

FRANK BLACK breaks away

former Pixies lead singer
is in search of individual fame
with self-titled solo debut



Eight years ago Charles Thompson formed the Pixies and renamed himself Black Francis. The band quickly became a college rock staple with its mix of three-chord surf grunge and dream-state imagery. Its healthy career spanned five albums and several world tours.

But the band — like so many that have gone before it — has disbanded, leaving Charles Thompson holding the bag and the name Black Francis.

His solution was to record a new solo album, scheduled for release in March on Elektra. The title of the album doubles as Thompson's new stage name — Frank Black. Is his decision the side effect of a latent identity crisis or just a symptom of a multiple personality complex? Thompson-Francis-Black says it's not that complex of a complex.

"I'm ditching my old stage name. I'm sick of it," he says. "A lot of people didn't get it — people don't want to accept Black as a first name and Francis as a surname. So I said 'Screw it, I'll change my stage name.' Besides Frank Black looks cooler on a marquee than Charles Thompson."

The new album reflects not just a change in moniker but also a transformation of musical style. Black makes a distinct musical break from the Pixies in the first few acoustic guitar strains of

the album's opening cut, "Los Angeles." The songs on Black's album are crafted carefully, sounding more laid-back and encompassing a variety of moods — from the straight-ahead rock of "Ten Percenter," a blunt musical biography of punk icon Iggy Pop, to the anthemic, layered guitar work of the instrumental jam, "Tossed," which features John Linnell of They Might Be Giants on saxophone.

Part of the credit for the varied musical styles of the album goes to Eric Feldman, a member of the seminal avant-pop group

Pere Ubu. Feldman produced the album and added keyboards and bass to a few tracks.

Black says Feldman's presence helped him to define further his new sound and inspired him to write more new material during a hiatus of the recording of *Trompe Le Monde*, the Pixies' last album.

"I expressed the desire to get back to the studio even though I had no material," he recalls. "I was going to do a cover-song album even though most people do shitty cover albums. My agent suggested Eric Feldman. He was great — he and I were two big band members. By the time we recorded the album a year and a half later, I had a bunch of new material."

And that material reflects a refreshing change from the guitar-driven sound of the Pixies.

"I was really glad to come to the realization that I liked keyboards," Black says.

"Because of Eric I wasn't thinking as much about the guitar. A lot of people who listen to indie-rock have a bad idea of keyboards because they are done poorly so often. I think it's a great instrument — it's not dominant... and yet you can't take it out of rock and roll."

And you can't take the musician — whatever he calls himself — out of it either. Take the song "Parry the Wind High, Low," which is about one of Black's favorite topics — flying saucers. Although Black never was abducted by aliens as a child (he admits that those experiences usually are blotted out), he maintains an unusual interest in life on other planets.

"That song revolves around a UFO convention I attended, which might involve a lot of crap and falseness, a lot of stuff that is questionable," Black says. "The material topic of the song is all those things which are supposedly real. The other half talks about meeting a UFO on the road and getting sucked up by it. There's a lot of bullshit to the stories, but if you wade through it, there's sometimes real information there."

Musically, the song mutates like a genetic experiment gone wild, beginning with a keyboard and bass-driven melody with extra-crunchy guitar on the chorus. A frenzied, noisy guitar solo breaks the apparent order of the song, which then transforms into an out-of-tune sing-along.

This penchant for contrast is dashed throughout the album — Black often switches between acoustic strumming and trashy electric guitar chords and experiments with different time signatures within a song. Black says he had more creative license to play around with song structure because he was writing for himself and not for the Pixies.

"The Pixies were a live band. We were a lot more uptight about keeping things portable," he says. "I was trying to make this as different as I could."

And that's exactly the kind of independence Black has now without the Pixies.

"Frank Black is a separate entity," he says. "This is a new guy, a debut performer. I will spend the next month promoting Frank Black. I won't promote the Pixies because I've already done that. I'm trying to make another me as much as I can."

And really, that makes this whole Thompson-Francis-Black business quite simple.

"Rock and roll isn't as psychological for me as people infer," Black says. "I don't exorcise demons; I make a good pop record. It's not any kind of primal scream therapy — it's just so people can tap their damn foot." □

