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MY BLOODY VALENTINE'S *LOVELESS*

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the course of history, numerous works of art have stood at the forefront of their respective genres. British indie band My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless* is one such work. Their unique sound on the album defined a sub-genre of indie rock known as shoegaze. This thesis is the first major academic study of My Bloody Valentine and their decisive presentation of shoegazer aesthetics: *Loveless*.

In the first chapter, I trace the origins of shoegaze as a resultant effect of the punk, postpunk, and indie movements that came before it. Later in the chapter, I discuss the music of several important shoegazer bands. Then, deduced from their commonalities, I imply a characterization of shoegaze. During the second chapter, I focus more specifically on My Bloody Valentine. By means of a basic biography, I present My Bloody Valentine's development and struggles as a band in order to emphasize the profundity of their final album, *Loveless*, on both musical and interpersonal levels. In the third chapter, I present an analysis of *Loveless* using both traditional and non-traditional methods. The goal of this process is to gain further insight into the new realm of sound possibilities My Bloody Valentine discovered and thus attain a better understanding of their dream-like art. The chapter stresses the significant innovations presented on the album. The final chapter offers the reception of *Loveless*. I accomplish this by dissecting several reviews, both official and unofficial, with the intention of highlighting its virtually unanimous positive response.

Throughout the thesis, I have attempted to combine both academic and journalistic writing and research standards so that interested persons from both areas may benefit from its reading. The essential objective of this thesis is to justify My Bloody Valentine as one of the most important bands in music history while also presenting a contemporary model for popular music studies.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE ORIGINS OF THE SHOEGAZER

#### Background and Inspiration for the Thesis

From the summer of 2003 until the summer of 2004, I was a member of a rock band that I considered the culmination of my musical creativity up to that point called The House Project. It was not a rock band in the MTV or modern radio sense of the term, rather the experience was more like four disgruntled musicians with bachelors degrees in music pounding out their frustrations with a corrupt mainstream music industry on their instruments—an industry that seemed to place more emphasis on image than on artistic creativity and the music *itself*. Our music was initially simple, yet became more complex—far beyond our initial concept of the band—as the four of us struggled with our ideas until we achieved what we believed was musical perfection. We wanted to create beautiful, slow-moving music that would unexpectedly change dynamics, from so extremely quiet that the listener had to strain to hear the music, to so recklessly loud that one had to run out of the room. In the process, we wanted to move people to uncontrollable tears while lyrically satirizing the redundant nature of the American-suburban life that we were all victims of in our youth.

One night during the spring of 2004, The House Project performed for a wild college party at our drummer's house. As we played, the four of us locked into that zone that we had all become accustomed to being in during our rehearsals, and consequently forgot we were playing for an audience. Because we were under the influence of alcohol and certain other mind-altering drugs, we had little choice but to concentrate only on what we were playing and thus, did not move around a great deal. We planted our feet and fixed our eyes on our fingers and shoes. The most important thing for us was not to spoil the music we spent so much time perfecting. The music moved through us and connected with our inebriated spectators who enthusiastically hailed our music. After our emotional performance, as my ears were ringing and I was floating in the excitement of

creative success, my friend George, who was a DJ at the local college radio station, came up to me and said something to the extent of, “Your band is quite good...you guys are shoegazers.” Not wanting to sound out of touch, I kept myself from asking him what a shoegazer was because regrettably, I had never heard the term before and was embarrassed. Nonetheless, I thanked him for his support and later realized that the term he used so freely to describe my music intrigued me with its apparent history as a genre of music that somehow influenced my band without having a concrete connection to us.

The ensuing journey into the world of shoegazer music proved to me that there were more correlations that my band had with the past than I had previously realized. One of the main influences on The House Project was a band from Iceland that presented many characteristics of shoegazer music in a further developed state called Sigur Rós. It was with this band that my investigation began. Shoegazer music has a complicated yet short history. It developed out of a fledgling indie music scene—a scene that owed a great deal of its values to concepts from the punk movement of the late 70s and early 80s. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the early shoegazer movement that spanned from the late 1980s through the early 1990s, discuss its roots and influences, both musically and aesthetically, while making the case that indie music genres, such as shoegaze, are important as alternatives to the prescribed characteristics of commercial rock.

The main purpose of this thesis is to document the importance of the shoegazing band My Bloody Valentine—specifically their groundbreaking album *Loveless*—through biographical research, musical analysis, and reception theory in order to discover the elusive aesthetics of shoegaze and present clues as to how the band created their unique sound.

### A Brief History of Punk and Indie

During a 1990 interview in *Guitar Player*, Johnny Marr, former guitarist for the English indie band The Smiths, described his notion of what a guitarist’s role in a band ought to be. As a result, he represented the thoughts of a counterculture devoted to redefining the values of popular music. His ten ways to avoid becoming a guitar hero, set

up in a ten commandments-like fashion within the article, reflected a trend within this counterculture of denouncing the spectacle-driven MTV rock that defined a decade of music.

**Table 1: 10 Ways to Avoid Becoming a Guitar Hero**

1. Quit a wildly successful band—and turn down offers from other successful bands—for musical reasons.
2. Avoid solos whenever possible.
3. Play few single-note passages.
4. Put songs before showmanship.
5. Don't clutter your records, even if it means laying out.
6. Be subtle in your innovations: Don't pose with a four-necked guitar; instead concentrate on offbeat harmonic ideas, unusual tunings, weirdo chord voicings, and finely detailed accompaniment.
7. Paint with a feather, not a firehose.
8. Cite unfashionable influences.
9. Violate pop music conventions whenever possible.
10. Denounce guitar heroism loudly and frequently.<sup>1</sup>

While splits within genres of music are not a unique occurrence historically, this split from the mainstream would eventually encompass many styles of popular music, from rock to hip-hop to country. The main reason for this split was not so much stylistic differences, but a protest against an all-powerful music industry that alienated some of its musicians in its careless quest for profit. Johnny Marr, for instance, went as far as leaving The Smiths in 1987, a band that may have been “wildly successful” in underground and college music scenes yet did not come close to the commercial success of certain MTV rock bands of the 80s.<sup>2</sup>

Marr's ideas and actions were a reflection of the values of a larger independent (“indie”) music scene that became a force by the mid-1980s yet had its roots in the punk movement of the 1970s. The punk movement originated largely in England, yet eventually had important sectors within the United States. Some even claim that punk began as early as the mid-1960s in the form of garage bands as a reaction to the

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Gore, “Guitar Anti-Hero, Johnny Marr: The Smiths & Beyond.” *Guitar Player*, (January 1990): 68. The article is not clear as to whether Marr actually created this list or if it was simply an invention of the author using Marr's career as inspiration.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.



overwhelming popularity of bands such as The Beatles.<sup>3</sup> Some also frequently cite the Velvet Underground as an early influence on the punk and indie movements as well for their dismissal of popular music trends.<sup>4</sup>

The aesthetics of the early punk movement were rooted as much in politics as they were in music. Some believe that the development of the punk scene in the United Kingdom was a result of severe economic deterioration in the country.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the anarchistic qualities of punk became an extreme criticism of the declining economic status of the UK during the late 1970s. The musicians that contributed to the punk movement were generally from a working-class background and were weary of the conditions in which they lived. This, combined with a seemingly unvarying music scene, caused them to yearn for something different. As a goal, punks sought to remove pretentiousness out of rock. While searching for a solution they combined back-to-basics music philosophies with their radical political ideas. As a result, they created something unique. Punks believed that songs should be short, aggressive, and harmonically simple (the I-IV-V progression pervades a large amount of punk music), and that lyrics should be political and nihilistic (The lyrics to the Sex Pistols's "Anarchy in the UK," Table 2, is a distinct example of this).<sup>6</sup> Bands such as "The Ramones and the Sex Pistols placed musical amateurism at the aesthetic core of punk rock."<sup>7</sup> They despised "twenty-minute guitar solos" and the image-based exhibition that had dominated the rock music scene throughout the 70s and into the 80s.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Themis Chronopoulos, "A Cultural History of Punk, 1964-1996" (master's thesis, San Jose State University, 1997), 5.

<sup>4</sup> See "So You Wanna Fake Being an Indie Rock Expert?"

<http://www.soyouwanna.com/site/syws/indierock/indierock.html> (accessed on February 26, 2006), "The Velvet Underground" *Wikipedia* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Velvet\\_Underground](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Velvet_Underground) (accessed on February 26, 2006), and Michael Sandlin, "Velvet Under-Appreciated." review of "All Yesterday's Parties: The Velvet Underground in Print: 1966-71," by Clinton Heylin. (2005)

<http://www.popmatters.com/books/reviews/a/all-yesterdays-parties.shtml> (accessed on February 26, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Andy Bennett, "'Plug in and Play!' UK 'Indie-Guitar' Culture." In *Guitar Cultures*, ed. Andy Bennett and Kevin Dawe. (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001), 49.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Bennett, 53.

**Table 2: Lyrics to “Anarchy In The U.K.”**

I am an anti-Christ  
I am an anarchist,  
don't know what I want  
but I know how to get it.  
I wanna destroy the passer by  
'cos I wanna be anarchy,  
Ho dogs body

Anarchy for the UK  
It's coming sometime and maybe  
I give a wrong time stop a traffic line.  
Your future dream is a shopping scheme  
cause I wanna be anarchy,  
It's in the city

How many ways to get what you want  
I use the best I use the rest  
I use the enemy.  
I use anarchy  
'cause I wanna be anarchy,

Is this the MPLA  
or is this the UDA  
or is this the IRA  
I thought it was the UK  
or just another country  
another council tenancy.<sup>9</sup>

Much to the early punk’s disdain, while they were busy creating a new musical style, they had to consider music business issues as well. One of the bases of their punk philosophy was a complete rejection of commercial music. Consequently, they had to discover new ways for promoting and distributing their music, without the use of corporate enterprises. However, after major labels discovered that the punk scene could become a commodity, thus generating a profit, they began recruiting punk bands to their labels. Some important punk bands of the late 70s, such as the Sex Pistols and The Clash, signed to major labels.<sup>10</sup> This may have been a positive result for punk as it helped internationally disseminate this genre of music and bring a larger audience to their political and musical perspectives. Yet, unfortunately, being signed to a major label and

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<sup>9</sup> Copyright 1977 by J. Rotten, G. Matlock, S. Jones, P. Cook

<sup>10</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, “Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre” In *Cultural Studies*, (January, 1999): 40.

thus supporting the capitalist system was a contradiction to the philosophy of many punks. This difference of ideas and the mainstream success of the Sex Pistols and The Clash would ultimately split the punk movement and cause its demise as a trend-setting type of music; enter postpunk.

