

THE SMASHING PUMPKINS

'ZEITGEIST'

Zeitgeist—the sixth Smashing Pumpkins album and first since 2000--doesn't just capture the spirit of our times, as the title might suggest. Even more impressively, Zeitgeist is a heartfelt, ambitious and deeply felt piece of work that vividly recaptures the spirit of this great and influential rock band. The release of Zeitgeist represents a powerful rebirth and reaffirmation of the Smashing Pumpkins by two of its key members, main singer-songwriter and guitarist Billy Corgan and drummer Jimmy Chamberlin.

This second coming of the Pumpkins is also one of those rare examples of actual truth in 21st Century Advertising. Two years ago-- on the release date of his first solo album--Corgan made headlines around the alternative rock universe by taking out ads in his hometown papers the Chicago Tribune and the Chicago Sun-Times, an open letter publicly declaring his desire and intention to try "renewing and reviving" the Smashing Pumpkins. "I want my band back," he wrote, "and my songs, and my dreams."

More than two years later--much of it spent working closely together first in Scottsdale, Arizona and later in Los Angeles--Corgan and Chamberlin have managed to make good and then some on every line of Corgan's declaration of non-independence. Right from the thrilling yet apocalyptic opening notes of "Doomsday Clock" to the final resounding chords of "Pomp And Circumstances," Zeitgeist is quite clearly the sound of a rock group that has been emphatically renewed and revived and is now ready to embrace and further its musical legacy.

This return of the Smashing Pumpkins has been a meaningful if sometimes challenging easy trip from newspaper ad to musical reality. "Actually it's been a different journey than I had anticipated," Corgan admits. "You can intellectually figure what it's going to be like, but until you actually have the experience you don't know. For me, this has been an overwhelming experience."

"I had advance knowledge of Billy's ad, so I wasn't shocked," says Chamberlin. "But it was a real turning point in my life. It was an opportunity for Billy and I to re-solidify our relationship that never really went away. We were really always friends and partners through both our individual solo projects. So it really made musical sense and spiritual sense. It was a way to make a statement that we're not going to make excuses; we're just going to do what we do. If you like it, you like it. If not, we're *still* going to do it. It was a very freeing thing to read."

For Corgan, the decision to revive the Smashing Pumpkins one way or another was a way of reclaiming his musical birthright. "When I said 'I want my band back,' I realized that I'd taken the best, proudest thing that I'd ever done and chucked it out a window and tried to build a new castle to live in. And in doing so, I took away every advantage of the one that I had built. Fundamentally, I asked myself, 'Why build a new persona when Pumpkins was meant to include *all* the personas?' No matter what, I had to explain myself versus the Titanic symbol of what the band represented even if it wasn't realistic. So I just thought I want my Superman costume outfit back, my Zero outfit or whatever, and just going back to being that person that I'm at peace with."

As the record shows, the Smashing Pumpkins have created one of the most acclaimed bodies of work in music history. Formed in Chicago in 1988, they released *Gish*, their influential (and platinum) debut in 1991, which was followed by more platinum and multi-platinum albums including the nine-times platinum *Mellon Collie And The Infinite Sadness* and the four-times platinum *Siamese Dream*. The pivotal group's many hits include "Disarm," "Today," "Cherub Rock," "1979," "Tonight, Tonight" and "Bullet With Butterfly Wings"--songs that defined the alternative music era and continue to resonate on modern rock radio, influencing a whole new generation.

Despite overtures to the other longstanding members of the Smashing Pumpkins—D'Arcy Wretzky and James Iha—it soon became clear that Corgan and Chamberlin would have to go it alone together. In an attempt to get away and focus on this considerable challenge, the pair took up residence in Scottsdale to get down to work in November of 2005.

According to Chamberlin, "We immediately realized that Pumpkins wasn't something you just pick up and start recording again. We came to a lot of conclusions in the first three weeks of playing together including the fact that the sum total of Pumpkins is the result of lots and lots of work. We set about re-identifying what was great about the band, re-languaging some of the music of the past, inventing new ways to play new Pumpkins that still sounded like the Pumpkins, but didn't sound like old Pumpkins. It was *very* difficult at first. There was a lot of time when we were scratching our head, looking at each other, going 'Can we even do this?'"

The answer, ultimately, was that indeed they could. "At some point about a month and a half in, we started turning a corner and the songs really started reflecting how we were feeling as opposed to trying to go back and recapture some kind of fire, we were rekindling a new fire," Chamberlin explains. "When that started happening it became a very joyous experience. We had a vision and we had a way to achieve the vision—and then we were off to the races."

