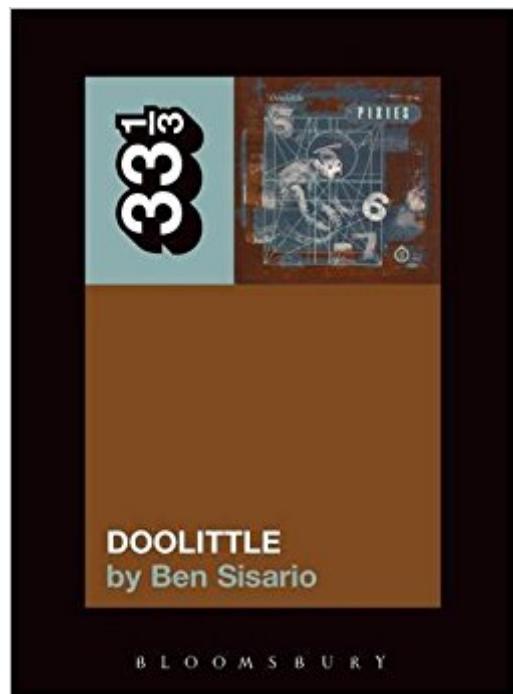


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The Pixies' Doolittle (33 1/3)



Synopsis

The Pixies have had a career unlike any other in alternative rock, disappearing as not-quite-the-next-big-things only to become gods in absentia. Doolittle is their knotty masterpiece, the embodiment of the Pixies' abrasive, exuberant, enigmatic pop. Informed by exclusive interviews with the band, Sisario looks at the making of the album and its place in rock history, and studies its continued influence in light of the Pixies triumphant reunion.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A brilliant series of pocket-sized books focussing on a classic album. Each one a work of real love.'
NME"

Ben Sisario writes about music and culture for The New York Times, teaches at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, and is a commentator on the New York public radio station WFUV. He lives in New York City.

Ben Sisario does an excellent job illuminating the various influences, e.g., the surrealist films of Luis Buñuel and David Lynch, behind The Pixies' idiosyncratic and highly original (especially for their time) aesthetic and sound on what can be considered their magnum opus (though I'm sure Pixies fanatics will disagree on this last point). He also provides adequate background on the origin of The

Pixies up to the recording and release of Doolittle and the eventual (and well deserved) legendary status they now enjoy as one of the essential American alternative rock bands, despite being under-appreciated during their main active years. Fun and interesting anecdotes abound as well, as Sisario got to hang out with Black Francis, Joey Santiago, and Dave Lovering (now a Magician) - though not Kim Deal - while researching the book, to get their reflections and insights on this fantastic album. I found it a worthy addition to the venerable 33 1/3 series. Another one that I read through in two sittings, three at most. Fun, fun, fun!

You can barely throw a limited-run vinyl without hitting a band that claims to be influenced by the Pixies. They stand as one of the most brashly innovative alt rock bands even to this day. As Ben Sisario points out in his entry in the Thirty Three and 1/3 series,

“Doolittle” the seminal album by the same name is so irreplaceable that not only is it never duplicated, it’s rarely even imitated. Even bands that proudly invoke the Pixies heritage seem unwilling or unable to display their bloodlines loud and proud. So then, why did this album released in 1989 by a small alt rock band sell more copies after their dissolution than during their heyday? Why do their stop-go songs sprinkled with nigh-unintelligible lyrics reeking of sex, death, violence and rage resonate so persistently? Sisario, impressively, comes as close to pinpointing the answers as anyone ever may, combining the style of a storyteller and the attention to detail of a historian. His book alternates from scenes of personal discussion with lead singer Charles Thompson to insightful and incisive backgrounding on the state of alt rock and the industry. Even for readers with not the slightest clue of why they should care about the Pixies, Sisario presents a compelling case for why the Pixies were and to some extent still are avant garde. You don’t even have to like them. After reading and listening to Doolittle, you will at minimum respect their contributions. Sisario has the advantage of studying and personally speaking with Charles Thompson at a time providing clarity of hindsight. Thompson and his band have since reunited in 2004 for touring and begun producing new music only recently, though with a slightly shuffled roster. Pixies songs have long perplexed listeners with their lyrics. Thompson explains his inspiration and songwriting process in detail, reaffirming some claims he’s made all along while at other times providing glimpses into authentic meanings. Citing surrealist filmmakers as influences on his style, Thompson might have lost the reader if it weren’t for Sisario’s constant and highly welcome explanation. While Sisario occasionally includes the terse input of guitarist Joey Santiago, drummer David Lovering had little to offer and estranged bassist Kim Deal seems to have stonewalled any

attempts to include her side of the Pixies story. A regrettable exclusion, though it does not noticeably impact Sisario's ability to explain why the music itself matters. In fact, he admirably avoids mucking most of the book with personal interjection until the very end, where his 121-pages-proven musical chops give him more than enough clout to draw some conclusions. Readers of "Doolittle" might find themselves surprised, impressed, taken aback, disappointed, or all of the above. It will depend largely on their existing knowledge of the Pixies. Musical pariahs who have long claimed Pixies songs to be overrated strummings behind rambling incoherence might find themselves googling "un chien andalou." On the other hand, members of the if-you-haven't-heard-the-Pixies-you-don't-really-know-about-music-at-all club might find themselves ever so slightly disillusioned. Sorry guys, "Silver" really doesn't mean anything. Even Thompson himself doesn't know what it's about, describing the lyrics as "throwaway rhymes." Sisario's thesis on Doolittle is incredibly approachable, weaving personal encounters of the alt rock-kind with well-researched conclusions and elaboration. He leaves even the completely oblivious with a rock solid grasp of why musically inclined folks can't seem to shut up about the Pixies, while at the same time satiating alumni with fascinating minutiae and inside stories from the band. I would go so far as to say that this little analysis stands as a necessary companion for any owner of "Doolittle," an album that will forever mark a turning point in alt rock history.

This was the first in the 33 1/3 series that I have read, and I've been tempted to read many. It absolutely succeeded in that the reading of the back really changed the way I hear "Doolittle." Sisario's book acts as a remastering: Guitar parts become clearer; bass lines stand out; lyrics become understandable even as they purposely ebb and flow throughout Norton's mix. "Doolittle" has always been second to "Surfer Rosa" with me, but the book helped me understand the band, the song construction, and the making of "Doolittle" in a truly objective way. My only wish is that there would have been more authorial subjectivity and less reliance on interviews/past reviews. Too much reliance/trying to find literal truth on lyrical meaning (which trip up a lot of rock writing). However, after reading this I am looking forward to reading more in the series. (Inspired to finally read this after having read Dwight Garner's glowing review in the NYTimes a week ago about Gina Arnold's homage to Liz Phair's "Exile in Guyville" Why I read "Doolittle" instead is unknown to me.

"Exile" is next, or possibly "Murmur."

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