In order to combat the oppressive presence of corporate music labels, some punks began to develop a postpunk philosophy. These punks decided to remain faithful to their fundamental beliefs and devised new methods to advance their music. While dodging the force of capitalism they created alternative networks of distribution, achieved a reflexive understanding of the dynamics of the record industry, extended independent networks of production and distribution beyond Britain and into Europe and the United States, and developed an aesthetic based on mobilization and access.<sup>11</sup> These methods proved successful for a time; however, the commercial music industry was not without a retort. The MTV generation was soon to be born in the early 80s and corporations had steadily been buying out independent radio stations, therefore circumscribing popular music for a mass audience. This resulted in the steady decline of independent albums making a significant impact on the pop charts.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these frustrating struggles, by the mid-80s postpunk was undergoing an image change as well.

By 1986, post-punk's status as the most prestigious branch of alternative music in Britain was under threat. At the same time, the term 'indie' was becoming widely used to describe a new phase in the cultural politics of alternative pop/rock in Britain. Rather than the *mélange* of experimental influences covered by the umbrella term 'post-punk', 'indie' described a narrower set of sounds and looks. The 'whiteness' of the genre was the subject of much music press comment in the mid-1980s. While many musicians, fans and journalists had increasingly turned to pop and black musical traditions, such as electro and hip hop, as fresh sources of inspiration in the early 1980s, indie was constructing a canon of white, underground rock references. The mainstream pop charts were dominated by funk figures and rhythms, but indie records turned to 'jangly' guitars, an emphasis on clever and/or sensitive lyrics inherited from the singer/songwriter tradition in rock and pop, and minimal focus on the rhythm track. ...In terms of presentation, indie often prided itself on its care over design but set itself against the concentration on 'image' in the pop mainstream: important indie bands, such as the Smiths, refused to put their pictures on record sleeves. There was a resistance to using promotional videos. And the stage presentation of bands involved dressing down, a minimum display of musical prowess, and a deliberate muting of charisma.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 37. Hesmondhalgh summarizes four ways that the post-punks helped develop the independent music scene.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 38.

The previous quotation opens up a series of issues as to the nature of indie music. One of the most startling issues is the “whiteness” of the genre. Certainly, the indie music scene, full of leftist principles, does not consciously discriminate; it does not innately promote racist tendencies, musically or lyrically, and the fans of indie music are commonly not racist. Why, then, did the music press of the 1980s make such a big issue out of the racial makeup of the indie scene? In fairness, did they not comment on the racial makeup of the hip-hop scene as well? While there does not seem to be much as far as a possible answer to these questions, at the time hip-hop was becoming a commercially viable genre of music that MTV and commercial radio stations promoted successfully. The same corporations that owned the music industry also controlled the media. Therefore, in their creation of blind appeal for mainstream music, these corporations encouraged their media outlets to degrade enterprises that sought to provide alternatives to their quest for dominance over the music industry.

Philosophically, the indie scene promotes independence from corporate music, artistic creativity, rejection of monetary ends, and a particular style of sound and image. When the punk movement developed into indie, it did so partly because the three-minute, aggressive pop songs that had been central to punk philosophy began to wane with the supporters of the music. The idea of indie music provided a new means for artistic creativity outside of the mainstream. In contrast to commercial musicians, indie musicians did not have to work within the boundaries of a predetermined rock song formula. Indie music became anti-formulaic because fans of the genre desired individuality in their music, or music for the sake of music, not music created for financial ends. Indie fans regularly use the term “sellout” to describe an artist that signs to a major label and crosses over to the greedy capitalist world. This term denotes a concept in indie philosophy that places true artistic expression on music created solely for personal fulfillment.

While indie thinking denounces the mainstream music scene’s sound and image, in its formation process it created its own ideas about what music and its practitioners should sound and look like. The image aspect of this is easier to describe. Anyone attending an indie music concert today will notice the performers and audience are dressed in a particular way. There is an emphasis on wearing unique, vintage clothing—

the type that is usually found in thrift stores.<sup>14</sup> A tight, twenty-year-old shirt, a pair of worn jeans or work pants, topped off with combat boots is a good start for either gender. In any case, the goal for indie kids is to look like they spent a limited amount of money on their outfits (even when this is not the case) and yet still have enough stylistic sensibility to work within these constraints. Hairstyles are important as well. The hair of indie kids often looks unwashed and matted, as if they just got out of bed. The point of these fashion trends is so that the indie fan appears contrary to what society deems appropriate and thus, distinctive and “antiestablishment.” This illustration is important because despite the basic indie notion of individuality, there is a contradiction in that for acceptance into the camaraderie of the indie scene, the participants have to look and act a certain way.

The subject of indie fashion raises a complex gender issue. Again, in attempting to defy the norm, many male indie fans tend to dress less masculine and look more effeminate than other men do in society. In the indie scene there seems to be an unspoken rule about the importance of looking ambiguous in sexual orientation. This occurrence does not only apply to men. Many indie women also dress less feminine than their societal counterparts do outside the indie scene. The issue of gender qualities in the music itself is further complicated. In relation to other types of rock music, the sound of indie music is usually less masculine. The lyrics of indie are more sentimental and the music is generally less reflective of male dominance and aggression. Historically, domination and rule by men has been a foundation of western society. Women have remained at the fringes, used simply for practical and decorative purposes. What some call the modernist age, approximately 1450-1950, where ideas mostly moved linearly and logically, only served to enforce this establishment.<sup>15</sup> The rise of postmodernism, or the feminine age, has allowed for innovative methods of analysis and radical movements of social critique. The indie movement is just one of many postmodern social criticism techniques. Thus, the music’s feminine qualities are a reflection of this trend.

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<sup>14</sup> There may be a connection with the original working-class background of the punk and indie movements to thrift store shopping.

<sup>15</sup> Jann Pasler, “Postmodernism.” *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy. <http://www.grovemusic.com> (Accessed on March 18, 2006).

Although the term indie implies a shortened form of independent, simply being independent does not necessarily denote indie. While there is certainly a history of independent record labels spanning back to the early twentieth century, indie developed as a unique culture by the late 80s and into the 90s. Though surely supportive of independence from corporate activities, indie is a lifestyle, a set of beliefs and values comprising an entire identity.

In summing up the spirit of indie philosophy before discussing the shoegazer scene more specifically, thoughts from a recent dissertation clarify the sometimes-confusing nature of the indie scene. Wendy Fonarow's 1999 dissertation undertakes several issues associated with indie. After spending nearly eighty pages seeking to describe what indie is, she comes to the conclusion that

indie is... a means of distribution, a genre, an ethos, a style, an aesthetic. There are many indie fans who listen to dance music, who are not technophobic, who don't have any particular proclivities for the 7" format, and who like some main stream chart acts, even admitting they think they ought not. There is an indie ideology, but defining membership in a community by adherence to its associated ideological framework results in only the most fully dedicated members constituting the group allowing highly inflexible ideological positions and clearly defined boundaries. With even the most cursory examination of the face-to-face activities that constitute what has been called youth cultures this is undoubtedly not the case. Indie is defined precisely by the discourse about its boundaries, about what it is and is not, because what it is constantly changes.<sup>16</sup>

This conclusion about what constitutes indie is vague because of the intrinsic complexities of defining *any* contemporary movement. It is almost futile to define living art styles because the moment that an agreed upon definition is reached will also be the moment that an artist within the movement breaks the rules.

### The Dawn of Shoegaze

The series of historical events described up to this point eventually provided the indie scene with a new type of musician that began to see prominence in London during the late 1980s—the shoegazer. British music journalists, especially from the magazine *New Musical Express*, initially coined the descriptor shoegazer in reference to some “indie-guitar players [that] often assume a rather static on-stage posture, looking down at

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<sup>16</sup> Wendy Fonarow, “The Culture of Participation and the Morality of Aesthetics in British Independent Music Performances” PhD. Diss., University of California at Los Angeles, (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1999): 118.

their fret boards or the floor.”<sup>17</sup> The term shoegazer was originally a derogatory one, like the terms impressionism and baroque, in response to the shoegazer’s apparent lack of showmanship. However, lack of showmanship, in reference to Johnny Marr’s ten rules for guitarists, is actually a virtue of the indie scene. Here, again, we see corporate music critics placing their own manufactured ideas of what music should be on a style that is foreign to them.

While the term shoegazer was originally a description of an action, it would ultimately become synonymous with a particular sound as well. The early shoegazers selected specific elements of rock to develop and sometimes exploit. Effects-laden guitars that gave the impression of heavy orchestration dominated the music; the lyrics became more meaningful and sentimental, yet the mixing process deemphasized the vocals so not even the singer stood out from the rest of the band. The resulting effect was one of unity. Rather than bands of highlighted individual members, shoegazers sought to minimize individuality within the resultant music in order to stress the importance of organic synthesis within the band, thus creating a music that was more personal and authentic than mainstream rock.

