserable stay in Puerto Rico, where he had traveled to learn Spanish and figure out what to do with his life. While there, he had come up with two ideas: head to New Zealand to watch Halley's Comet, or move to Boston and start a rock band. He went with the latter.

He then persuaded his freshman-year roommate, Joey Santiago, to drop out and join him in Boston. The two spent their first night in the city in a van parked outside a doughnut shop.

"We both worked at warehouses along the waterfront," says Santiago, on the phone from Los Angeles, where he now writes music for television shows. "I was stocking butcher block furniture and Charles was stocking buttons."

Black stuck with an acoustic guitar then and for much of his Pixies days, one of the few outward hints of his folkie past.

"I won't weep," Black says as "500 Miles" winds up, "but it's almost that. Certain chord progressions done in an especially beautiful way, you do get a little choked up. It's good sadness. Beautiful sadness."

The Wandering Ear

Black's musical diet was determined by financial and familial circumstances, as well as his iconoclastic hunch -- which developed when he outgrew Melanie -- that everyone else was listening to dreck. Black's parents divorced when he was young; he, his younger brother, mother and stepfather moved constantly during his childhood, mostly because of his mother's continual urge to pick up and go. Before he graduated from high school, Black had attended 10 different schools, most of them in California and Massachusetts.

"We got jerked around a lot, which was good," says Errol Thompson, Black's brother. "Our stepfather was in real estate, so one year we'd be millionaires and go to private school and the market would go bust and he'd lose everything and we'd end up in an inner-city high school. We saw everything."

Black performed for the first time at 9, singing Woody Guthrie's "**Why Oh Why**" in a Unitarian church. "It was with a group called the Boston Folk Song Society," he recalls, "and they were, like, this collection of well-to-do hippie types and their kids, and somehow I hung out with some of the kids that were involved.

"Some older person said, 'Why don't you two guys do this song,' so me and another kid did it as a duet." Black isn't sure if he loves the song, but he's never forgotten it or its humorous chorus, a handful of "why oh whys" followed by just as many "because because."

Black's mother encouraged every hint of musical inclination in her children, prodding them to spin albums rather than watch television. In addition to PP&M, the household record stash included a double-LP of Bob Dylan's greatest hits. "**The Mighty Quinn (Quinn the Eskimo)**" stood out.

"It's a good lyric. 'Come on without, come on within.' It's a little bit of a rowdy song -- it's kind of tough, you know. I heard Dylan when I was in about fourth or fifth grade and I was like, 'What is this all about?' "

What "Quinn" is about in the literal sense didn't concern Black, then or now. As often as he went to a dictionary to decipher words in a song, he'd relish the feeling of being left in the dark.

"Sometimes songs can be riddles. Dylan had total attitude. I didn't know what he was singing about, even on a song like 'Blowin' in the Wind.' Everyone's like, 'Oh, a song for our times.' For

me personally, what's way stronger is the sense of Dylan up there on the pulpit, giving it to you. That's the charismatic side of it. . . . He was the second great act I discovered."

The first was the Beatles. The previous tenants of an apartment he and his family moved into had left behind a single with "Let It Be" on one side and "You Know My Name (Look Up the Number)" on the other. It never occurred to Black that the former was destined to be a classic and the latter a bit of a throwaway. On "Name," the Fab Four horse around with different rhythms and sing in silly voices -- Paul does a Vegas lounge singer, John mimics an old lady. Brian Jones, the Rolling Stone who would soon drown in a swimming pool, played the saxophone. The lyrics are just the title repeated over and over.

"The Beatles don't get enough credit for being soulful, but this is totally heavy," Black says. "That drum beat, it's like you hear on 'Sergeant Pepper's,' it's laid back, not pushing it. Then you have a tough-ass chord progression. McCartney always got a lot of disrespect for being the fluffy one, but he could be this hard, aggressive soul-dude guy."

The schoolyard simplicity of the words were, for Black, part of the charm. "Paul was really good at these super-minimalist lyrics. 'Why don't we do it in the road?' 'You say it's your birthday. It's my birthday, too.' I like that, and I did it a bit with the Pixies. We did a song called 'There Goes My Gun,' which was just 'There goes my gun, there goes my gun.' Like Woody Guthrie, 'Why oh why oh why.' It's good. It's tough."

Black was 12 when he started playing a guitar, a classical left by a cousin who sometimes lived with his family. Before that, he'd owned a primitive little drum kit, a snare and a cymbal. Donovan's "Mellow Yellow," another left-behind record he discovered in a new apartment, was the perfect practice song. He tapped along to it for hours.

"This song is excellent. Kind of laid back, 'I'm cool,' you know. It's not aggressive, but it's more like skulking around. It's very commanding. It's as if you're yelling, but you're not. This song was big for me."

An Irresistible Pitch

When Black was 12, his mother and stepfather became deeply religious, and for seventh and eighth grade, Black went to Christian school in Downing, a town near Los Angeles. His class was tiny -- about 30 kids -- and so many classmates were flunking out that when the baseball coach tried to put together a team, he was one boy short.

