

Baby Boom

A tiny revolution is afoot and its growing by the day. Worried? You shouldn't be. After all, if quiet can usurp the old loud, then who's to say that nappies can't be the new black T-shirt or nurseries the new moshpit. Kids music has never been cooler and today's artists are practically queuing round the playpen to get a piece of the action. Where the likes of Paul McCartney and Donovan got it so hideously wrong, bands like Saint Etienne, Erasure, Belle & Sebastian, Ida and The Innocence Mission are flying in the face of convention like pureed food from a spoon. A nervous **Alan Pedder** donned protective clothing and went in search of the why...



illustration by Mark Stevens

My first encounter with children's music as an adult was a fraught and unpleasant experience. It was Christmas, 1997, and my mum had just handed me a tantalisingly CD-shaped package. After briefly scanning the label and nodding my thanks, I tore off the paper to reveal [drum roll] *The Best Mr. Men Album In The World... Ever!* 43 Original Pop Songs For Children. Now, a lesser audiophile may have run right then and there but I was, in fact, a big Mr. Men fan and if this was the best... ever! I was damn well determined to love it. In the end, I just couldn't. Every 'song' was unspeakably scandalous, a white knuckle pile-up of as many musical styles you can crowbar into five inches of plastic, all clumsily buttered with voices so sickly that I wanted to shred the speakers. No genre was left unscathed, from shoddy cod reggae to outlawed country and western. Hell, even Mr. Tickle let me down. I was disillusioned to say the least.

Fast forward seven years and I'm stalking the aisles of HMV (older though not convincingly wiser) searching for my next circular fix when something different caught my eye. Maybe it was the cutesy illustrated packaging that reeled me in, or just that it was something unexpectedly new from a favourite artist, but finally I felt ready to put Hargreavesgate behind me and usher in a brave new world. That epochal album was Lisa Loeb and Elizabeth Mitchell's **Catch The Moon**, an endlessly endearing acoustic gem for children that ambles charmingly between Bob Dylan's *New Morning* and *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, via French, Spanish and Japanese folk songs.

As if to underscore the family theme, Mitchell's husband Dan Littleton and their daughter Storey also chime in, the youngest most adorably on the crowd participation pleaser *Stop & Go*, a slyly funky little song with a nagging guitar riff. Family friend and 4AD's His Name Is Alive head honcho Warren Defever was also involved, as was Liz's mother Bonnie Brooke Mitchell who lovingly illustrated the accom-

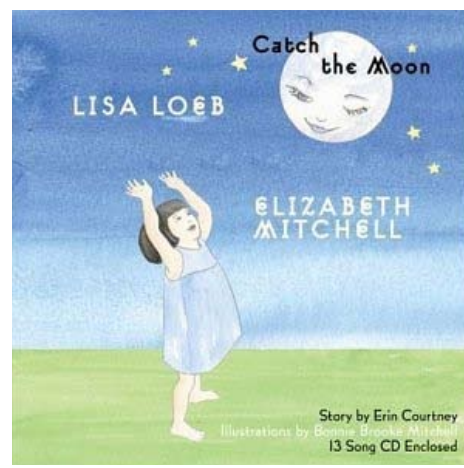
panying storybook. Collaboration had never been so wholesome and it demanded repeated plays.

While this was Loeb's first full-length foray into children's music (she had previously contributed songs to the soundtrack for *Rugrats The Movie* and a *Lilo & Stitch* tie-in), Mitchell and Littleton, both founding members of US indie luminaries *Ida*, have form for such things. During her many years as a nursery teacher in New York, Mitchell would sing the folk songs of Woody Guthrie, Elizabeth 'Shake Sugaree' Cotten and the Carter Family to her charges – a wholegrain alternative to the fun but often artistically anaemic Disney soundtracks so many were overexposed to.

The story goes that while on the road with *Ida* in 1998, Mitchell was heavy with cold when she and Dan dropped by Defever's home in Livonia, Michigan, and ended up taping these songs and others on a whim. The result, **You Are My Flower**, was wrapped and mastered in one day using single takes only. It was never originally intended for sale, and yet even now, Mitchell receives letters and emails from a mind-bogglingly diverse range of enthusiastic listeners – from young parents to teenage *Ida* fans and punks. These days, all sales from the album are donated to a children's charity, as are those of its follow-up, **You Are My Sunshine**. Recording for that collection began in 2000 while Mitchell was in the early stages of pregnancy with Storey, and the album was eventually released two years later to similar acclaim.

"Children's songs are such an exciting medium," says Mitchell. "There's such a meeting ground of very old music and bringing it into the present, while having a dialogue with the past. Kids music frees you up to be a beginner, to do things in a less precious, less pressured way."