The sounds that the early shoegazer bands created may have been unique, but not completely. There were several considerable influences on the genre. Two of the most frequently cited influences are the Cocteau Twins and The Jesus and Mary Chain, both hailing from Scotland.<sup>18</sup> Journalists have described the sounds of these bands as “beautiful, shimmering, swirling...*stuff*. There are guitars in there somewhere, but they’re textural, oblivious, environmental; they’ve shed their leadership qualities and become communal. Meanwhile the rich, emotive voice...flies merrily around the mix,”<sup>19</sup> and “dark, brooding music, a combination of buoyant pop songcraft and blistering feedback shriek.”<sup>20</sup> In stressing the importance of amateurish qualities in the indie music scene, the guitarist of the Cocteau Twins, Robin Guthrie, describes his experience with the guitar. He says, “From the time I first started playing, I tried to get away from making the guitar sound like a guitar. I don’t classify myself as a guitar player, really.

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<sup>17</sup> Bennett, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Any internet inquiry into the origins of shoegaze will usually mention these bands.

<sup>19</sup> Steph Paynes, “Robin Guthrie.” *Guitar Player*. (February, 1991): 25.

<sup>20</sup> James Rotondi, “The Jesus and Mary Chain.” *Guitar Player*. (July, 1992): 19.

I'm not very good—my fingers don't work properly.”<sup>21</sup> William Reid, the guitarist of The Jesus and Mary Chain has a similar view on the subject. He declares, “You didn't need to be a great technician to make a record or to play guitar. You didn't need to be Eric Clapton to play. You can just pick it up, and as long as you've got an imagination, you can do okay.”<sup>22</sup> The attitudes and sounds evident from these bands surely influenced the early shoegazers. Guthrie's view on inventing new sound possibilities with the guitar is especially significant. The Cocteau Twins's early pieces such as “Blind Dumb Deaf” and “Sugar Hiccup” and even later pieces such as “Orange Appled” and “Carolyn's Fingers” contain common shoegaze traits such as atmospheric guitar qualities and beautiful vocal melodies. However, their songs stand apart from shoegaze in various ways. The bass lines, for instance, are more driven and the vocals are unambiguous.<sup>23</sup> The Jesus and Mary Chain, in comparison with the Cocteau Twins, had a much heavier and energetic sound. On their album *Psychocandy*, a particularly important influence on shoegaze, they used a very harsh, dirty distortion almost suggestive of static.<sup>24</sup> Like the Cocteau Twins, however, The Jesus and Mary Chain's vocals were clear and distinct. While there are surely many more influences on shoegaze, it was important to point out some of the key bands and elements from which the shoegazers borrowed. Then again, the root of the inaudible vocal quality of shoegaze is somewhat of a mystery.

Attempting to define a living art form is difficult as the styles are always changing. In spite of this, now that the original shoegazer movement has settled into its place in rock history, we can contextualize and discuss it as a genre. Rather than give a detailed definition of shoegazer music, it works better to describe the specific qualities of some important shoegazer bands in order to see their common relations. In particular, I will highlight the music of Chapterhouse, Lush, Ride, Slowdive, and in the subsequent chapters, My Bloody Valentine, and from their commonalities it may be possible to understand what shoegaze encompasses.

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<sup>21</sup> Paynes, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Rotondi, 19.

<sup>23</sup> I couldn't help but think of The Cure (especially *Disintegration*) when studying the Cocteau Twins's music. The two bands have strikingly similar sound qualities. In reference to shoegaze, Slowdive's first album, *Just for a Day*, is especially reminiscent of this sound, although their vocals are still vaguer.

<sup>24</sup> People sometimes refer to The Jesus and Mary Chain as a noise-pop band.



The album *Whirlpool* by Chapterhouse resembles the archetype of shoegaze, My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*, more closely than any other album from the period. Oddly enough, Chapterhouse released *Whirlpool* during the summer of 1991 before the release of *Loveless* in November. However, My Bloody Valentine released the EPs *Glider* and *Tremolo* in April of 1990 and in February of 1991, respectively, so it is possible that Chapterhouse was aware of My Bloody Valentine's new sound exploration. Nonetheless, the thick, orchestral guitar sound on *Whirlpool* is astounding. The guitars, obviously an important element to the band's sound, are at the forefront of the mix. The singer almost whispers the words. The drums are not as heavy sounding as most drum parts are in rock bands—many of the drum parts sound like they are electronic or sequenced. The overall sound of the album gives the effect of a spacey ambience. If there were a second-place for albums that characterized shoegaze, *Whirlpool* would be it, or as one Amazon.com reviewer put it: "If "Loveless" is the "Sgt. Pepper" of the shoegaze genre, than "Whirlpool" clearly is its "Pet Sounds."<sup>25</sup>

Lush's music sounds similar to their name, the pun obviously intended. Their "subtle, seductive sound weaves extremes of rawness and fragility into a sprawling musical mosaic, a paradoxical mixture of ethereally beautiful and brutally atonal guitar textures."<sup>26</sup> Certainly, this journalist was not referring to Schoenberg when he mentioned the descriptor atonal; rather he was attempting to describe the atonal results that heavily distorted guitars loaded with reverb and delay create acoustically. Lush was even fortunate enough to have Robin Guthrie of the Cocteau Twins, one of the originators of the ethereal sounding guitar, produce their 1992 album *Spooky*.<sup>27</sup> However, some critics claimed that Guthrie's production of the album stole from Lush's creation.<sup>28</sup> In particular, it seems that Guthrie made Lush sound more similar to the Cocteau Twins than to Lush themselves. Nevertheless, Lush's vocals are less clear than the Cocteau Twins's making them further coordinated with the aesthetics of shoegaze. The

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<sup>25</sup> Rick Taylor, "A Celebration of the Possibilities of Sound." Review of *Whirlpool*, by Chapterhouse. Amazon. [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000008E59/qid=1139441701/sr=1-1/ref=sr\\_1\\_1/104-3291685-0479105?s=music&v=glance&n=5174](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000008E59/qid=1139441701/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/104-3291685-0479105?s=music&v=glance&n=5174) (accessed on February 10, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Darren Ressler, "Ban the Bland: The Brutal Beauty of Lush." *Guitar Player* (June, 1991): 13.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Steven Thomas Erlewine, "Biography." *All Music Guide*. <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:51u67uq0h0j3~T1> (accessed on February 15, 2006).

atmosphere of *Spooky* is mostly pop-like throughout. The guitarists melt their sound with high levels of effects such as reverb, chorus, and phase. Although the album has a darker quality than My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless* and the bass guitar seems to play a more important role, the influence of earlier shoegaze albums on *Spooky* is evident. The introduction to Lush's "Fantasy," for instance, is similar to the introduction to My Bloody Valentine's "Soon," and some of the guitar sounds are curiously redolent of My Bloody Valentine's album *Isn't Anything*. Lush does, however, by writing memorable songs similar in texture and ambience, mold the shoegazer sound to their own

Another band to put out a significant shoegazer album prior to My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*, in particular their 1990 album *Nowhere*, is Ride. In discussing *Nowhere*, one journalist says, "The tempos were less frantic and the moods more dreamy than in the past. That big guitar wall is still there, but warmer Cocteauesque tones can be heard echoing on some songs. Keyboards, strings, and other instruments make a tastefully low-keyed appearance as well."<sup>29</sup> Ride's use of keyboards and strings is significant. In more current shoegazing circles, these instruments have become increasingly important. Peculiarly, unlike most shoegazer bands, Ride's vocals, while still somewhat submerged in the mix, are comparatively comprehensible. In addition, a distinct English accent is present—unlike in other English shoegazer bands's vocals. What appears to set Ride apart from the rest of the genre are significantly longer introductions. Their skill at mood setting in these introductions is excellent. Some of the songs on *Nowhere* that exhibit lengthy introductions are "Seagull," a 6:08 song with a 1:14 introduction, "In a Different Place," a 5:29 song with a 0:55 introduction, and "Dreams Burn Down," a 6:06 song with a 1:05 introduction. These songs are also considerably longer than average pop songs. As the extension and alteration of normal pop song forms would become gradually more important to certain indie styles—especially postrock—as the 1990s progressed, Ride were well ahead of their time in this respect.<sup>30</sup> Some of Ride's later post-*Nowhere* work was significant in this matter as well.

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<sup>29</sup> Alan Diperna, "Ride: Gorgeous Pop Grunge." *Guitar Player* (December 1991): 30.

<sup>30</sup> Postrock is a genre of indie that sought and is seeking to move further away from traditional pop song forms. In these expanded forms, postrock bands present a strong sense of tension and resolution. Dynamic contrast is of vital importance. Many times postrock dynamics follow a bell curve approach; beginning soft and beautiful, building to a grand destructive climax, then returning to a state of normalcy. Much of

Songs such as “Leave Them All Behind,” an 8:17 song, “Ox4,” a 7:03 song, and the epic instrumental piece “Grasshopper,” a 10:56 song are all rather predictive of later genres within the sphere of indie. The song “Cool Your Boots,” from their 1992 album *Going Blank Again* is also a shoegazing classic.

