

■ **Forgotten music**

Alternative albums from childhood that actually didn't suck

A "detachable penis" and the triple guitar assault of Radiohead are just some of the nostalgic highlights

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Sometimes people enjoy revisiting the music of their childhood, the sounds from that time when their personality and tastes were forming and when everything sounded new and fresh, no matter how cheesy and derivative it actually was.

It's amazing how much the music we loved as children turned out, in hindsight, to really suck. But why don't we put on the buttless chaps of nostalgia and go for a stroll into to the gay nightclub of our childhood (how's that for a metaphor?) and look at some albums from our formative

years that did not suck, or at least didn't suck so bad.

First in our trip down alterna-rock memory lane is The Breeders, a pleasant enough collaboration between second fiddle songwriters from the Pixies and Throwing Muses, respectively. Their album "Last Splash" was their most substantial piece of work and contained their sole contribution to our collective consciousness, the single "Cannonball." The song is one of those unfortunate hits that can ruin an otherwise decent band, dooming it to the county fair circuit for all eternity. With its instantly catchy and wonderfully bouncy bass line, which wraps around an equally infectious guitar hook, the song can stick in your mind like a wad of super glue and cotton candy. It's rhythmic stop-start progression and sudden false end make it one of the better singles of the alternative rock era.

Unfortunately, that's about it for that album. While there are a few other more-than-decent tracks, much of the album is bogged down with fragmented, incomplete ideas and ponderous, underdeveloped mush. But now, as then, one song can

make it all worthwhile.

Next up is a band equally defined by a hit song, though not the sort of song that ends up selling Volkswagens. King Missile was an underground success through the late 1980s and early 90s, making a name for itself with spoken word rants, humor, musical adeptness and literary sophistication (we are talking relative to other rock artists here). The band's defining moment ended up being the album "Happy Hour" and a little ditty called "Detachable Penis." The song is a rambling monologue told from the perspective of a man who wakes up to find his removable meat missing and wanders around looking for it, feeling low while his organ is away. With its distorted groove and melodious backing vocals that echo the title over and over like a perverse religious chant, the song became a college radio staple and made the band a novelty favorite, thus sealing their fate.

There is more to the album than just the one song, however. A few other choice cuts make the whole thing worthwhile, such as the short blast of verbal violence meant as a misdirected homage to Martin Scorsese. But other than these highlights, it existed for the "Penis" song.

Next we have a band that managed to next off its one hit. Radiohead, for a minute thought to be the Pink Floyd of its generation before the band decided to do something more interesting, made a name for itself with the song "Creep," a moody bit of angst that captured the early 90's zeitgeist and strangled it for all it was worth. While this

song was a little more indicative of what the band was heading toward, the album it came from was not. "Pablo Honey" is different from every other Radiohead album in that it contains tight, standard songwriting in a traditional rock style. The band had not yet developed its love of atmospheric and instead focused on the triple guitar assault that it would perfect on "The Bends." The result is a good enough collection of Brit-rock that is unfortunately overshadowed by the rest of the band's work. "Creep" isn't even the best song on the album, though it is up there. Great, anthemic bits of rock 'n' roll such as "Stop Whispering" and "Anyone Can Play Guitar" showed that the band actually bothered to master the traditional rock style before completely deconstructing it. Cool album.

Finally we have a band that didn't really have any big hits in this country, even though their sound helped define the times. Blur, by 1995, was in a bitter feud with the more popular band Oasis. Both were set to release new albums, Blur with "The Great Escape," Oasis with "(What's the Story) Morning Glory?," around the same time, and things were looking fierce when their lead singles came out in August. The ever-rabid British music press was hyping the story to high



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heaven, and everyone awaited the sales results to see who would come out on top. Ultimately, because of an error with the bar codes on the Oasis single, Blur was the winner. "Country House," one of the best songs the band ever produced, became a number-one British hit. The album as a whole didn't sell as well as "Morning Glory" in the end (few things do), but overall it was the better album. It was better written, better produced and smarter (not to fault "Morning Glory" too much). But unfortunately, it ended up being one of those albums that was "too English" for these shores. Shame. It would have made for some great listening for some impressionable youths.

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IN BRIEF

The men who make hits out of teenage girl novels

The masterminds behind some of the most popular books for adolescent girls are a couple of thirtysomething men who work in an average office building full of white, Ikea-esque furniture.

But don't underestimate these guys. They are experts on teen crazes, and they know their limitations enough to hire young, female editors to develop ideas that jive with what a girl wants.

Alloy Entertainment Inc., a division of marketing and advertising giant Alloy, has developed a slew of hot book series, including "Gossip Girl," "The A-List," "The Clique" and "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants," which was made into a hit movie, and TV's "Roswell."

Three of its books are in the top 10

of The New York Times list of best sellers for children's books, and "Traveling Pants," is the No. 1 series.

Alloy Entertainment has a staff in New York of about 10 editors who diligently research what's hot in the teen world — what girls are wearing, the music they like, the TV shows they Tivo.

The hook that many of the novels have in common is a gaggle of rich, bratty, powerful schoolgirls. It's like an episodic reading of Paris Hilton and her friends, and who can resist a little peek into how the privileged live? Others strive to be more in the Judy Blume vein, focusing on strong friendships and life lessons. Either way, teens are devouring the books.

New version of Etch-A-Sketch comes calling

For doodlers who can't get enough etching and sketching at home, Etch-A-Sketch is coming to a cell phone.

The cellular version can't, of course, replicate the look and feel of the original red-and-rectangular plastic toy, which is still produced by Ohio Art Co. And users will have to settle for a key pad rather than white knobs.

But there is one advantage: For the first time, In-Fusio said, doodlers will be able to save their drawings — up to three in the phone's memory.

On the cellular version, users move the virtual "stylus" around the phone's screen by pressing the number pad or direction arrows.

One key distinction that Etch-A-Sketch aficionados might mourn is that erasing a cellular sketch does not involve the vigorous shaking needed to recoat the real toy's screen with powder.

But In-Fusio has devised an alternative: When a user presses the "0" key to erase a drawing, the phone also vibrates.

—The Associated Press

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