Loeb concurs, saying "We wanted to be in touch with the classics. We tweaked them, personalized them a bit, and then tried to create a lot of variety. [*Catch The Moon*]

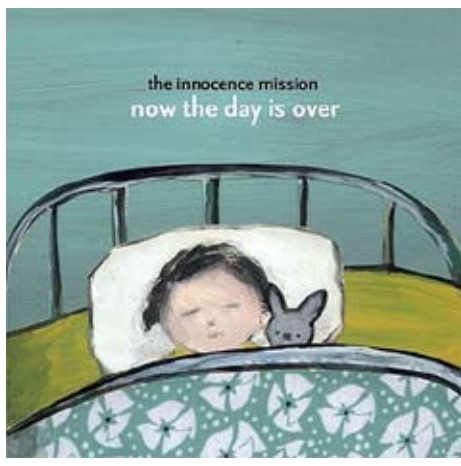


has enough simplicity and variety that it stays interesting to listen to, and doesn't talk down to kids. The instruments, sound of voices, and the arrangements I think will appeal to every age."

In fact, the process seems so enjoyable that Mitchell is already planning a third kids' album. "It's easy to be super zany, or to make sleepy lullaby music, and there is a place for both," she says. "But I like to find something in between, and to bring in unexpected sources – on the next album, we're recording songs by Yoko Ono, Vashti Bunyan and Françoise Hardy, as well as folk songs from Korea, Portugal, the Philippines and Japan. We play Velvet Underground and Bo Diddley songs at the shows all the time, and those are some of the best 'kids' songs I know."

While the impetus for Mitchell's albums came from many years spent around young children, most arise from the simple fact that the artists become first-time parents themselves and discover first-hand the horrors of the genre. In November, perennial pop





heroes Saint Etienne will release **Up The Wooden Hills**, their first album aimed squarely at the preschool set. But what makes London's finest feel qualified for such a daunting task? "Two of us have had kids in recent years and we got particularly fed up with nasty kids music, where it's nasty keyboard sounds and nasty voices," explains singer Sarah Cracknell, whose son Spencer was born in 2002, "There's quite a lot of it about."

Indeed, it's hard to think of a voice less nasty than Cracknell's soft and creamy vocals, while bandmates Pete Wiggs and Bob Stanley have exiled any mention of tacky horrible synths with a more sympathetic instrumental background. The joyous *You Can Count On Me* sounds like Stereolab in training pants, and, like several songs on **Catch The Moon**, contains laudable cultural references with Cracknell counting to ten in English, French and Spanish. Elsewhere, *Let's Build A Zoo* is a riotous romp through the animal alphabet ("Rachel rode a



rhino" etc.) and the David Essex-featuring *Bedfordshire* (as in 'up the wooden hills to') charms as a sweet and woozily woven tale. Add to that the obligatory song about trains, complete with booms and whistles, and it would seem that all the boxes are ticked. "It was actually a lot easier than making a normal album, it was really quick," says Wiggs. "It allows you to give free rein to your daft side."

Indeed, and they don't come much dafter than 44-year old permanent-bedhaired Dan Zanes, a man on a mission to bring "the world of 21st Century all ages family music" to the masses, music that allows kids to sing along with mother without the matriarch having a meltdown. He's not alone either; the likes of Aimee Mann, Sheryl Crow, Dar Williams, Suzanne Vega, Debbie Harry, Angelique Kidjo, Rosanne Cash and even sadly neglected Eighties eccentric Sandra Bernhard (her last album was 1998's **I'm Still Here... Damn It!**) have all featured on his strangely engaging records. Seriously, listening to Crow's appealing duet on a dancehall version of *Polly Wolly Doodle*, it's hard to believe it's even the same person.

Zanes, who was once a member of the successful Eighties roots rock twosome, The Del Fuegos, was first inspired to create children's music following the birth of his daughter in 1995. Enlisting the help of some of the people he'd met while in the band, he set about recording **Rocket Ship Beach** (2000), which the New York Times described as "kids' music that works because it is not kids music; it's just music – music that's unsanitised, unpasteurised, that's organic even."

When asked how he sees his records in the context of other albums aimed at the younger generation, Zanes is generously tactful, saying "On a lot of kids' records I can hear the recording studio – all the gizmos and gadgets. I understand the desire to make things sound professional, but I wanted to get away from that. Why not let it sound like what it is? People in a room playing and singing."