The next band, Slowdive, like Ride and My Bloody Valentine, was on the independent label Creation Records. This record label

was strongly linked with the kind of alternative music that the Americans did not take to: their leading band, Primal Scream, had a dance sound at the time, and became associated with the androgynous, neo-psychedelic ‘shoe-gazing’ style through the signing and development of bands such as Slowdive and My Bloody Valentine.<sup>31</sup>

One obvious reason why Americans did not take to bands on Creation Records was that the Seattle grunge movement was dominating the early 90s music scene in America. The grunge scene shocked American listeners with a completely new sound for the 90s and thus abruptly changed the way Americans thought about popular music. The success of the grunge movement was partly due to alternative rock being able to draw upon heavy metal and hard rock audiences who had previously resisted the style.<sup>32</sup> The shoegazer scene was subtler as a style that evolved over many years and required more patience, not an easy task for the average American listener. Even so, some of Slowdive’s albums, especially *Just for a Day* and *Souvlaki*, are important examples of the shoegazer style. Generally, the two aforementioned albums are less dependant on distorted guitars than other shoegazer bands’s work. Slowdive’s music is commonly mellower and more exposed sounding, while still texturally full as well. Spatial ambience saturates much of their music. The master architect of ambient music, Brian Eno, even lent his compositional assistance to Slowdive on a song from *Souvlaki* called “Sing.”<sup>33</sup> Like Ride, Slowdive also composed instrumentals. “Erik’s Song” from *Just for a Day* is a

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postrock is instrumentally based; however, when the voice is present it is either hushed and obscure, as in the music of Mogwai, or it is used as an instrument, as in the music of Sigur Rós.

<sup>31</sup> Hesmondhalgh, 48.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 48. Early nineties alternative rock was generally considered by Americans to be anything outside of eighties “hair” bands and heavy metal bands. Like indie, alternative rock musicians sought to denounce image-based music for something more authentic. Unfortunately, like many movements attempting to do this, alternative rock created its own set of image rules.

<sup>33</sup> In describing ambient music, Eno explains “An ambience is defined as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint. ... Ambient music is intended to induce calm and a space to think. ... Ambient music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.” Taken from the liner notes of *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*.

beautiful example of a rock band creating an orchestral sounding piece. Lastly, in keeping with the shared traits of shoegaze, Slowdive's vocals are airy and light. After Slowdive broke up in 1995,<sup>34</sup> two members of the band, Neil Halstead and Rachel Goswell, went on to form a group called Mojave 3—one of the progenitors of an indie sect called alternative (“alt”) country.

The demise of the first wave of shoegazer music was realized partly when Creation records soldout to Sony in order to focus on promoting back-to-basics “Brit-pop” rock bands like Oasis.<sup>35</sup> The sentiment was that shoegazers were self-reliant and too pretentious, qualities that proved selling a mass amount of records to be difficult. Slowdive had to attempt a US tour without sponsorship—an event that proved disastrous.<sup>36</sup> My Bloody Valentine also experienced difficulties during their post-Creation period. Fortunately for them, their 1991 album *Loveless* became the epitome of the shoegazer sound—an album that defined the first wave of the genre.

Given the near-fanatical critical reception that has greeted *Loveless*, My Bloody Valentine's latest album, it's hard to know where the hype ends and well-earned recognition begins. *Rolling Stone*, for example, trumpeted that the group has “redefined rock,” calling their music “as ethereal as the Cocteau Twins and as grindingly discordant as Sonic Youth, yet a quantum leap past both bands.” Meanwhile, both David Byrne and Brian Eno have declared My Bloody Valentine the most intriguing new pop band on the scene. Why the fuss? The London-based quartet favors straightforward rhythms and song structures, their chordal vocabulary relies chiefly on time-honored chimey open-string strumming, and vocalists/guitarists Kevin Shields and Bilinda Butcher, bassist Debbie Googe, and drummer/sample-twister Colm O'Ciosoig are hardly riveting onstage. But My Bloody Valentine's recent releases...really *do* sound quite unlike anything else in pop music.

Each record boasts iconoclastic playing and production details that violate almost all conventional wisdom about how pop records ought to sound. Barely audible vocals drown in dense washes of pulsating guitar. Weird phase relationships tease your ear while churning, low-register beating processes knot your belly. Thanks to Shields' [s] startling whammy bar manipulation, guitar tracks seem to flutter and wind down without losing the beat. The deep-focus, dream-time music seems to invite farfetched, atmospheric metaphors: a short-wave transmission from a distant galaxy, a faded palimpsest barely visible beneath an old painting.<sup>37</sup>

This quotation from 1992 shows that the British indie scene was still important in the early 90s despite the explosion of American grunge. Although the popularity of shoegaze

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<sup>34</sup> Andrew Stevens, “Leave Them All behind - ‘Shoegazing’ and British Indie Music in the 1990s.” *3AM Music* (January, 2003) (also found on the internet at <http://www.3ammagazine.com/musicarchives/2003/jan/shoegazing.htm>)

<sup>35</sup> Hesmondhalgh, see especially pages 45-52.

<sup>36</sup> Stevens.

<sup>37</sup> Joe Gore, “My Bloody Valentine: Kevin Shields Peels Back the Layers of His Sonic Onion.” *Guitar Player* (May, 1992): 87-88.

would begin to decline significantly thereafter, it had made its mark on the history of music as a genre that attempted to redefine the boundaries of rock.

Some of the terms presented in this chapter to describe the shoegazer sound, such as ethereal, atmospheric, sentimental, organic, and thickly orchestrated textures, are prominent in *Loveless*. The soft vocal quality almost condemns the value of the lyrics, thus removing linguistic meaning out of the words and establishing the voice at the same level of importance as the other instruments. This use of the voice as an instrument comes back in later waves of shoegaze—mainly in the work of Sigur Rós.<sup>38</sup> This unity and equality of the separate parts, again, implies the leftist ideologies that indie musicians commonly support.

The first wave of shoegazer music was over by the mid-90s, but the appeal of music influenced by this genre never faded and it continues to thrive to this day. Bands like Sigur Rós, Mogwai, and Godspeed You! Black Emperor, sometimes called postrock or nugazer bands,<sup>39</sup> have each developed the genre in unique ways. What remains constant is the need for sentimental pop music that a small sector of the population can relate to without having to worry about the inauthenticity that the stranglehold of corporate interests creates on the music scene. As for the shoegazer's apparent lack of showmanship, the shoegazer believes that wasting time on spectacle for the audience and other extraneous aspects of rock shows detract from the music itself. To the shoegazer, the music is about the music.

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<sup>38</sup> On their 2002 album (*Ágætis byrjun*), the singer of Sigur Ros sings nonsense syllables throughout the entire album, thus turning his voice into a melody instrument.

<sup>39</sup> I found quite a few mentions of these terms on the internet.

## CHAPTER 2

### A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF MY BLOODY VALENTINE

#### My Bloody Valentine's Pre-*Loveless* Development

My Bloody Valentine was an indie band based in Britain. Guitarist Kevin Shields and drummer Colm O'Ciosoig originally formed the group in Dublin, Ireland in 1984, enlisting the help of vocalist Dave Conway and keyboardist Tina.<sup>40</sup> Before forming My Bloody Valentine, Shields was in a number of other bands. Reflecting on his early musical experiences he explains,

Everyone used to form groups in late 78/79, but they wouldn't actually buy instruments, but they just put on their jacket. Everyone was doing it and it seemed like it was all the cool people who would form these groups and I actually was asked to be in an actual group. What all the nerds and weirdoes actually do, as opposed to the cool people who have the leather jackets and all that. So, some twelve year old kid asked me to play guitar in his group and I sort of got a guitar a few months later and we started rehearsing every Sunday. This was about 1980.<sup>41</sup>

Shields would eventually become My Bloody Valentine's most important song-writing member. Born in Queens, New York on May 21, 1963, his family would leave the States and move to Dublin when he was six.

While there are differing accounts of where the band's name came from, some believing that the band got its name from the Canadian slasher film of the same name, Shields himself said the name was suggested by Conway.<sup>42</sup> It was only a few years later that they discovered the name came from a "really really crap terrible Canadian film."<sup>43</sup> Before spending too much time in Dublin, the group moved to Berlin, opting out of the

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<sup>40</sup> I found specific biographical information on My Bloody Valentine at various websites. The most important resource was [www.mybloodyvalentine.net](http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net) where I found a great deal of data on the band and links to many biographies of the band. Information on the elusive keyboard player Tina is scant. While biographical accounts of My Bloody Valentine tell of Dave Conway's departure from the band, for the last-nameless Tina, however, there are none. In fact, she is only credited as having been a member of My Bloody Valentine on their first recording, *This is Your Bloody Valentine*.

<sup>41</sup> Kevin Shields, interview on @Last TV. November 30, 1998. <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/irish-tv.html> (accessed on October 28, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Kevin Shields, interview on America Online. February 7, 1997. <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/aol-7feb97.html> (accessed on October 28, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

usual trek to London that many British Isle bands made. In the band's defense for moving to Berlin, Shields recounts that

Our singer lived in Finglas, and Gavin Friday lived in Finglas, and I used to often walk by him. So, one day I just got the courage to say 'Look we're in a group and have [you] got any advice?' and he just said 'Get out of Dublin'. That's what he said. At the time, the Virgin Prunes used to do these mini-tours of Europe - Holland and Germany and stuff. So he just gave us a whole list of address[es] of people to phone. And one person rang back and offered us a gig in Tilberg in Holland. So we just emigrated with one gig. We arrived in Tilberg and asked the guy is there anywhere we can stay, 'cause we left the country forever. The guy freaked out 'cause he felt all of a sudden responsible and worried. And we just sort of meandered around Europe for about eight months and then we kind of went to London.<sup>44</sup>

In Berlin, the band released its first recording, an EP titled *This is Your Bloody Valentine*, on the record label Tycoon in January of 1985. At this point, the postpunk band The Birthday Party was apparently a heavy influence on My Bloody Valentine.<sup>45</sup> In a 1988 interview, Shields affirms the assumption that The Birthday Party was an early influence on his band. He says, "...we used to be heavier, more from the Birthday Party/Cramps area. All the[i]r songs are approached differently, I like 'em when we do 'em but then I forget 'em."<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, as is the case with many recently formed, struggling rock bands, this early EP went largely unnoticed. Frustrated in Berlin, the band moved to London where it added fulltime bassist Debbie Googe to its lineup in order to fill out its sound. In a rare interview, Googe tells of her haphazard induction into My Bloody Valentine. She explains,

