



THE BREEDERS *Mountain Battles*

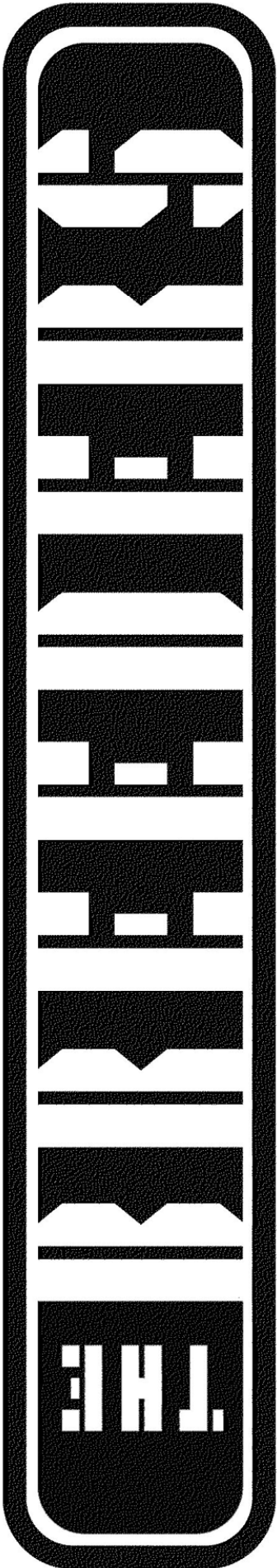
The first time I met Kim was in London in 1989, when my band supported Frankfurt. We hung out next to some train tracks after a gig. I asked how she was getting back to her hotel, she said "You guys are giving me a lift!" We didn't have a car. She didn't have any deutschemarks. My friend ended up paying for a cab. The hotel was at the airport.

A couple of months later, she asked me to play in the Breeders. I couldn't understand why she wanted me to play bass instead of her. She said she wanted to play guitar, which made it easier to sing. And the reason she asked me, she later said, was because she thought I was "exotic."

Next thing I knew, she was in my house in Bedfordshire, England, rehearsing in my bedroom. And so was a laconic 19-year-old drummer, Britt Walford, from Louisville band Slint, who had agreed to play with us on condition that he could use an alter ego (to keep his ego pure). We worked on songs from a demo Kim had made with Tanya Donelly. Tanya was in London with her boyfriend. After a week we joined her there to rehearse some more, then drove to a house in Edinburgh which had a recording studio on the ground floor, and bedrooms upstairs.

Britt had a self-assuredness that comes only with youth. He was an authoritative hard-hitting drummer, and so behind the beat you almost felt it belonged in the last bar. He dispensed with the standard 'one-two-three-four' song count-off, and cued everyone by simply announcing 'one.' Tanya played guitar in an almost absent-minded way, dispatching the last note of each riff as if to say, "How was that?" Kim was encouraging, "That's great. But can you play fewer notes?" I wanted to play the songs slower, but Kim said she didn't have enough breath to hold the notes any longer, and that limited how slow they could be. Engineer Steve Albini wasn't interested in "perfecting" a song or a performance: his metier was getting the best sound from the equipment and pressing "record." (He was utterly pleased with himself when mixing the record, saying "Look - no EQ!") If we made it through the song from beginning to end, that was the take which made it onto the record. When *Pod* was released in 1990, people talked about its 'creative arrangements,' 'visceral production' and 'palpable atmosphere,' and they weren't wrong.

In 1991, Kim came to stay with me in Brighton: she had some time and a song she wanted to work on. We practiced in the kitchen, so she could go out the back door and smoke. We may have only had one song, but dammit it was a good one. I got my friend Jon from Spacemen3 to come play drums and we recorded Safari. It was another year before we were able to get together again to record three more songs, this time in New York. Tanya was on her way to do Belly, but Kim invited her to play on the songs. Britt used a different pseudonym, I played bass and cello, and Kim introduced her identical twin, Kelley, as Tanya's replacement, saying, "She doesn't know how to play guitar, but she's going to learn." The Safari EP thus marked a



transition in the line-up of the Breeders and also sonically, since the production was, well, more produced: yes, there were overdubs! and double tracking!

