

# STOPSMILING

MAGAZINE + SITE + STOREFRONT + EVENTS

Downtown Dedication: The Return of Polvo



(Touch and Go)

Monday, June 23, 2008

By Dan Pearson

We could have flown out of Newark, landed in Charlotte, and just hit a barbecue spot in Reidsville, but this was after all the Polvo reunion and it deserved more. We needed to feel as if we were making the descent, notice the disparity in New England and Southern spring, endure interminable DC traffic and feel that we had earned our ribs and slaw. So, I packed the Malibu with I-Roy and U-Roy, stomached \$4 gas and my friend Bose and I left from Connecticut in a rainstorm, both of us in fleece. Night one we spent at a Ramada in Fredericksburg, never made it to the battlefield or historic downtown, but instead drove down the divided highway to Allman's BBQ. I'm wary of food blogs, but the culinary scribes were dead-on: best ribs I have ever had outside Texas, enviable pulled pork and slaw, notable sauce in the squirt bottle — all in an old corner diner with spinning stools. What a foundation, not only for the evening, which consisted of ice cold tap Yuengling and inebriated dancing to Def Leppard in the Ramada lounge, but for the show to come. Just a stateline south, yes, Polvo, the seminal math rock quartet, reunited at their Ground Zero, the Cat's Cradle in Carrboro. In the morning, it was only better, the slow slalom down Route 40 country roads leaving trails of red clay and another barbecue platter at Short Sugar's in Danville, Virginia. Then we were upon it, Route 86 into Chapel Hill, the concert just hours away. Publicists, executives and Bob Guccione Jr. jet in for gigs. True fans arrive on fumes blaring "Hex Enduction Hour" and debating whether the Durham Red Roof Inn is near a bar showing the Fox game of the week.

Before the show, however, a look back. Polvo, from Chapel Hill. The first sounds came in a double single in 1991, with muddy production and lots of jangle, as if Jesus and Mary Chain were playing "Wolves Lower" from *Chronic Town*. Still, it went largely unnoticed until 1992, when Polvo toured with Sebadoh and Superchunk. That triple-bill received widespread acclaim (Pavement played on part of the tour), connected Polvo to the Merge universe and let people know who was buying all the \$50 pawnshop guitars and used Ibanez pedals. Indeed, Polvo were a revelation live, with malfunctioning equipment that somehow managed to produce the most dynamic and innovative guitar rock since Dinosaur. At its root, the antecedents were clear: Sonic Youth and Albini, discord and pummel. But there was so much more: hints

of the non-occident, prog, Teutonic noise, notes that fluttered as if they had been thrown by Phil Niekro, others that teetered, noodled, bent, broke, splattered, but eventually harmonized and soared as if, Jesus Christ, was Adrian Belew cutting tracks on samisen? There was nothing like it, still isn't — and the proof emerged right around the time of the tour in the form of *Cor Crane Secret*, Polvo's first full-length on Merge, with gobs and gobs of guitar. Nobody could understand a word, except for a few references to martial arts and remote controls, but it didn't matter, because it laid out the premise: beautiful, alinear, excessive, completely unpredictable, like watching Barry Sanders in the open field, starting, stopping, redirecting, eventually scoring and then retiring. The second album, *Today's Active Lifestyles*, only complemented with more daring, more angle.

In creative writing programs, they always admonish against opening with a landscape. But what about Thomas Hardy? Same could be said for Polvo songs, that frequently started with long crescendos or concluded with hypnotic repetitions that went on and on well beyond a major label's patience. (You listened and stayed with it, because you knew it would pay off). Critics used the term "math rock" and "post rock" and, yes, there was certainly the sense of long equation and rewarding solution, but Polvo bore no resemblance to American Analog Set or Tortoise, had little to do with *Tago Mago*. Polvo's music was, and is, its own being, artistic and athletic, grave and witty ("We know who it sounds like, we hope they care / And now we just bought a sitar, so be prepared") inspired by modern metropoli but honed with southern pace. Most of all, the band was intransigent, had conviction — or at least it was clear that they had reverence for the form and refused to make notes go where you expected them, refused to be handcuffed by convention. To hear Polvo was to hear the guitar, to hear rock, to hear indie music for the first time again, to reconsider what two guitar bass and drums could achieve. There was so much to like. The guitarist wore all purpose cleats. Their vintage guitars had more buttons and levers than the Space Shuttle console. What band releases a triple single in the digital age?