...I met Colm and Kev first. I met them in April 1985. They had been living in Berlin and were talking about moving to London, they just happened to ask an ex girlfriend of mine who was living in Berlin at the time if she knew any bass players (at that time they had a keyboard player but no bass player...shameful !!), she gave them my phone number and when they arrived here they gave me a ring and that was it really. I went along to a practice and they never really said you're in the band they just kept saying 'we're practicing again next week if you want' and then after a while we went in the studio to do the first ep ('Geek'), so I just sort of assumed I was in by that point.<sup>47</sup>

In December of that year, they released their second EP, simply titled *Geek*, on the label Fever. Once again, audiences disappointingly overlooked the effort. In 1986, the band recorded yet another EP. This one, released in September on Kaleidoscope Sound and

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<sup>44</sup> Shields Interview on Irish TV. 1998. <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/irish-tv.html>

<sup>45</sup> Steven Thomas Erlewine, "Biography." *My Bloody Valentine*. <http://www.irishmusiccentral.com/mbv/biography.html> (accessed on October 23, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Pete Melon, Interview with Kevin Shields. *Avanti Fanzine*. 1989. <http://www.creation-records.com/valentine.html> (accessed on October 25, 2005)

<sup>47</sup> Debbie Googe, interview. <http://www.creation-records.com/debval.html> (accessed on October 27, 2005).

plainly called *The New Record by My Bloody Valentine*, began to demonstrate My Bloody Valentine's interest in the music of the postpunk noise-pop band The Jesus and Mary Chain.<sup>48</sup>

By 1987, the band was experiencing much activity. It released an EP on the Primitives's label Lazy called *Sundae Sunday Smile* in February. The singer Dave Conway then left the band to pursue other interests and was replaced by singer/guitarist Bilinda Butcher, whose distinct vocal quality ultimately rounded out the band's final roster. The band released two more EPs, *Strawberry Wine* and *Ecstasy*, as well in August and November, respectively, though the two recordings would eventually be sold as one album called *Ecstasy and Wine* beginning in 1989.

1988 was an extremely significant year for My Bloody Valentine. Most notably, the band signed with Creation Records and released its first full-length album, *Isn't Anything*, in November. Some reviews of the album include:

As blurred and ambiguous as its overexposed cover photo, MBV's first post-metamorphosis long-player still resonates with frightening, revolutionary sonic invention, in spite of its muffled production. Ride, Lush, Slowdive, Swervedriver, Pale Saints, et al, would shortly follow in its mighty wake.<sup>49</sup>

Though it's often seen as just a precursor to their magnum opus *Loveless*, in its own way My Bloody Valentine's *Isn't Anything* is nearly as groundbreaking as their 1991 masterpiece. Not only was it the most lucid, expansive articulation yet of the group's sound, it virtually created the shoegazing scene and spawned legions of followers. The album's tightly structured songs still bore traces of My Bloody Valentine's previous incarnation as jangly indie popsters, but Kevin Shields and company crafted wide-ranging experiments within those confines. "Feed Me With Your Kiss"'s mix of bruising guitars, drums, and sensual boy-girl vocals define My Bloody Valentine's signature sound, while "All I Need"'s weightless guitars and vocal melodies melt into a heady haze. Shields' unique tunings, tremolo, and miking techniques stand out on "You Never Should" and "Nothing Much to Lose," but Deb Googe's surprisingly funky bassline on "Soft as Snow (But Warm Inside)" reaffirms that all of the Valentines contributed to their innovative sound. Indeed, many of *Isn't Anything's* disturbingly beautiful highlights come from Bilinda Butcher. On the wrenching "No More Sorry," she sings abstractly pained lyrics like "Your septic heart and deadly hand/Loved me black and blue," barely audible over a swarm of fragile yet menacing guitars, while on "Several Girls Galore" she's sexy, yet dazed and distant; it sounds like she's whispering in your ear outside of a blaring nightclub. The Valentines' dark side is especially prominent on the album, particularly on "Sueisfine," where the chorus slyly morphs from "Sue is fine" to "Suicide." *Isn't Anything* captures My Bloody Valentine's revolutionary style in its

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<sup>48</sup> Erlewine. <http://www.irishmusiccentral.com/mbv/biography.html>

<sup>49</sup> "Fifteen Years Gone By: The Legacy of My Bloody Valentine." *Exclaim*.

<http://www.exclaim.ca/index.asp?layid=22&csid1=1881> (accessed on October 28, 2005).



infancy and points the way to *Loveless*, but it's far more than just a dress rehearsal for the band's moment of greatness.<sup>50</sup>

Creation Records was an important record label in the British independent music scene of the 1980s. The head of the record company, Alan McGee, even claimed that in the early 80s he “was sort of inventing indie rock,” although he did not know it at the time.<sup>51</sup> Two other My Bloody Valentine EPs came out that year. One, called *You Made Me Realise*, was released in August. A review of this EP states,

Following several years of lucklessly searching for their niche, this five-track EP — My Bloody Valentine’s debut for the then-struggling Creation label — introduced the band’s sudden, astonishing reinvention as an incomparable collision of merciless guitar squall and hyper-melodic, disembodied vocal harmonies. The title track’s justly famous middle section of noise crescendo was reputed to be a mischievous joke.<sup>52</sup>

The other EP, a single version of a track on *Isn’t Anything*, *Feed Me with Your Kiss*, came out in November. By this point, the band’s skill at interlocking noise and beauty was becoming noticeably apparent; a skill they would spend the next few years perfecting during the recording of their undisputed masterpiece, *Loveless*.

### The Creation of *Loveless*

Released in November of 1991, the album *Loveless* would become the essence of the shoegazer sound and instantly be hailed as a classic. However, this was not without consequences. The recording process of the album was long and arduous—an alleged two and a half years and approximately two hundred and fifty thousand pounds for forty eight minutes of music—an almost unheard of amount of time and money. My Bloody Valentine virtually bankrupted Creation Records in the process. The head of the record company, Alan McGee, broke down several times because of the stress of working with

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<sup>50</sup> Heather Phares, Review of *Isn’t Anything*, by My Bloody Valentine” *All Music*. <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:2m9yxdybjol0> (accessed on October 29, 2005)

<sup>51</sup> Paolo Hewitt, *Alan McGee and the Story of Creation Records: This Ecstasy Romance Cannot Last*. (London: Mainstream Publishing, 2000), 28.

<sup>52</sup> “Fifteen Years” *Exclaim*. <http://www.exclaim.ca/index.asp?layid=22&csid1=1881>

Kevin Shields.<sup>53</sup> According to Ed Ball, an ex-Creation Records employee, there was much static between Shields and McGee. He says,

I believe the album title says it all. *Loveless*. It was basically a battle between Alan and Kevin. Not a battle as we understand it but it didn't make sense how they could spend so much time in studios and show nothing. It didn't really figure. And Alan would be saying, 'Well, where is the record, where is the record?' And Kevin would be saying, 'Coming soon.' And the first single to come off it was called 'Soon.' And then it was, 'When do I get the album?' And the next single was, 'To Hear Knows When.' And then when he'd actually got all the tracks done he called the project *Loveless*. Really, it was like Alan playing midwife to the work of genius from Kevin Shields.<sup>54</sup>

Shields became an almost psychotic perfectionist during the recording. He went through sixteen sound engineers and gave the most credit to Alan Moulder, an engineer who would eventually record considerable 1990s acts like The Smashing Pumpkins and Nine Inch Nails.<sup>55</sup> Moulder also engineered Ride's album *Nowhere* connecting him further to shoegaze. Oddly, during the recording process, Shields did not allow the engineers to hear him or Butcher while they were recording vocal parts.<sup>56</sup> Secrecy seemed to pervade the making of *Loveless*. McGee explains that Shields did not allow him in the studio for the first two years of the recording—not something your usual creator would do to his or her benefactor. He says,

...and after two years I phoned him up and I went, 'Kevin, you've got to let me in the studio man. I've nearly paid £200,000 for music that I've never heard.' And he used to keep me in the room outside the studio, and not let me in. And I tried every which way to manoeuvre myself round him. Eventually I phone him up and I said, 'You've got to let me in the studio man, you've just got to let me in.' I emotionally blackmailed him. I went, 'You're gonna make me bankrupt – you're taking the whole label down – you're so selfish.' And eventually he didn't want to but he let me in.<sup>57</sup>

McGee's frustration with My Bloody Valentine became obvious. Shortly after the release of *Loveless*, he dropped the band from Creation Records.

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<sup>53</sup> Paul Lester, "I Lost It." *Guardian Unlimited* (March 12, 2004) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/fridayreview/story/0,12102,1167043,00.html> (accessed on November 2, 2005)

<sup>54</sup> Hewitt, 116.

<sup>55</sup> While researching facts about this album, I came across many differing accounts of exactly how many sound engineers were used on *Loveless*. They ranged in number from usually around the mid-teens all the way up to an unbelievable forty engineers. Rather than attempting the impossible task of contacting Kevin Shields or his record company to find out the true number of engineers used on the album, I am simply going to go with the number of engineers listed on the album itself: sixteen. However, upon inquiring about this dilemma on the mybloodyvalentine.net forum, I received some interesting insight. The first reply to my question said that Shields only credited the engineers whose work actually ended up on the final product. Sound good to me.

<sup>56</sup> "Kevin Shields" *Wikipedia* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin\\_Shields](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin_Shields) (accessed on November 5, 2003)

<sup>57</sup> Hewitt, 119.

Kevin Shields's story on the crises during the making of *Loveless*, while similar to McGee's, has a few differences, mainly in the cost of the album. From a 2004 interview, after his long disappearance from the public eye, we learn some of what happened during those dramatic years of making *Loveless*.

