

The Church



Marty Willson-Piper & Steven Kilbey

The Church is an extremely enigmatic band. Comprised of equal parts droning guitar rock, somber psychedelia, and tongue-in-cheek pop, the band has defied formal characterization for more than a decade. Formed in Australia in 1981, its initial stateside success came with the release of 1988's brilliant *Starfish*, which contained the MTV staple "Under the Milky Way."

But as early pioneers of the trance-like guitar layering that has since given birth to texture bands and dream pop, The Church is often overlooked for its inventive guitar playing and its ability to weave 12-string electric guitars and acoustic guitars into shimmering rock tunes and dark, ethereal ballads. Marty Willson-Piper's slithering guitar lines sound like a cackling dope fiend, shrieking through the reverb of some faraway alley. Steven Kilbey, lead singer and bassist, uses a six-string Fender that provides a rambling counterpoint to Willson-Piper's eerie guitar playing (Kilbey's role is similar in many respects to what Paul McCartney did with that band he was in before Wings). Together they produce melodic and entrancing music highlighted by piercing flashes of guitar that cut through the current, kind of like a meandering stream that has razor blades floating in it.

The Church is a duo these days, since former rhythm guitarist Peter Koppes went off to pursue his own muse (it's not like he was locked into the band, though; between them, the members of The Church have released nearly two dozen solo or collaborative albums outside of the band in the last decade, including stints with Jack Frost, All About Eve, Tom Verlaine, and Hex). Drummer Richard Ploog exited the band before 1992's *Priest=Aura*, and was replaced by both drum machines and various human drummers. Today, it is only Kilbey and Willson-Piper who make up the congregation, and yet the band still sounds like it did when it was a full-fledged four-piece. When the two got together this past year to see what was left of The Church, the result was *Sometime Anywhere*, the band's ninth album (not counting several compilation albums of collected out-

takes). The band's studio rebirth was so spontaneous that much of the exploratory playing ended up going directly onto the new album. On some tracks they played each other's instruments simply because that was what they were holding onto as the tape ran. Says Kilbey, "It didn't matter who was playing the guitar, it just happened to be whoever had the guitar or the right vibe at the time."

Kilbey also sees the new album as a liberation from the confines of dealing with an entire band. "In the past, with Peter and a drummer, usually we'd just jam out with each other, then rehearse it and then record it. Since it was just Marty and me, this time we put it straight to tape without the rehearsal, which left us free to keep certain parts without having to replay or relearn them again with the whole band. It gave us a certain amount of freedom, because with only two of us, we could do more with each other's parts, like take guitar sections and play them backwards or sample them. Because of that, *Sometime Anywhere* tends to breathe a little bit more than some of the past albums." Willson-Piper emphasizes the point, noting, "There was no role-playing; we could play whatever was there, the drums or guitars or keyboards. On probably half the songs, I ended up playing bass."

For Willson-Piper, taking over all the guitar duties didn't pose a problem. "In-between the last few Church albums, I'd played for a lot of other people and even joined All About Eve for a couple of albums when their guitarist Tim Bricheno quit [to join The Sisters Of Mercy]. In that situation, I went from 'Oh my god, how am I going to cut this?' to having our first gig go absolutely fine. Consequently, when it came time to come back to The Church and Peter had quit, I had absolutely no fear. It was like, 'Okay, so now it's only me.'"

Known for its effects-heavy guitars, The Church pulled out all the stops for *Sometime Anywhere*. "This album is full of crazy sounds, weird guitar sounds," says Willson-Piper. "The wilder stuff in The Church was always me anyway, because Peter didn't have a wild streak. Peter was soft, which always let me act noisy with the weird noises we have."

"We've done the jangly guitar thing so much in the past," adds Kilbey, "that we were a little bit tired of it, you know? And this time, it was like we had more time and space, so

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we got to play with the sound and play with more effects and more instruments. We had all those little yellow overdrive and distortion boxes lying around and kind of decided 'if one pedal is good, then two might be twice as good, and three might be three times as good.'" Willson-Piper relied heavily on some old standbys, though. "For a lot of stuff I used an old Ibanez analog delay that has stereo out, along with a volume pedal, which I think is the most creative effect I've ever had. It doesn't really do anything, which is why it's so fantastic. Everything about a volume pedal has to do with feel and the way you play."

Not content with all those pedals, The Church experimented with everything they could get their hands on, according to Kilbey. "This time we used a SansAmp, which we loved, as well as other things from harmonizers to E-Bows. We even played through some ancient synthesizers, where we'd plug the guitar into an old Korg that had the switchboard on the front. We'd just plug the guitar into the input and sometimes it would take a while till we got it where we could even get sound out of the thing, but then we'd have this amazing sound that was half guitar, half synth. I really recommend that to people looking for new guitar sounds; plugging a guitar into those old analog synths as opposed to

using real guitar synthesizers, which I don't find all that amazing."

From a playing perspective, Willson-Piper is definitely not of the shred school, nor does he care to be. Shredding would limit the expansive nature of The Church's music by putting too much focus on a single guitar line, thereby putting limits on it. "We like to pride ourselves on our atmospherics," he says. His lead lines and fills are tight and succinct, often sustaining from one note to the next over an entire line of vocals, only to come back and then vibrate and tremolo off into nothingness. ("The Church has always had guitar solos as part of the structure of the song instead of someplace where the guitarist steps up and plays a hundred thousand notes while everyone else gets bored," claims Kilbey). Repeated listens to *Sometime Anywhere* will unveil numerous guitar parts twined about each other like embracing cobras, leaving only Kilbey's voice and bass to hold down the heart of the song. Oftentimes, the guitars are so thickly layered, and so deeply treated with reverb, echo, wah-wah, and volume swells that you're not really sure you're listening to guitars at all. Like the original psychedelic bands (notably Pink Floyd), there are times when the guitars could be mistaken for keyboards or sound effects. But no matter how much distortion he

throws at his playing, it is still very identifiable as his own style.

In particular, Willson-Piper is a master of utilizing open chords to maximize the droning effects of open strings. He gets more mileage out of three-finger chord structures on a Rickenbacker electric 12-string than most guitarists do with five-fingered barre chords on a Strat, utilizing techniques as simple as accenting the bass notes while plucking or strumming the three notes of the root chord (check out *Starfish's* "Hotel Womb" and *Sometime Anywhere's* "My Little Problem") or repeating a haunting arpeggio over and over (*Heyday's* "Myrrh," and *Priest=Aura's* "The Disillusionist").

The band plans on touring behind their new release, doing a semi-acoustic set with a small group of backing musicians. But the multi-layered guitar playing on the album presents some basic performance problems, like how to play all the strange six-string atmospherics that are the trademark of *Sometime Anywhere*. "Well, there are so many guitar parts that we probably couldn't plan on playing live exactly like the album even if we had the old lineup," admits Willson-Piper. "We'll just have to adapt some of the guitar parts for a different band setting."

Which parts?

"All of them," he laughs. ☐



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