After *Today's Active Lifestyles*, the songs continued, the drummer left and was replaced for a bigger sound. There were tours, sports bars, glimpses of notoriety (Thurston Moore repeatedly photographed wearing the orange Polvo shirt), a cover of "Mexican Radio," split singles with Erectus Monotone and New Radiant Storm King. Then there was Helium, side projects and, finally, silence. In 1998, the band went thier separate ways. That is until this year when Explosions in the Sky was asked to curate All Tomorrow's Parties, which resulted in a Polvo reunion, some festival shows, and then some domestic shows, which brings us to Carrboro on May 10th, a wonderful portent of what was to come in shows New York and Boston last week, followed by Chicago in July.

On with the show then.

First sight, a surprise, as the Cat's Cradle is located in a mini-mall situated among bars with stellar beer selections. It was Duke and UNC graduations, so there were families about and a few no-shows, but the Cat's Cradle was packed. Polvo, to their credit, hadn't aged. Dave Brylawski looked as if he could come off the bench for Digger Phelps and make himself big in the middle. Gone were some of the junk guitars, the Fernandes and the no-name knockoffs from Italy, replaced by proper Fenders. Red Stripe was cheap. After the first few notes I started to move forward, reminded of that long ago Sebadoh-Polvo-Superchunk show, when someone yelled out to Lou Barlow to "play the hits." "These are the hits," Barlow said. "You just don't know it yet." Fitting then that Polvo should begin with an untitled new song, warming up with a long excursion that brought them back to center, the guitars off on periodic tangents, periodically in accordance. It sounded like "Castles Made of Sand" played by a chorus of jet engines.

What can be said: There were reassuring equipment problems, leaving Ash or Dave to noodle about while chords and amps and guitars were inspected. Gone were the prior two drummers, replaced by Brian Quast, easily the most capable and thunderous of all the Polvo percussionists, giving significant weight and foundation to the Polvo sound, perhaps raising the bar for all, as Polvo were as tight as I had ever seen them, blending song into song with secret starts and stops that made familiar notes emerge from unfamiliar origins. And that was what mattered most: It would have been easy to faithfully exhume, but that wouldn't be Polvo. No, here were the songs reimagined, reconsidered, with flourishes levitating and dangling precipitously, leaving you there suspended, waiting, so you had no idea where you would land and heard it all anew when it came crashing down somewhere near the left field warning track. Polvo owned it.

There were younger fans with game faces, humorless, trying to study every moment having waited a decade. There were those like myself, paunches and a second chin, mindful of health benefits and vacation days, who were there the first time years back, who needed to be reminded why it all meant so

much. Perhaps we were there because we needed the assurance that it was not a folly, that the worth of hours in the college station dropping the needle on “Tilebreaker” was not beery nostalgia, but a true happening, a musical arrival, as *Murmur* and *Double Nickels on the Dime* were for the previous generation. For Polvo was never only about music or guitar rock — it was about straining and stretching a note to get the most out of it, and about applying that to every medium, to every experience. It was about creativity and the need to reinvent, to see from multiple perspectives, to remain restless, inquisitive — to look with the same intensity at frets and measures as you would at books or poems or relationships and feelings. It was about knowing the difference between novelty and evolution.

In Carrboro, after the show, as I was double fisting Pabst to beat last call, I ran into guitarist Ash Bowie at the Orange County Social Club. It would have been impossible to try to relay to him what Polvo meant, or even what to make of a reunion. Words would have failed. The testimony was apparent anyway, in that I and others had traveled hours and hours up and down Interstate 95, endured the Beltway and Carolina swelter, years after that first double-single, years after that first concert, still believing. The reunion mattered because it confirmed Polvo still did as well.