Over the next three years, using 18 engineers in almost as many studios, Shields toiled on the next giant leap for British guitar music. That giant leap cost a reputed quarter of a million pounds, a staggering sum for an independent (Oasis had yet to arrive and make McGee rich). It also cost the label owner his sanity.

"I think his drugs lifestyle was a much bigger part of that," suggests Shields, gesturing around him. "The fancy hotels - in those days he was living in places like this. You know, he also drove me crazy."

As Shields points out, 1991 saw not just huge outlays from Creation on *Loveless* but also on the label's other key releases of the era such as Teenage Fanclub's *Bandwagonesque* and Primal Scream's *Screamadelica*. The financial price, Shields contends, has been overestimated - *Screamadelica* cost £130,000, *Loveless* maybe £140,000 - if not the emotional one. "I'm the one," he confesses, "who caused the most emotional damage."

This is true, as Creation's boss recalls only too vividly. "*Loveless* was a factor in my personal meltdown," McGee tells me a few days after my interview with Shields. Creation, he explains, dropped *My Bloody Valentine* after the album's release because he couldn't face working with the temperamental band-leader again. "It was either him or me," says McGee, who was reduced to tearfully pleading with the musician to deliver the record before the whole enterprise went bankrupt.

You would never suspect that behind Shields's unassuming exterior lay such a monster. "That," says McGee, "is called passive-aggressive." Legend has it that Shields, infuriatingly, would respond to demands as to when his magnum opus would be finished by blankly reciting *My Bloody Valentine* song titles: *To Here Knows When*. *When You Sleep*. *Sometimes*. *Soon*.<sup>58</sup>

Although McGee blames Shields for his breakdown, Shields's point about McGee's drugs lifestyle is surely a contributing factor. Extensive use of stimulants, especially McGee's favorites like cocaine and ecstasy, over a period surely aids in developing nervous tendencies and eventual breakdowns. Drug lifestyles, like McGee's, in addition to extra traumatic experiences ultimately cause serious mental problems, hence, McGee's disastrous downfall.

Shields, perhaps by poetic justice, experienced a similar fate. He and his band may have lost their minds, so to speak, during the endless months of predicaments in the studio. While many seem to blame the incessant perfectionism of Shields for the

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<sup>58</sup> Lester, *Guardian*, 2004. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/fridayreview/story/0,12102,1167043,00.html>

excessive length of time *Loveless* took to record, the problematic recording sessions were not entirely his fault. In Shields's defense, one journalist describes the recording of the album as one marred by "so many financial setbacks, studio knockbacks, enforced sabbaticals and technical disasters that all four band members believed that the malignant influence of a mysterious, evil karmic jinx was a serious possibility."<sup>59</sup> He goes on by describing *Loveless* as,

An album whose recording processes proved so tortuously slow that the entire year of 1990 was dedicated to the recording only of bass lines.

And the longer this agonizing process went on, the more My Bloody Valentine, this most - to use Kevin Shield's favorite word - *bizarre* of bands, became the stuff of rumors, intrigue, suspicion, wide-spread admiration, total plagiarism and, ultimately, unfathomable mystique. Worlds change; another war breaks out; the Valentines put a second lock on the studio door.<sup>60</sup>

In an earlier interview, Shields seems less apologetic. Although the translated French causes Shields to sound more arrogant than he probably intended, when the interviewer asked Shields if he feels responsible for bankrupting the label, Shields, obviously annoyed by the question, unsympathetically answers,

Why should i feel responsible? If they absolutely want their bands to sign contracts, they have to assume the consequences. Nobody force[d] them to work with expensive bands. Anyway, I'm sure that everybody will have the invested money back in the six months. And it's our money that we have spent, the money our two previous singles had yielded. I don't owe anything to anyone. We were the first band to *really* be signed on Creation. Thanks to us, the label has become more professional, we didn't stop kicking their behind. Before us, they were amateurs. I won't give any name[s], but some bands that will never sell a record have costed more money than us to Creation. Especially in the field of the dance music. The label has invested fortunes that it will never get back. But we, we are profitable.<sup>61</sup>

My Bloody Valentine's lengthy recording session for *Loveless* surely sparked rumors that they may have been in a creative slump, yet from interviews during the making of the album, it seems that they were working excessively during this period, sometimes to the point of experiencing severe sleep deprivation. In an interview during the *Loveless* recording period, the band members occasionally mention that they have been getting little sleep.

Kevin: It doesn't get me to me like it used [to] because I make sure I get 4 hours sleep.

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<sup>59</sup> David Cavanagh, "3AM Eternal." *Select Magazine* (February, 1992)  
<http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/select-feb92.html> (accessed on November 1, 2005)

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Kevin Shields, interview. *Les Intockuptibles*. <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/les-98.html> (accessed on November 3, 2005) I couldn't find the original text, nor the translator.

...I don't know about pressure, it's just difficult to get through the week with only 2 or 3 hours sleep, and constantly thinking - not just staying up but actually using your head all the time. But we end up writing in the studio before we go in. ...

Interviewer: So MBV is the sound of the subconscious? Of this 'dream state' that the music press has referred to? It's strange that a band whose songs are considered so much in a dream state only get about 3 to 4 hours sleep at night...

(Colm comes in, having waited on and off three hours - and kept missing because he went back indoors - the night bus before heading home for the usual 3 hours sleep - hence his late arrival.)<sup>62</sup>

While the band may have been exaggerating slightly, lack of sleep can definitely be a problem when attempting any sort of creativity. Thus, poor work habits may have been a contributing factor to the album's extensive recording process.

During the recording of *Loveless*, My Bloody Valentine released two EPs. These two records were previews as to what their next full-length album would sound like. The first EP, *Glider*, released in April of 1990, was a single for the eventual ultimate track on *Loveless* titled "Soon." By this point, the band was making considerable impressions on the popular music world. "In fact, regarding "Soon," no less an authority than Brian Eno said, "It set a new standard for pop. It's the vaguest music ever to have been a hit."<sup>63</sup> Their other EP, *Tremolo*, released in February of 1991, was a single for "To Here Knows When." When considering *all* of the endeavors My Bloody Valentine embarked on during the *Loveless* sessions, an easier explanation of some of the ambiguity between Shields and McGee over the actual cost and recording time of *Loveless* comes forth. In the three years between the release of *Isn't Anything* and *Loveless*, My Bloody Valentine recorded four EPs, two of which were not released, a few videos, and an album. It seems apparent that McGee is counting all the releases in his tally, while Shields is only counting the actual cost of *Loveless*. Not that this idea justifies My Bloody Valentine's excessive amount of time spent in the studio, however, this could explain the major difference in Shields's and McGee's totals. As Shields explains,

We never felt we had to live up to anyone's expectations with 'Loveless' except our own. The reason for the delay was that we made two EP's after 'Tremolo' that we just didn't feel were good enough, so they were never released. They weren't bad, it's just that they didn't excite us in the sense that they could make what we did before seem irrelevant. We made them like we'd made all our previous records, just went into the studio and wrote a lot of stuff really quickly, but that way

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<sup>62</sup> Marton Ashton, "My Bloody Valentine." *The Catalogue #67*  
<http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/catalogue-67.html> (accessed on November 3, 2005)

<sup>63</sup> *Hype* (August, 1992) <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/index.html> (accessed on October 26, 2005)

of working wasn't working anymore.

Basically we'd done everything we could working quickly, making songs up on the spot. We had to slow down or we start repeating ourselves.

It's true that we've spent over a quarter of a million, but that's been over the last three years, including the videos, EP's, everything. 'Loveless' cost about £100,000 and that's already paid for, Creation paid for it bit by bit as we went along. As for them being up for sale, they're probably the successful independent going. They've just done a massive licensing deal with America.<sup>64</sup>

The last part of the previous quote refers to Alan McGee selling Creation Records to Sony shortly after *Loveless*.

In conclusion, in regards to the cost of *Loveless*, it was not the album itself that cost Creation Records a quarter of a million pounds, it was everything My Bloody Valentine did from roughly the early part of 1989 through the end of 1991. Shields even claims that Creation Records treated the band cruelly from the beginning of the recording process. He says,

Three weeks into making that record, Colm [O'Ciosoig] the drummer, when we were doing the drum tracks, he was homeless. And we asked Creation Records for a few hundred pounds for deposit on a flat and they told him to fuck off basically. They got used to us living in squats and living for free. The only thing I'm pissed off about [chuckles] to be really honest, is the fact that if you read about *Loveless*, they talk about the money we spent and how we nearly bankrupted Creation, where in fact we spent half as much money than was ever claimed. The total figure was 140,000 pounds. That's still a lot of money, but it's not a big deal in the scheme of things. More importantly, Creation bankrupted us in the first three weeks of making that record by leaving our drummer homeless. And he had an American girlfriend who was being deported and he just wanted some help and they wouldn't help him. He had a nervous breakdown and that's why he's only on three tracks of the album. That's why we programmed everything. We had no money and no equipment. It took me three months into the record to get a decent [Fender] jaguar guitar. I was borrowing one from Julian Cope's brother. There was that kind of really imbalanced situation. I think it's a better record than just to be remembered for costing a lot of money and nearly bankrupting a label. So, in that respect, I'm not annoyed at all at people who talk about anything that promotes the music, even though I know most of it's an illusion, because most of what they talk about isn't true--all the effects and overdubs and studio manipulation, it's just not true. It was a really simple record.<sup>65</sup>

Shields's frustration with *Loveless* being remembered as the album that took so long record and almost bankrupted its label is obvious even in this quote taken from a 2003 interview. Surely, he has every right to claim that *Loveless* is so much more than that.

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<sup>64</sup> The Stud Brothers, "My Bloody Valentine – The Class of '91." *Melody Maker* <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/mm-2nov91.html> (accessed on November, 1991)

<sup>65</sup> Gregg LaGambina, "Kevin Shields, Lost in Translation and a My Bloody Valentine Promise." *Filter Magazine* (Holiday Issue, 2003) <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/filter-holiday03.html> (accessed on November 28, 2005).

