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New York

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FITTER. HAPPIER.

Letting loose on its confident new album and jazzed to be back on the road, Radiohead is looking on the bright side **By Reed Tucker** Photographs by **John Spinks**

If everything you read were true, Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke would fall somewhere between Edgar Allan Poe and Eeyore in the pantheon of the world's most miserable bastards. Ever since the band went huge with 1997's *OK Computer*, countless articles have portrayed the spiky-haired singer as distant, tortured and generally gloomier than a London weather forecast. It's a wonder the man hasn't hacked off an ear yet. The four other band members got off easier, but not much, alternately being painted as overly intellectual, stand-offish and impenetrable.

So what's with the guys actually smiling on the cover of this magazine? And what's with this new album, *Hail to the Thief*, sounding so much looser and warmer than either of their two most recent efforts, the frosty, electronic-tinted *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*? "I think we have lightened up quite a lot," says drummer Phil Selway, sitting in a Dublin bar last month, the night before the band opened its world tour, which includes a

stop at this weekend's Field Day festival (see "Long Island sounds," page 36). "The music never lies, really. It's always a very good barometer of what's going on in a band."

If the music from *Hail to the Thief* is any indication, the band is fitter and happier than it has been in years. "With this record, I was just letting it happen—for the first time," Yorke says in his Dublin hotel, munching on a seriously hodgepodge vegetarian dinner of french fries, steamed vegetables and a leafy salad. While he's the band's singer, frontman, lyricist and acknowledged leader, Yorke says he's never been controlling about songwriting—most of the band's music is co-written. But he does admit to being the one "with the loud mouth," quick to give his opinion, no matter how brutal.

It was Yorke's longtime girlfriend, who convinced the singer to loosen up. "There was one particular conversation we had after listening to [Neil Young's] *After the Gold Rush*," he recalls. "She said, 'Why don't you just do it like

that: chilled out? Go in and let things take their natural course, and only fuck with [the other members] when they need fucking with.' And I think that's why the music sounds a bit more positive." Because of Yorke's adopted glasnost policy, *Thief* was, by all accounts, Radiohead's least laborious record to make, especially compared with the arduous *Kid A*, released in 2000. "This album is like someone's who's had eight kids," Yorke says with a high-pitched cackle. "They just fall out as you're walking round the kitchen."

It also helps when everyone is steering in the same direction. In the case of *Kid A*, Yorke guided the band toward a more electronic, impersonal sound, a move that reportedly ruffled the others, especially guitarist Ed O'Brien. "With *Kid A*, a lot of [the music] was actually quite fully formed by the time it was presented to be worked on as a band," Selway says. However, bassist Colin Greenwood claims he supports Yorke's commanding interests in the



THIEVES LIKE US Their crisis of confidence behind them, the band members agree that *Hail to the Thief* was their easiest album to make; from left, Jonny Greenwood, O'Brien, Yorke, Selway and Colin Greenwood.

MORE PRODUCTIVE.

band. "You need someone with a controlling vision. I've got no ideas," he says, apparently only half joking. "I think we'd like nothing better than to be a band like [Neil Young's] Crazy Horse, backing someone with vision."

Yorke says the direction for *Thief* hit him suddenly in late 2001, while he was driving his car. "I have particular points of revelation or whatever you call it, where I'll be hearing something or sitting somewhere or doing something and—*ding!*—that's where we're going," he says. "On this one, I was driving through the countryside in what's called the gloaming in England, which is basically twilight, when the colors change and everything gets dark. And I was listening to this politics-and-news station during the Afghan war—and it was like someone just beamed something from above." When asked to elaborate about this "vision," Yorke demurs. "It's not so direct," he says. "It's a sound and a color; it's sort of everything. I don't know exactly what it is, I just know that's the record—I hear it and it sounds right." (Incidentally, a song on *Thief* is called "The Gloaming," which the liner notes also list as the album's alternate title.)

Caution: Geniuses at work

The band's newfound assuredness is the result of a long uphill struggle, during which they suffered a collective form of self-doubt. To get past it, the members say they had to recover their confidence, which had vaporized sometime around 1998. Following the anointing of *OK Computer* as an Important Work of Art by virtually every critic, the band—and Yorke especially—suffered a much-publicized breakdown as they tried to come to grips with their new "rock geniuses" status. "We were questioning, what possible right did we have to be in that position?" Yorke says. Or, as O'Brien puts it, "You don't gain true confidence by making a great record—you're just thinking, Oh, shit! What are we going to do next?"

The members didn't begin believing in themselves again until they toured in support of *Kid A* and *Amnesiac*, for which they had to arrange and learn to play live the often tricky material from those two albums. "It gave those songs a life we didn't expect and made us think slightly differently," Yorke says. "I was amazed at what we ended up creating, and at how everyone was playing."

Their self-confidence problems behind them, the band members are now looking to quash the widespread misperception that they're a bunch of joyless sods. In truth, the group is dreadfully normal: All still live in Oxford save for O'Brien, who now resides in London. Colin Greenwood and his brother, guitarist Jonny, are married, as is Selway; Yorke and O'Brien have serious girlfriends. Selway has three kids, Jonny Greenwood has a new baby boy, and Yorke has a two-year-old son, Noah. So how did these five regular blokes—guys who carry their own bags and were spotted *walking* back to the hotel after their Dublin concert—get such a bad rep? "I kind of think I'm being funny all the time, and no one's getting the joke," Yorke says. "I consider quite a lot of our music to be funny. But then, I consider a lot of the Smiths' [music] to be funny, too."