In 1992, I went to Kim and Kelley's house in Dayton Ohio, while they recruited local Jim MacPherson, a powerhouse of a drummer with impeccable timing. He had a finesse and versatility, which Kim put to work in the new songs. We rehearsed all summer in the basement, emerging only to watch "Star Trek - The Next Generation." Kim imagined she was Captain Picard, Kelley was Councillor Troy, and Jim, Commander Riker. I suppose I must have been Data. Our mission, though, was to boldly go where no one had gone before, and get Kelley playing the guitar. She refused to practice on her own with a CD, insisting we all rehearse over and over so she could learn her parts. This was annoying at the time, but I later appreciated having had the songs beaten into me at shows where all I could hear was the hi-hat. We started playing low-key gigs, trying out new songs so that Kim could apply the critical test "Do I feel dumb singing this?" Kelley now had to learn in public, which was punk-rock but nerve-wracking, and not only for her. As Kim said: "the whole song is a set up for that one guitar part, and if you don't play it, there is no pay-off...."

What can I say about recording *Last Splash*? Other than that Jim and I got our parts done pretty quickly and I couldn't quite understand what was taking the rest of them so long. I went to the studio one evening to find that they had spent the day trying to crack a brand new cymbal to make it sound like a crappy old cymbal. Yes, these are the kinds of shenanigans that people get up to. Or using a telephone handset to record the drums by placing a call to the control room.

We made a video for the single, Cannonball, which Kim asked Kim Gordon to direct, and Kim Gordon asked Spike Jonze to shoot. It was a huge MTV hit, back in the day when people spent Sunday nights watching 120Minutes. We were so famous my dentist recognized me when I went to get my teeth cleaned.

Nirvana asked us to tour, we went to Australia, New Zealand and Japan, stopping in Hawaii for a photo-shoot for the cover of Rolling Stone, which never materialized because of Kim's refusal to provide a "twin shot" (notice how Kim and Kelley are never next to each other in photographs?). We played sold-out shows across Europe and the US. Then came 1994's Lollapalooza. The first month was like summer camp, but by the second, it had lost some of it's charm. During the mind-numbing downtime, Kim kept to herself, I learned to juggle, Jim fell off the wagon, and Kelley went MIA doing bad things with Nick Cave's Bad Seeds. She appeared each day as if by magic, asleep under the table in our dressing room, just in time for the show.

A break seemed in order. I flew to new York City and set up a home studio. Jim went home to his wife and two kids. Kelley got arrested and went to rehab. And Kim? Well, like the Energizer Bunny, Kim kept on going, forming The Amps, touring, and releasing the quick and dirty garage-punk album Pacer in 1995.

In 1997, Kim called me and said she wanted to get the Breeders back together. I wondered what would happen with Kelley with the pressures of touring, and she said "I am going to keep an eye on her" which sounded to me like the proverbial blind leading the blind, or lunatic taking over the asylum, or something of the sort.

It was another five years until *Title TK* was released, in 2002. I knew it had not been an easy record to make, following as it did a series of abandoned sessions and starting over. And I

didn't find it an easy record to listen to, either, partly because I couldn't help wondering what it would have been like if I had played on it, and partly because it was so rough around the edges that I couldn't quite get my head around it. Sonically it is raw (Albini recorded it) but the rawness isn't only in the production, it's also in the performance. I was unnerved by its looseness, since I remember Kim's insistence on rigor and precision. But maybe she lost her taste for that. The album is loose in the way that a demo is loose, but by virtue of that it is also supremely immediate and intimate. It's as if you've dropped in on someone playing a song, and that someone just happens to be Kim Deal. Press play - you can almost smell the smoke of her cigarette.

Kim just sent me *Mountain Battles*, the new Breeders album. My favorite track is "Night of Joy." It has a beautiful chord progression, and sublime, wistful vocals, tinged with melancholy. The album reminds me of Kim's enthusiasm, playfulness and focus. Hey, why aren't I playing on this?!

Josephine Wiggs 2008.

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