## The Demise of My Bloody Valentine

Within a day after Creation Records dropped My Bloody Valentine, eleven record companies offered record deals to the band. Island Records bid the highest and advanced the band 500,000 pounds in 1992. The band reentered the studio after the *Loveless* tour to record a new album, but by this point Shields's perfectionism became too much. Besides releasing a cover song in the mid-90s, My Bloody Valentine never released any new music for Island Records or their fans. Shields turned into a recluse, locking himself away in his home—the pressure to live up to the legacy of *Loveless* fueling his own personal breakdown. The band eventually went defunct—Googe and O'Ciosoig left to pursue other musical avenues. Shields would only reemerge years later to record new material for 2003's *Lost in Translation* thanks to some coaxing from Brian Reitzell, drummer for the French electronica band Air. In summing up Shields's post-*Loveless* psychological downfall, Alan McGee describes his genius fairly.

I think Kevin Shields smoked too much. I mean Kevin was getting stranger and stranger, by the minute, to the point I couldn't work with him any more. But after he left me I think he had some sort of nervous breakdown. He built a 16-foot fence round his house so that nobody could get in. He saw one of his neighbours sleepwalking one early morning in his garden. So he built a huge fence. *Colditz*. Round the house. He then sent his sister out to get green barbed wire to put round the house. He said, 'You can't go on holiday until you go and get sandbags.' So he sandbagged himself in. And at that point the band left him. ...And after that it all got very weird. I think to this day he still thinks he's been abducted by aliens. He never went to sleep for about a year.

He obviously can function on a level. He can come, play guitar but I don't think he'll ever make another My Bloody Valentine record ever again.

In America, he's a legend. ...People in America absolutely idolise that guy. Completely. ... If I had to summarise Kevin Shields in one sentence, I'd say 'Irish as you could possibly ever be, in the great tradition of the true fucking Irish genius,' which is a quotation from the bible according to Shane McGowan. Shields is a true genius. And his vision is so futuristic and so ahead of what anybody else ever went for. I tell you why he changed. People, after 'Isn't Anything' said you're a don, a fucking don. And up to 'Isn't Anything' he was always considered a fucking second-rater. And he went from being a second-rater to being the first division right, and then it just built up. And then by the time *Loveless* came out, he was the greatest. He's the greatest artist as in 'artist' I've ever worked with. No doubt about it.<sup>66</sup>

In McGee's opinion, then, Shields became a casualty of his own delusional narcissism. While there is probably more to it than that, only Shields truly knows what happened to him during that traumatic time. In a recent interview, Shields tells of his post-*Loveless* years.

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<sup>66</sup> Hewitt, 118-121.

I ask Shields whether he secretly relishes his near-mythic status. "No," he replies. He seems to change his mind. "It's hard to explain. I live so much in my imagination. My version of reality is so different ... I don't necessarily connect with things. Yes, it is nice."

Is he the 21st-century Syd Barrett, or a Brian Wilson? "I'm crazy," he says, "but I'm not mentally ill. There's a difference." Reitzell is quick to correct: "He's not clinically crazy." With a grin, Shields adds: "The doctors haven't got control over me."

But in 1997 he told a website his long absence was due to mental illness. "Ah," he says, "but I didn't say whose mental illness." He pauses. "The funniest bit was, my brothers' friends were all going: 'Sorry to hear about Kevin's mental illness.' At that time, we were going through a slightly estranged phase, like families do. So they'd go, 'Yeah ... ' And that confirmed it."

The only advantage to being considered insane is, Shields says, that "people don't get as angry with you when you piss them off". Angry, impatient record companies, you mean? He nods and laughs. "I'm right all the time, you see."

The real reason he's spent the last 12 years behind the scenes, finessing the music of far less talented groups (Yo La Tengo, Placebo, Joy Zipper) and joining Primal Scream as mixer-cum-auxiliary live member but producing no new material of his own, is simple: "I lost it. I lost what I had and I thought, you know what? I'm not going to put a crap record out."

You lost it? "I think everyone does. Everyone has a certain thing and they lose it and they should move on. But I wasn't ready to move on. I reached a sort of stalemate with myself. I wanted to be where I used to be and have that powerful, strong sense of direction. But I wasn't inspired the way I used to be."<sup>67</sup>

From this excerpt, it is obvious that Shields believed not even he could again live up to the allure of *Loveless*—at least not in the context of My Bloody Valentine. His frustrating downfall destroyed any hopes My Bloody Valentine fans had of the band releasing new material. However, if the band had released new material, an album perhaps, would it have lived up to the revolutionary *Loveless*? Optimistically, I would say yes. Their entire career up to *Loveless* was an upward emotional and creative climb. Perhaps they would have gone further up this mountain. If the new material had not eclipsed *Loveless*, however, we may not remember them the way we do today. Thus, My Bloody Valentine left their remarkable album and career to a well-deserved place in music history.

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<sup>67</sup> Lester, *Guardian* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/fridayreview/story/0,12102,1167043,00.html>



## CHAPTER 3

### AN ANALYSIS OF MY BLOODY VALENTINE'S *LOVELESS*

*To me the way they acted was the way Kevin Shields acted when he was really chasing something that he couldn't define, and spending tons of money on it.*—Joe Foster, Co-Founder of Creation Records

#### The Ambiguous Cover

One of the first things to observe about My Bloody Valentine's 1991 album *Loveless* is the vague artwork on the cover and in the liner notes. In comparison with the artwork on their previous album, which contains washed out images of the band members, the artwork on *Loveless* attempts to represent visually what the listener will perceive aurally upon hearing the album. It is easy to conclude that the cover photo is an electric guitar, although it shows only a small area of the instrument, from the bottom of the neck where it joins the guitar's body to just below the neck pickup. Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that there are actually multiple images of guitars layered on top of each other. While the blurry quality of the picture and the thick layer of fuchsia coloring on the guitars make it difficult to decipher the types of guitars on the cover, one guitar, at least, with its unmistakable large white rectangular pickup is a Fender Jazzmaster. The other guitar that is recognizable is most likely another vintage Fender guitar, probably a Jaguar or a Stratocaster.

The photo on the back cover, while still super-imposed images of small guitar sections, is easier to visually comprehend. The boundaries of the guitars are visually more crisp and in focus. The fuchsia color is still there, yet this time hints of orange and red compliment it. The blackness of the neck and the design pattern on the guitar's body are also more vivid. Finally, the images inside the liner notes, again, of the same section of guitars, have lost the pinks and reds of the cover art and have gained a light grayish

hue and visual computer effects stereotypical of the early 1990s. It is in these images that we can clearly see a hand strumming the guitar. The cover images possibly have the hand in them as well, yet their indistinct quality makes it nearly impossible to tell.

The visual artwork of *Loveless* brings up several noteworthy points. Most obviously, there are no pictures of the band members on this album. While their first album contains washed out pictures of them, which, of course, goes against the idea of clarity that many pictures of mainstream artists on their albums demonstrate, by the time they released *Loveless*, their music and philosophy had progressed to a distinctly higher place. Following the lead of indie bands like The Smiths, who chose to leave pictures of themselves out of their record art, like on *Meat is Murder*, My Bloody Valentine's attitude towards music caused them to reconsider putting blatant glamour shots of themselves on the album, simply for the sake of narcissism and image, for a more original visual approach. A familiar counter-example of this is the cover of The Beatles's *Sgt. Pepper's* album. At the center of the image are the four band members surrounded by important historical figures and celebrities. Apparently, The Beatles considered themselves significant enough to present themselves as the focal point of these notable individuals.

The next idea that the artwork leads us to believe is that the guitar is an essential element to this album. Not that this is a unique factor among rock bands, rather this suggests that the band is going to use the guitar in an inventive manner. The blurred, out-of-focus images parallel the actual sound of the guitar on the album. Not to go into a significant amount of detail here, as I will discuss the guitar sound on the album thoroughly throughout this chapter, the distinct guitar work that Kevin Shields produces on this album would become a fundamental staple of the shoegazer sound.

The final item of note about the artwork on *Loveless* is that it suggests what types of instruments were vital to producing this sound. It is safe to assume that fans of this album, at least the guitarists, headed to vintage guitar shops to buy old Jaguars and Jazzmasters in the hopes of simulating the special guitar sound of the album. Although, as many would surely find out, including myself, Shields's guitar sound is much more difficult to imitate than it initially seems. As is the case with the indie music scene, it is highly important to obtain the unique image that vintage instruments give a band. Indie

musicians wanted, and still want for that matter, to appear as if they were protesting the musical norm. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, the issue of image in indie music becomes somewhat hypocritical when discussing it in detail, especially when it comes to fashion. Though indie bands might try to pass themselves off as not caring about their image, their stylistic decisions and actions imply that they are still concerned about it.

The instrumentation on *Loveless* consists of voices, both male and female, guitars, bass, drums, and samplers. The gender makeup of the band is unique among rock music with two females and two males. Unlike the mainstream music scene, it is more common to find female musicians in the indie scene.<sup>68</sup> This is due to the noticeably patriarchal nature of mainstream rock music. With the exception of the mainstream girl-band phenomenon, which is in some ways simply a novelty act that can sell records based on their visual appeal rather than the sound of their music, all male bands have almost completely dominated mainstream rock music of the past. Indie music, which is in one way or another a reaction against this corporate, mainstream music scene, tries to distinguish itself from these traditional stereotypes by objecting to this standard.