The U.K.'s rabid tabloid culture doesn't help matters. "It can be frustrating," says Jonny Greenwood backstage after the show. "I remember Thom once saying in an interview, 'Yeah, I just moved houses and my life is a complete fucking mess because everything is in boxes.' And the quote on the front of the



magazine was, 'My life's a fucking mess,' with a shot of Thom looking unhappy."

Mind you, each band member will cop to their prickly moments—"they're tricky customers," in O'Brien's words—but the image problem was amplified by Grant Gee's 1999 documentary *Meeting People Is Easy*, which portrayed the band's life on the road as horrendously deadening and workaday. Yorke maintains that Gee could just as easily have glorified the touring experience. "Grant could have made the movie bright and happy and cheerful, but it would have been awful; it wouldn't have worked," he says. "Those moments [in the film] were genuine, but it's an editing thing. He wasn't distorting anything, he was just selecting bits to tell that story."

If the May 17 show at Dublin's Olympia Theater was any indication, Radiohead has no qualms about plunging back into the touring life. The band bounced around the stage and clearly looked energized by the swirling crowd. Yorke smiled and joked, while, during songs, O'Brien sang along furiously to himself on stage left. The two-hour set included more than half the songs from the new album, and it rewarded fans with a generous fix of older material. (And if anyone still cares, nope, they didn't play "Creep.")

Field Day will be the first chance most local fans will have to check out the new Radiohead material—not as rocking as *The Bends*, not as electronic as *Kid Amnesia*. At last, these



"I consider quite a lot of our music to be funny," Yorke says. "But then, I consider a lot of the Smiths' music to be funny, too."

guys seem comfortable just being themselves. "I think the people who have our records and like them, they can tell [what we're really like], and everyone else thinks we're a miserable band," Jonny Greenwood says. "On one hand, we're very egotistical, because we want to get Radiohead stuff out and play to lots of people. But it's also cool when no one knows

who you are until you tell them which band you're in." Greenwood pauses before adding, "And they've usually heard of it."

Radiohead plays the Beacon Theatre Thursday 5 and the Field Day festival Saturday 7. *Hail to the Thief* is released Tuesday 10.

Long Island sounds

Field Day, a two-day Euro-style festival, hits the North Fork

The Europeans have taken some heat lately in regard to their politics and their livestock-borne diseases, but where rock in the great outdoors is concerned, the folks across the ocean have the right idea. Massive, weekend-long outdoor festivals attended by tens of thousands of fans are the norm in Europe. With a couple of exceptions, such as California's Reading-inspired Coachella and the disastrous 1999 Woodstock, America has seen few similar events.

This weekend, though, local fans will get their chance, when the curtain goes up on the inaugural edition of Field Day. The festival, held on the 1,000-acre site of an old military aircraft-assembly plant in Calverton, Long Island (nine miles west of Riverhead on the island's North Fork), spotlights some 35 rock and rap artists. Event organizer Andrew Dreskin says that at press time,

more than 50,000 tickets had been sold.

"It felt like a chancy thing, which is very exciting," says Radiohead guitarist Jonny Greenwood. Field Day turned out to be chancier than Greenwood or anyone else could have imagined. For a brief period late last week, the event's status was up in the air when the Suffolk County Health Department denied the promoters a permit. As the 11th hour neared, a deal was struck when the promoters agreed to hire additional security, and scores of music lovers breathed a sigh of relief.

In addition to its multiple music stages, the event has allotted space on the grounds for modern-art exhibits, and certain activist organizations have been invited to set up tents. Of course, fans are also invited to set up tents (Dreskin says he's expecting 15,000 campers). The venue space can accommodate 60,000 people each day, and Dreskin says he doesn't expect Field Day to sell out. Of all the logistical benefits of the festival-style show, that's gotta be the best one: ample space!—RT

SATURDAY 7

Radiohead
Beck
Underworld
Spiritualized
Thievery Corporation
Beth Orton
Interpol
Röyksopp
Dashboard Confessional
Liz Phair
Tortoise
Thursday
The Raveonettes
Ben Lee
My Morning Jacket
Gemma Hayes
22-20s

SUNDAY 8

Beastie Boys
Sigur Rós
Blur
The Roots
Elliott Smith
N.E.R.D.
The Streets
Bright Eyes
Le Tigre
Blackallcious
The Sea and Cake
Peanut Butter Wolf
Luna
Ben Kweller
Particula
The Polyphonic Spree
Ours
Trachtenburg Family
Slideshow Players

Field Day takes place Sat 7 and Sun 8 at Enterprise Park in Calverton, NY. For travel instructions, see www.fielddayfest.com/travel.html. Tickets can be purchased at www.fielddayfest.com or through Ticketmaster (212-307-7171). \$85 per day or \$160 for both; two-day pass including a camping permit \$190.



BACK TO NATURE The Roots are among the 35 acts lined up to perform at the weekend-long Field Day.