

MUSIC

Magnetic personality

Stephin Merritt chooses his words carefully

BY CORI TARATOOT

It's the summer of 2004, and I can't shake the Magnetic Fields' new record, *i*.

I want to. I want to sneer at the narcissism of the lowercase first-person album title, or berate Stephin Merritt (the band's primary songwriter and singer) for his incessant indulgence in ironic, deep-throated romanticism. I beg my girlfriend to take *i* out of the CD player, but she loves it.

Loves it. Wouldn't you think that a musician who titled his last record *69 Love Songs*—and meant it—would be wrung dry? For god's sake, *69 Love Songs*. A literate, theatrical, three-disc dissertation on one man's queer heart (via Morrissey, New Order and Irving Berlin). Delicious masochism for broken lovers. And *i*—the band's seventh record—is more where that

Hopefully his Portland audience will receive a warmer welcome than this. Maybe Merritt's ukulele will break the tension.

I dive into the heart of the awkwardness. "You've given some interviews," I ask, "that have made you seem grumpier than maybe you are. Do you think that's true?" His response: "I've given some interviews with really difficult journalists." I wait out the awkward pause. "Not all music journalists are awful and stupid. They're not stupid. Well, obviously some of them are. Um. But they live with their own agendas. I've been a music journalist."

Progress! Six sentences. Spider sense says Merritt is a prolific musician (y'know, with the, uh, *69* and all). In addition to the Magnetic Fields, he's performed and recorded as/with the 6ths, the Gothic Archies and Future Bible Heroes. But rock journalism? (A quick Google search finds Merritt's byline inside *The New York Times*. Underachiever.)

So Merritt begins to detail how his writing life extends beyond the realm of Magnetic Fields records. He talks about his film scores. There's *Eban and Charley*, a gay intergenerational film directed by PDX resident James Bolton. The soundtrack to *Pieces of April*, an indie shot digitally by Peter Hedges (*What's Eating Gilbert Grape*), consists of Magnetic Fields outtakes, plus one Merritt original.

Then there's the songwriter's experimental production of the Ming Dynasty opera *Peach Blossom Fan*, the commissioned opera on Hans Christian Andersen, the film score for children's author Lemony Snicket and a new 6ths album (rumored to be tracks for 1960s Andy Warhol screen tests).

So, yeah, Stephin Merritt is busy. But listening to him, it becomes clear that his impa-

tience with extraneous information (like, say, most questions from music journalists) is really evidence of a single-minded focus on the things he loves. I ask Merritt my last question, one that's been nagging at me during the interview: What do you enjoy, Stephin? And for the first time in the course of our conversation, Merritt seems happy to answer the question.

"I enjoy hazel cognac and cigarettes," says Merritt. "I enjoy drinking and smoking. I enjoy songwriting. Most of the time I enjoy recording...and I've been really enjoying doing music for plays."

So for those of you in attendance Nov. 11 at the Aladdin, bring Stephin Merritt a snifter of cognac and a smoke, enjoy the songs, and ignore the rest of it—that extraneous stuff that doesn't really matter anyway. **JM**

THE MAGNETIC FIELDS play 8 p.m. Nov. 11 at Aladdin Theater, 3017 S.E. Milwaukie Ave. Tickets are \$20-\$22 from the box office or Ticketmaster.

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Stephin Merritt (second from left) also composes film music, including the score for 2000's *Eban and Charley*, which was shot in Oregon

came from: 14 indie-rock show tunes about love gone wrong, 14 more cuts from Merritt's sharpened knife, 14 more recordings of his tobacco-stained baritone.

Maybe I'm just bitter because I write one song every five years, and Stephin Merritt seems to write one every five minutes. Plus? He's a fantastic writer. The kind of writer who makes other writers despise him.

And besides, it's not hard to dislike Merritt. He's an infamous pain in the ass—pretentious, impatient, perhaps unsuited for life in the public eye. (Think of the sullen young Bob Dylan toying with and eluding the press in the D.A. Pennebaker documentary *Dont Look Back*.)

Evidence. Catching up with Merritt via phone, he is, initially, the brick wall writers and publicists whisper about. I ask him how the tour is going. "It's just going from airport to hotel to venue to hotel," Merritt responds abruptly. "We don't get to see anything or do anything interesting." (Insert awkward silence.) And do you like the European audiences, I ask? "Same." (Insert awkward silence.) Would you abandon touring altogether if you could? "I'm not all that happy to tour." (Silence.)

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