

# PREACHING TO THE >> CONVERTED

VOICES FROM THE GRAVE IN THE NEW RELEASE FROM THE MANIC STREET PREACHERS, BOB DYLAN GETS THE BLUES AND ROCKING INDIE FROM SCOTLAND. *GERAINT PRICE* REVIEWS THE LATEST RECORDS

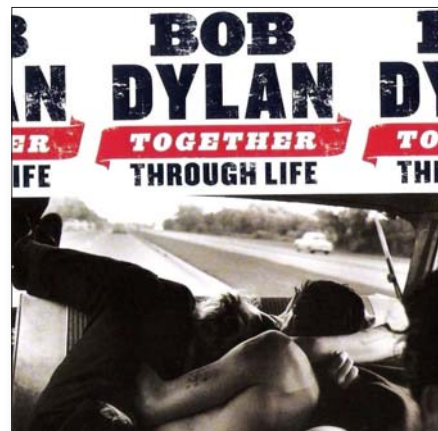


**FOURTEEN** years since the mysterious disappearance of guitarist Richey James and now at last it appears the Manic Street Preachers can lay his soul to rest. James was the driving force behind the Welsh indie band's lyrics, declared dead in absence of a body last year. On 1 February 1995, his Vauxhall Cavalier car was found abandoned at a motorway service station near the Severn Bridge, a notorious suicide spot in the south-west of England. What fate befell him, no one knows. Despite suffering from severe depression, friends and family claimed suicide was not in his vocabulary (despite the band covering *Suicide Is Painless* – the theme

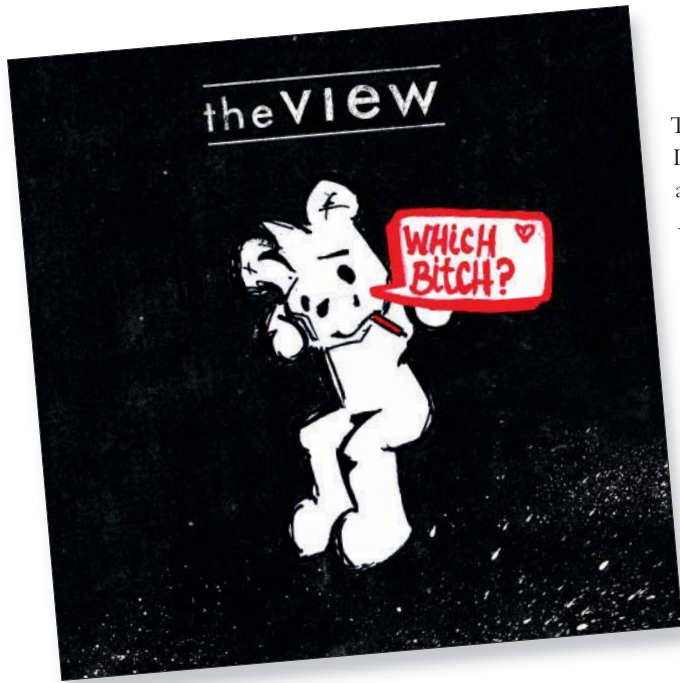
from *M\*A\*S\*H*). "In terms of the 'S' word, that does not enter my mind. And it never has done, in terms of an attempt. Because I am stronger than that. I might be a weak person, but I can take pain," he had said the previous year.

Curiously, before his disappearance he left a scrap book of lyrics and ideas for the follow up to *The Holy Bible* album, which was the last record to feature him performing. The follow-up double platinum-selling, *Everything Must Go*, cemented the Manics as one of the UK's most successful rock acts.

I listened to the latest release, *Journal For Plague Lovers*, without the benefit of the press release or media coverage, and I'm so glad I did. My blissful ignorance led me to the conclusion that this is the biggest pile of unmitigated guff it has ever been my misfortune to listen to: pretentious almost beyond belief; self-indulgent, pseudo-philosophical claptrap masquerading as art. Yet sadly every review I have read subsequently eulogises it. Unfortunately, to me at least, it falls between two stools: it's neither as raw as *Generation Terrorist* (their first release) nor as immediate and anthemic as *Everything Must Go*. The band and its followers have undoubtedly matured in the intervening years, yet the lyrics are still stuck in the mid Nineties – the kind of fresh grad piffle that most groups grow out of after a couple of years. With song titles like *Jackie Collins* [sic] *Existential Question Time*, *She Bathed Herself In A Bath Of Bleach* and *Virginia State Epileptic Colony*, you know you're on to a loser. Musically, too, it lacks the bite and originality one would come to expect, with too many familiar hooks and chord progressions. It's as if the band believed that wallowing in the messiah's lyrics would suffice. Even Jenny Saville's cover art lacks progression, harking back to *The Holy Bible*. The band should be admired for allowing time to elapse before putting out this release – thus avoiding accusations of cashing in on James' memory, but this is not the glowing epitaph it could have been.



Continuing on from last month's column on revivalism, Bob Dylan's 33<sup>rd</sup> studio album has also been attracting reverential reviews, though this time they are a little more worthy than those bestowed on the Manics. It's the third time this decade that Dylan has been asked to contribute music to a Hollywood picture: in 2000 he wrote the track *Things Have Changed* for *Hollywood Confidential* director Curtis Hanson's *Wonderboys*. And he picked up an Oscar and a Golden Globe for his troubles. This time round, French filmmaker Olivier Dahan, director of the acclaimed Edith Piaf biopic *La Vie en Rose*, invited Dylan to write some songs for his new film, *My Own Love Song*, a romantic road movie of sorts starring Renée Zellweger and Forest Whitaker. However, he was invited to contribute a number of songs, inspiring him to create a whole new album. The outcome, *Together Through Life*, sounds like it was lobbed off with barely a thought, yet it still manages to sound cohesive. "I didn't come here to deal with a doggone thing/I just came here to hear the drummer's cymbal ring," he growls on *My Wife's Home Town*, harmonica and brushed-snare in the background. That's just one of many wryly observed blues tunes that should keep his many loyal fans content.



They've been called the Scottish Libertines, though for the life of me I can't think why. Where the Libertines were Britpop redux, The View are more good old fashioned Indie rock 'n' rollers, more akin to the Arctic Monkeys – with equally regional accents. Their debut album, *Hats Off To The Buskers*, had a few cracking singles and a lot of fillers, the follow-up, *Which Bitch?*, is even better. The opener, *Typical Time 2*, is a cutesy folk-blues ditty for harmonica and piano, followed by the first single *5Rebecca's* [sic], dazzlingly cut with one of those killer choruses that leaps out of nowhere and grabs you by the throat. *One Off Pretender*, with frontman Kyle Falconer rapping Mike Skinner-like in a thick (and often impenetrable) Dundee accent, is interrupted by the rousing “Shout it from the rooftop” terrace chant chorus.

And the string-laden *Unexpected*, underscored by a moody bassline, is a song of sombre haunting beauty, as it describes the singer's shock and guilt at the “unexpected” suicide of a loved one, “But I always should have known/That you would lead a shortened life as your light was running low”. Great stuff. ■