US folk-rock band The Innocence Mission would agree. When they started recording 2004's **Now The Day Is Over**, a collection of jazz standards, traditional folk songs and new compositions sung as lullabies, the album was wrapped in under two weeks, mostly recorded live to guitar and later embellished with piano, pump organ and an upright bass. Dedicated to the children of singer Karen Peris, who has worked with Natalie Merchant, Joni Mitchell and Emmylou Harris, and her bandmate and husband Don, **Now The Day Is Over** is a rare and shy breed, inducing a soothing bewitchment that's hard to shake off. Karen's hypnotically fragile vocals even lend poignancy to *Over The Rainbow* and *Moon River*, songs so often mutilated by lesser artists. She even carries off *Edelweiss* without the need to reach for a bucket. Remarkable, really.

This concept of lullaby-ifying (or should that lullabicing? Why isn't there a word for this?!) pop, rock and jazz classics, or indeed music from any genre, has in fact become rather popular over the past few years. A cursory glance at Amazon reveals titles like *Dance Baby* (witness the murder of Björk's *Venus As A Boy*), *80s Baby* (*Karma Chameleon* soporific-style anyone?), *Rock Baby*, *Punk Rock Baby*, and even *Elvis and Beatles For Babies* (relax, it's all pre-*Frog Chorus*, phew!). Sadly, no sign of *Rave Baby* yet, but I'm sure that it's only a tiny matter of time.

This year's best antidote to such derivative brand extension comes in the form of the self-titled album by mysterious collective, Ansty Cowfold. Featuring the vocals of one Kerry Shaw, formerly of Wiiija-signed band Whistler whose most famous song was the laugh-a-minute *Don't Jump In Front Of My Train*, **Ansty Cowfold** goes from Hendrix to Elvis via The Beach Boys, Bill Withers and The Handsome Family. Even gruff and scary Tom Waits gets the lullaby treatment on *Underground* from his surreal 1983 album, **Swordfishtrumpets**.

MY FIRST SONG

We asked some lovely people what their favourite song was as a child. This is what they said...

Not only is it a paradigm for how to do it for the kids, it's also one of the best collections of covers in general. As a bonus, instead of Tori Amos dressing up in wigs and channelling the dead, you get a colourful birdie called Little Wing (that Hendrix cover has a two-fold role) mapping the musical journey through a beautifully designed hardback picture book. Just don't listen and drive.

So now you know where to start, what else is there to look forward to? Well, if that's given you a taste for the genre, put the pacifiers aside and bring on what could well end up being the biggest-selling children's album of 2006. Much-loved Scottish indie band Belle & Sebastian are in the process of curating a charity compilation of brand new songs for toddlers. Rumour has it that Beth Orton, Scissor Sisters, The Fiery Furnaces, Icelandic band Múm and quirky US demi-goth types Rasputina are all involved, alongside Snow Patrol, Franz Ferdinand, Teenage Fanclub, Primal Scream, Adam Green, Four Tet, Gorky's ZygotiC Mynci, Bert Jansch and The Divine Comedy.

Newcastle's finest, Kathryn Williams is also taking part. "I've written a rather odd song about night baking," she says. One artist who probably won't be taking part is fellow Scottish indie maverick Momus, whose two suggested contributions were turned down for their pervy lyrics and references to violent video games. Hardly unexpected really; his 1991 album **Hippopotamomus** was a concept album about underage sex and was subject to widespread criticism.

With other children's albums expected soon from Erasure, who have recently taken to performing *Three Blind Mice* and *Rockabye Baby* in their live sets, and erstwhile Zero 7 vocalist Sophie Barker, the arena is certainly hotting up. Lay out your terry towel early and stake your claim on a ringside seat. ■

Find out more at Elizabeth Mitchell's www.youaremyflower.org and at Dan Zanes' Festival Five Records website www.festivalfive.com.



DIANE CLUCK

i had a lot of favorite songs as a child the first one that comes to mind was a song which i think was called "wildfire" a male folk/pop singer from the seventies sang it i have no idea who the lyrics were a dramatic story of a girl who loses her horse in the snow "and a pony she named wildfire busted down its stall on a cold december morn she ran calling 'wiiiiiiiiiiiiii-l-l-l-l-l-l-d-d-d-d-d-d-f-f-f-f-f-f-i-i-i-i-i-i-r-r-r-r-r-r'e'..." gave me goosebumps when i was maybe seven i also liked the "put the lime in the coconut" song the theme from "ice castles" and anne murray singing "daydream believer"



SHARON LEWIS

It's hard to choose a favourite but I really loved *The Long & Winding Road* by The Beatles.

ROSE POLENZANI

Mine was *Sing Something Simple* by Julie Christie



KIMYA DAWSON

My Country, 'Tis Of Thy People You're Dying by Buffy Sainte-Marie (I had it on 8-track)



NADINE ZAHR

My favorite song as a child was *Christopher Robin*. I used to sing it with my friends at camp when I was a kid. That was my first go at trying to harmonise with others (musically, as well as socially)



LAUREN HOFFMAN

Mother by John Lennon. I covered it on my first EP.