Chamberlin and Corgan were joined for some days at the races by the two men who helped them produce the album. "We worked with Roy Thomas Baker of Queen, Cars and Foreigner fame and Terry Date of Pantera and Rob Zombie and other sundry metal," says Corgan. "Roy is somebody whose name we had bandied about before but we thought he might be out of touch, so it never came to fruition. We'd always heard these crazy rumors that he's out of his mind. Roy came to Scottsdale and he was great so we ended up working with him. It was the right time. Then we were working with another famed rock producer who ended up being a total flame-out. He didn't even last 48 hours in our little intense world. So we called Terry and he ended up helping. But ironically, even though Roy and Terry were involved, we ended up producing ourselves mostly because of our twin mentality."

"We took the long road and not everybody understands the long road nowadays," Corgan continues. "And with only the two of us, tracking took a lot longer. Roy was really the only person who really *auteured* the record in a way, almost just by his mere presence and that's because he's not intimidated by anything—he's seen it all, done it all. You say something about throwing a piano off a building to Roy, and he says 'Oh, I've tried that. Once. And the sad part is that it didn't sound that good'. That's Roy. It's mind-boggling what it takes to get him off."

Another significant contributor to Zeitgeist was artist Shepard Fairey--best known for his Andre The Giant street art--whose striking album cover suggests some of the simultaneously uplifting and sinking feelings of the modern world. "Like a great artist can do, Shepard had summed up very simply a lot of complex themes. He also used the type font from our very first single, and I asked him about it and he had no idea. He was just on point."

Corgan and Chamberlin are now on point to bring the band to life on the road. Their May 22 Paris show will be the first Smashing Pumpkins show since December 2, 2000. “We put a band together that’s really amazing,” Chamberlin says. “We went through a lot of growing pains finding musicians and people who had the same kind of musicianship. I did a lot of the auditions myself while Billy was doing the overdubs on the album, and what I gravitated to was even more spirit than talent. When I found the right two people, it was very obvious.”

After the long haul of recording Zeitgeist, Corgan seems very at peace with the decision to proceed. “There have been different roads you could take. There’s the much-vaunted reunion road where people do not speak, but because there’s money to be made, they play but hate each other. We were very open to the idea of our former bandmates playing, but only under the circumstance of love of music, and love of playing new music. If those criteria weren’t present, then they weren’t going to be involved. Moving forward it really has to be about what the music asks of us.”

For Corgan and Chamberlin, working as a duo on Zeitgeist has only brought more depth to a musical partnership—one that was tested by Chamberlin’s past personal problems and his subsequent firing from the band in 1996. “It taught us a lot of deep, hard lessons about life and about what matters,” Chamberlin says now. “Through our so-called estrangement I never felt a total disconnect with Billy. For us to have gone through what we’ve gone through--me personally and him personally...My publicized life aside, there were things we went through that people don’t know about--Billy’s mother’s passing, my mother and father’s passing, it’s all really brought us together.”

“I’ve been continually humbled by the relationship,” Corgan adds. “You have this thing you do together that remotely sounds like what people identify as sounding like the Smashing Pumpkins. When you think of all the energy that’s been created off that gift between us, that’s a staggering thing. We could sit here and wax rhapsodic about why that is, but the truth is we have no clue why when we play together something seems to happen. And it doesn’t mean we can’t have great moments with other people, but we consistently seem to go to some other place together.”

For now, both men express excitement to get to visit--and even reside--in that other place--that Pumpkins place--again.

“It’s an absolute joy,” says Corgan. “In all candor, there are some songs I haven’t played in 13 years and I’m the kind of person who can’t lie about it. If I hated playing those songs, I would tell you. I’m loving being in a great place to represent this music. We want to play this music, and we appreciate that you want to hear it. And even if you *don’t* we can respect that. We’ve come out of the fire of it all, and we’re tough enough to go from here.”

“It’s amazing,” adds Chamberlin. “What’s amazing is the pure physicality, the primal instinct behind what we did back then--how our conviction was so much stronger than our intuition. It gives me a deep appreciation of myself as a young man and Billy as a young man—and for how unashamedly we pursued our craft and continue to do so.”

“It’s surprisingly fun,” Corgan says with a visible smile. “That’s not a word you normally associate with us, but it’s *fun*.”

--By David Wild, from an interview conducted in Chicago in April 2007.