

BLONDE REDHEAD

biography

Blonde Redhead's last album - *Misery Is A Butterfly* - established them once and for all as one of the most distinctive and precious bands of their generation. It was a confident, thrilling and delicately-nuanced sweep of sound which enraptured the already-converted and won the band a whole new legion of fans. And although it marked a modulation away from the bittersweet starkness of previous releases, it was by far the most commercially successful release of the band's career, continuing a steady upward trajectory, which started well over a decade ago.

In 2007, Blonde Redhead return with something even more spellbinding - *23*. The new album is as rich and densely layered as the last one, but *Misery's* overall mood of wistfulness, melancholy and regret, has been replaced by one of mystical wonder and renewed energy. This shift in tone should not come as a surprise - as long-term observers will testify, a restlessness, a questing desire for change and for artistic expression has been a constant throughout the band's career. The graceful turbulence, the artful and dramatic songs of Blonde Redhead's self-produced seventh album mark it out as perhaps their most confident and resonant step yet in a discography marked by great records.

Taking their name from a song by New York No Wave artists DNA, the band began playing and rehearsing in New York, drawing inspiration from the city's squalling underground scene, from movie soundtracks, everywhere they could. They caught the attention of Sonic Youth's Steve Shelley, who swiftly signed them to his Smells Like imprint, producing their self-titled debut album in 1994. Following 1995's self-produced *La Mia Vita Violenta*, the group signed to esteemed Chicago underground imprint Touch And Go, and found a new producer in Guy Picciotto, singer / guitarist for hardcore's deftly-nuanced figureheads Fugazi.

The first fruit of their collaboration with Picciotto was the combusive, dissonant *Fake Can Be Just As Good* (1997) - a record which mixed scraped guitars and eerie synths with lyrics that

referenced film-maker Pier Paolo Pasolini and Amedeo and Kazu's own relationship. A sequel, *In An Expression Of The Inexpressible*, followed a year later, further distilling Blonde Redhead's artful chaos. The band's swansong for Touch And Go - 2000's *Melody Of Certain Damaged Lemons* - marked a turning point in the group's sound, and also in their fortunes. The trio pared back the chaos and squall of their earlier records, putting more emphasis on their windswept, minor-key melodies. The album won them a wider acclaim than they'd ever enjoyed before, with European music fans getting their first real taste for the band.

Photo by Ed Horrox

In 2003, they signed their first worldwide record deal with 4AD, the legendary UK indie label responsible for The Pixies, Cocteau Twins, Dead Can Dance and many more. Their first album for the label, *Misery Is A Butterfly*, was ornate and deeply poignant, seeing Blonde Redhead take a further step away from the atonal attack of their earlier records; instead, their love for movie soundtracks (as key an influence throughout their career as the noise of No Wave) came to the fore. At the same time, a new context was emerging for the band - through their rehearsal space in Greenpoint, Blonde Redhead found themselves making connections with the vibrant Brooklyn scene centred on long-time BR fans TV On The Radio (Kazu contributed vocals to TVOTR's 2006 album *Return To Cookie Mountain*).

Which brings us to 23. "We felt we'd been recording and playing long enough, that it was time to make an album on our own," remarks Simone, of their decision to produce 23 themselves. The group returned to the Magic Shop, the New York studio where they recorded *La Mia Vita Violenta*.

Photo by Miss Lana Kim

Their plan was to be more spontaneous in their song-writing, to aim for simplicity and clarity, and not to over-analyse what they created. Thanks to this consciously-relaxed approach in the studio, the songs came quickly, but old tensions weren't entirely absent. Simone says he found entering the studio with loose ideas for the songs "nerve-racking". Kazu admits that it "wasn't an entirely enjoyable experience. Without a producer, a "referee", we could really get on

each other's cases. It got intense."

"We were very focussed on doing something we hadn't done before," agrees Amedeo. "But until we got to the mixing stage, we weren't sure what direction the album was taking at all. You have to have faith. You also have to really think about what you're doing; sometimes things happen by accident, and that's great, but most of the time you really have to work at it."

Midway through recording, with the band feeling a little lost, producer Mitchell Froom (who has worked with American Music Club, Richard Thompson and Paul McCartney) stopped by the studio for a couple of days and helped them work on "Silently" and "Top Ranking". It was a crucial intervention, restoring their confidence and getting them back on track.

Photo by Miss Lana Kim

The end result is the most striking, beautiful and resonant album of Blonde Redhead's career. Simone explains that the band worked intensely on orchestrating these songs, and the care shows in the gentle, touching glide of closer "My Impure Hair", where Kazu's sleepy-eyed yowl is couched upon keening synths, lulling guitars and soft percussion; in the hypnotic, tip-toed hush of "The Dress"; in the sweeping drama of "Publisher". "This album is almost like all my fantasies and desires, all the feelings I had, were made real somehow," reflects Kazu, "I feel very lucky". Which explains, perhaps, the title - it's her lucky number. Title track "23" is hypnotic and rapturous - a hymn to the magic of change which sets the tone for the whole album - as is "Dr Strangeluv", another magical moment. "Silently" and "Top Ranking" are as emotionally resonant as anything the band have recorded, while uptempo moments like "Spring And By Summer Fall" and "SW" will take their place alongside long-time favourites "Melody Of Certain Three" and "In Particular" as highlights of the band's live set.

"We've developed a lot", adds Simone. "It sounds fresh, because we are exploring new things. We get tired of doing the same thing all the time, so we search for other things to do. But I never get tired of our songs. It amazes me, how much tolerance I can have for our own music. I could never go through this with another band, with music

that I wasn't 100% into."