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Music Features

Sick leave

Polvo give it another go

After a decade-long hiatus, the progenitors of math rock find their chemistry still exists

By **MICHAEL ALAN GOLDBERG** | June 17, 2008



CAROLINA LIAR? Ash Bowie has little interest in the notions of legacy or Importance.

"And now, back to the music!" a voice exclaims over the WMBR airwaves. It's the tail end of 1991, and the quip comes from a member of Polvo, who have just concluded a seven-song live session on MIT's radio station (it can be heard on-line for minimal Googling) with a blistering, feedback-drenched tear through "Vibracobra" — the track that would kick off the band's full-length debut album, *Cor-Crane Secret*, which Merge Records would release the following year.

At the time, the North Carolina quartet's noisy sound was music to a select group of ears — cacophonous guitars and flailing rhythms circling around melody and structure and the half-buried vocals of frontman Ash Bowie, and then all of it collapsing in on itself like a semi-controlled demolition. In those nascent years, Polvo seemed to draw inspiration from a number of sources: the chorus-pedaled fury of Hüsker Dü; the slithering complexity of Slint; the deft tension-and-release of such Dischord bands as Jawbox and Lungfish; and certainly the arty dissonance, weird tunings, and aural freakouts of Sonic Youth (Bowie's laconic delivery was particularly Thurstonian too). Over the next seven years and about as many LPs and EPs, Polvo shaped and refined their enthralling assault into something singular, never quite abandoning the clamor or becoming all that accessible, but from time to time incorporating moderately straightforward riffage or ambient drones, or exploring more wide-open spaces instead of the usual all-consuming guitar density.

(Witness the odd classic-rock chops of 1997's *Shapes*.)

The band amicably called it quits in 1998, and the decade since has been kind — like Slint, Polvo have been elevated to iconic status, cited as progenitors of “math rock,” and hailed as influential for a new generation of post-rock/post-punk groups. One such outfit, the Texas instrumental band Explosions in the Sky, was charged with curating this year's All Tomorrow's Parties festival in England, and when they asked Polvo to get back together for the May event, not only did the quartet agree, they appear to have made the reunion more lasting. Singers/guitarists Bowie and Dave Brylawski, bassist Steve Popson, and drummer Brian Quast (formerly of the Cherry Valence, he replaces original Polvo drummer Eddie Watkins) have written new material slated for an album they hope to begin recording in September, and they plan to spend much of this year touring the US.

“I feel like taking such a long break from the band is helping us in the present,” says Bowie. “The chemistry is still there, and maybe we're a little more relaxed about what we're doing. I think it's easier to put our situation into perspective now and just enjoy what's going on.”

Still, he admits that he felt so detached from the old songs, he was reluctant to dig into them again. So the band have reworked some of those compositions, sometimes dramatically. “There were some parts I actually disliked, and virtually no original lyrics I cared to sing anymore. Making changes to old material was a challenge, but it turned out to be a lot of fun also, and suddenly I was happy to be playing the songs again.”

These days, as during Polvo's first run, Bowie has little interest in the notions of legacy or Importance. But he allows that the band did surpass its own modest goals. “We just wanted to put out a record and open for some bands we liked. And get played on the local radio station. I think that was really it. So we've gotten a lot more out of this than we could have expected. For a band that never had much of a plan, I'd say we somehow managed to overachieve.”

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