"I wasn't very into athletics, and I definitely didn't want to be on the baseball team. But the coach knew I was into music, and he told me that if I'd join, he'd let me borrow as many records as I wanted from his collection for as long as I wanted. And he said, 'I've got 5,000 albums.' "

Black was soon hauling home armfuls of vinyl, most of it late-'60s white blues artists, like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and John Mayall.

"That's where I discovered Leon Russell. His records, they've all got this muscle but they're raggedy. He's got attitude, too. Never smiling, the long hair, the sunglasses." Amazingly, the soft-loud instant transition in Pixies songs -- and later Nirvana's -- is present with Russell and his version of "**Roll Away the Stone.**"

"Can you play the verse again?" Black asks. Rewind 20 seconds. "It's rock-and-roll stuff, but when the verse comes in, it's kind of like *kheeeeeek*," he says, making a car-crash noise. It's got this kind of walking-down-the-street thing. Then, right here -- " On the chorus, the song surges a little, though not nearly as dramatically as the explosions in Pixies tunes.

"It's more subtle," Black says. The Pixies couldn't afford to be subtle. "None of us were super-learned players, so we had these minimal amounts of tools to work with, and it's sort of like, how can we make the verse different? Well, just don't play during the verse, and when we get

to this part we'll play real loud.

"We got credit for something that people have done in different ways. We just did it in a painfully obvious way."

Black left the school in Downing with more albums than Bible knowledge, but his family's sudden interest in religion would seep into many of his songs, especially the early ones. The title of the band's debut EP, "Come On, Pilgrim," comes from the lyrics of a song he heard at Christian summer camp.

After his baseball coach's indefinite album loan, Black's next musical present came from his mother: a ticket to a Jethro Tull concert for his 14th birthday. He'd heard "**Aqualung**" on the radio and was stunned by it, especially the acoustic break in the middle.

"I was like, 'What is this?' I really became curious just by hearing it come out of my parents' speakers. Technically, they're progressive rock, but I think they're more earthy, they've got more grit and more blues in them. They're not quite so dorky."

"Aqualung" taught him that tempos were there to be rearranged. Plenty of Black's compositions start in one speed, then toggle back and forth to another, with melodies that emerge, crisscross and then give way to new melodies. Black changes the pace and direction of his songs the way a rodeo star works a lasso, with total control, spinning the tune in one direction, then snapping it to another. "Adda Lee," from his first solo album, is like an amusement park ride that shoots a car full of people up a steep incline, lets it linger 400 feet in the air for a breathless moment, then plunges the car right back down the same tracks.

"I didn't have to be conscious of it and say, 'Well, let's change the tempo here,' a fast part, a slow part, whatever. I'd already heard a bunch of rock music that had done that."

While Black's high school peers feasted on punk and new wave, Black was listening to rock and blues from the '50s and '60s. To some extent, it was a matter of money; he didn't have much and there was a lot more Muddy Waters than Sex Pistols at the library, where he could check out albums free. He would eventually take to punk with the fervor of a convert.

"I probably discovered post-punk bands like Husker Du and later got around to listening to punk. But as Iggy Pop once said, it's all disco. It's all animal, all beating on drums, it's all getting up there and making a racket in front of a bunch of people. It's all beat."

Iggy's music arrived late in Black's life, not until he was a sophomore at U-Mass. While rooming with Santiago he bought a copy of "**Lust for Life**," Iggy's 1977 album, produced by David Bowie. What Black picked up from Iggy, as with many of his favorite singers, was principally an attitude.

"It's tough, it's dark-sounding, it's really well humored, it's got all this sex stuff in it," he says, with the album's title track pounding in the background. "This is when I first started to pick up on this slightly snarly, slightly deadpan idea. It's sneering, but you never know when he's being facetious or if he's mocking whatever he's singing about or if he's mocking the listener."

Black, you gradually realize, is a master of imagemaking, and the aura of intrigue he's built around himself is a careful construction. When, as a college sophomore, he heard the Violent Femmes, he further refined the identity he'd bring to the job of leading the Pixies.

"I got the slightly nerdy, slightly [angry], slightly sexually frustrated vibe from him," Black says of Femmes lead singer Gordon Gano, as "**Gone Daddy Gone**," a track from the band's debut album, plays. "This was a very influential band for me. It's musical, it's deadpan, it's a little bit down, it's not necessarily loud, and it's got folkie elements, which I like."

It's dark out by the time the Femmes are done harmonizing that "love is gone, yeah, it's gone daddy gone." Talk turns to the off-Broadway musical about Black's life. If it happens, it is

certain to restoke talk of Black's role in the creation of alternative rock. He sounds a little ambivalent about getting that kind of credit.

"I don't know that anyone deserves credit, really. I mean, you get what you get." Black might prefer life as a barely aboveground sensation, which is what he was at 21, but he isn't complaining.

"How can I? Because I don't have a bigger pile of money? That's a bad attitude when you make your living as a musician. Hey, you're in. You're in the club, you're on tour, you make records, you get to sing with David Bowie on his 50th birthday. What more do you want? An island?"

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