From reading the liner notes, it is apparent that guitarist/vocalist Kevin Shields had the greatest compositional input on the album. With the exception of one song, Shields wrote or co-wrote the other ten tracks. The co-writing was actually just the lyrics for “To Here Knows When,” on which vocalist/guitarist Bilinda Butcher gave her creative input. In addition, Butcher wrote the lyrics of three other songs on the album. The song that Shields did not write, “Touched,” composed by the drummer, Colm O’Ciosoig, is a short sampler piece. It is evident then, that *Loveless* is essentially the invention of Shields. Somewhere hidden in his timid mind was the difficult and elusive sound he wanted to attain. He toiled and experimented until he achieved what he and countless fans considered perfection.

*Loveless*, as a whole, is a complete idea. The songs flow into and out of one another as if there were no interruption between them. While there are fraction of a second breaks between some of the songs, each song at its end usually transforms into the next one. The song titles may simply be a formality, like the album itself is a sort of rock

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<sup>68</sup> This thought is a result of my own observations of the dichotomy between indie and corporate musics.

symphony, each of the songs being a new tracked movement. The production on the album is such that each of the songs seem to be sonically similar. Distinct sounds as if the listener is bobbing in a body of water permeated with the hum of airplanes flying in the sky above abound the aural presence of this album. There are no guitar solos on this album—no solos of any kind. The guitar itself maintains a thick, orchestral presence throughout the album. The guitar's distortion is not a heavy, metal-like distortion; rather it is a dense, dirty, fuzz-box distortion. The guitar sound is sometimes so abundant that it drowns out every other instrument, including the voices. The bass lines, with some exceptions, are nearly impossible to hear. With the exception of occasional flourishes, they mostly follow the root notes of the chords. The drums, or in some cases sampled drums, keep a consistent 4/4 rock beat throughout the album, with the snare hits falling on beats two and four. One of the most fascinating things about *Loveless* is the role of the voice. When one listens to rock music, usually there is a strong vocalist presence with their vocals at the forefront of the mix—lyrics and the clearness of the voice being of utmost importance. On *Loveless* this is not the case—far from it. Shields and especially Butcher sing in whispered, airy tones. The lyrics are nearly incomprehensible upon merely listening to them. The vocal melodies themselves usually hover around a few pitches and repeat perpetually.

*Loveless* is not simply eleven songs thrown together in the studio. It is a concept album that My Bloody Valentine spent nearly two and a half years in the studio creating. Again, this amount of time is nearly unheard of for a fifty-minute record. Although Creation Records did put pressure on the band to finish in the end, they stubbornly supported the band's sound exploration knowing that their philanthropy would not be in vain. Fortunately, Creation Records allowed the band to spend a significant amount of time assimilating their difficult musical philosophy to tangible sound in order to create this shoegazing work of art.

### The Key Scheme of *Loveless*

In order to avoid repetitiveness when discussing ideas of texture, form, and sound on *Loveless*, factors that I find unique to the album itself, I will only discuss four tracks on the album in detail—the first, the last, and two from the middle. However, in order to give a better idea of the overall harmonic structure and unification of the album, I will present a key scheme here.

**Table 3: *Loveless*'s Main Key Areas**

1. “Only Shallow”—G major, however, frequent B-flat-major and F-major chords suggest borrowing from the parallel minor  
Bridge to track 2—G major
2. “Loomer”—G major, also borrows from the parallel minor
3. “Touched”—C major
4. “To Here Knows When”—Ambiguously G major/C major  
Bridge to track 5—E major
5. “When You Sleep”—B major  
Bridge to track 6—Quartal harmony: notes are G-sharp, A-sharp, C-sharp, D-sharp
6. “I Only Said”—E major/mixolydian
7. “Come in Alone”—F-sharp major
8. “Sometimes”—D major, however, the guitars on the song are slightly sharp
9. “Blown a Wish”—E major
10. “What You Want”—G major  
Bridge to track 11—minimalist texture based on the G-major scale
11. “Soon”—F-sharp major, A-major and B-minor chords suggest borrowing from the parallel minor

The most evident conclusion we can make from this table is that all the songs on *Loveless* are in major keys. This helps establish other commonalities throughout the album, such as an overall optimistic mood despite certain cynical and maniacal elements. In addition, several of the transitional pieces between the songs suggest a larger thematic plan. The

bridge piece between “Only Shallow” and “Loomer,” for instance, maintains harmonic stability and creates a skillful allusion between the two songs by altering the atmosphere. The bridge piece that connects “To Here Knows When” with “When You Sleep” makes for a more comfortable harmonic shift between the keys of the two songs. My Bloody Valentine’s somewhat conscious thought process of key schemes becomes even more apparent when comparing the bridge piece that follows “To Here Knows When” on *Loveless* to the one that follows the song on its single *Tremolo*. The difference between the two is exactly that—they are completely different because they have alternate purposes on the two recordings.

The pentatonic subset of notes between “When You Sleep” and “I Only Said,” provides an ambiguous swell to the album and bridges the two songs together fluidly. In fact, one could think of “When You Sleep” as an extended buildup of dominant tension that finally releases when “I Only Said” begins. This idea appears at other points as well, such as between “Loomer” and “Touched,” and between “Sometimes” and “Blown A Wish,” with the sharpened D major acting as somewhat of a tendency tone to the following E major. The bridging idea that follows “What You Want,” rather than setting up a new harmonic center, curiously introduces an importance of rhythm—a concept that is imperative to the dance-like character of “Soon.” While I am surely not suggesting that *Loveless* is a song cycle due, in part, to the classical connotation of the term, because of the aforementioned connections and the lack of pauses between the songs, the possibility that the album has a larger thematic plan becomes more realistic.

### Lyrical Issues and the Voice as Instrument

Deciphering the lyrics of My Bloody Valentine is problematic. A basic search of My Bloody Valentine on the Internet provides numerous lyrics websites. The search will be frustrated, however, when one finds question marks and dashes throughout lines of text. Even one of the more official looking My Bloody Valentine sites, *To Here Knows Web*, has question marks and words or parts of words in parenthesis, as if they have no

idea what Butcher and Shields are singing.<sup>69</sup> In the introduction to the lyrics section at this site, however, Jeff Birgbauer provides some useful insight. He explains,

As most listeners of My Bloody Valentine know, the lyrics are not as important to the sonic structure of the songs as they are in traditional recording techniques. However, the listener can gain additional insight into the meaning of a song if they know what the vocalists (Bilinda and/or Kevin) are actually saying.

These lyrics have been transcribed by listeners, and are the best known representations known to exist beyond the band themselves. Given this disclaimer, the following lyrics should not be taken as the "real thing" or the "last word". Use them with discretion only to gain insight into what a song is about, not for tablature, karaoke, or sing-a-long.<sup>70</sup>

This remark raises an important issue. Most importantly is the significance of lyrics to the overall philosophical outlook of the band. When My Bloody Valentine was mixing this album, they conceived the role of the voice to be hushed and ambient, rather than mixed to be at the focal point like traditional vocals. The previous quote also implies that My Bloody Valentine wanted to maintain an element of mystery about their lyrics and thus never officially released them. About their vocal phenomenon, Shields explains,

One thing that tends to make the vocals sound submerged is that, eq-wise, I tend to use a lot of the noise end of a guitar amp. From that, you get this airy kind of hissy sound all around a lot of the music. Because that's there, I have a tendency not to make the vocals overly bright, so they don't seem to stick out. A lot of people might have the vocal and hi-hat at the top end and the guitars below that, panned out to either side of the vocal, which has a slightly extended high end to make it more present. I tend to put the guitars in the same stereo image as the vocal, with the vocal sharing pretty similar frequencies which merges the whole thing quite a bit. People perceive the vocal as being quiet in the mix, but if you take it out, there's a definite drop in the level of the track.<sup>71</sup>

With this in mind, the lyrics are not an important aspect of their music, which may explain why the hypothetical lyrics themselves are not entirely profound. Rather, overall, the lyrics seem to be about love and loss, perhaps in reflection of the name of the album. Shields assures us, however, that the title of the album was simply a haphazard decision. He says,

No big reason. I knew people wouldn't be able to pin down any particular meaning from it. Plus it didn't sound like a miserable record. If it was a really miserable and sad record, calling it Loveless would've been a bit stupid. The feel of the record has a kind of optimism to it. A lot of

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<sup>69</sup> <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/>

<sup>70</sup> Jeff Birgbauer, <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/lyrics/index.html> (accessed on September 13, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> Alan Diperna, "Bloody Guy." *Guitar World* (March, 1992)

<http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/guitarworld-mar92.html> (accessed on September 13, 2005).

the songs are a bit chirpy-chirpy little melodies. But they're not really happy. So it just seems to suit it, that's all.<sup>72</sup>

To provide an example of the general problem with decoding My Bloody Valentine lyrics at Internet lyric sites, I will insert the lyrics of “Only Shallow” as they appear at *To Here Knows Web*.

**Table 4: “Only Shallow” Lyrics**

Sleep  
Like a pillow  
???  
??  
(Where)  
She won't care  
Anyway (where)  
Soft  
As a pillow  
Touch her there  
Where she won't dare  
Somewhere

Sleep  
Like a (royal)  
(subject)  
???  
Think  
That you grew  
Stronger there  
Speak  
???  
She's not sc(ared)  
Soft like there's silk  
Everywhere

Sleep  
(is a) pillow  
Come ???  
??  
Where she won't dare  
Anyway (where)  
(Look)  
In the mirror  
She's not there  
Where she won't care

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<sup>72</sup> Gina Harp, “Lush Life—My Bloody Valentine’s Pink Elephants.” *Mondo 2000* (August, 1992) <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/mondo2000.html> (accessed on September 22, 2005).



**Table 4: continued**

Somewhere<sup>73</sup>

When one removes the meanings of lyrics from the vocals, the voice simply becomes another instrument. My Bloody Valentine were pioneers of this practice in the popular music realm. The lyrics to *Loveless* are nearly indistinguishable throughout the album. Eventually, bands like Sigur Rós, whose 2002 album ( ) contains no lyrics whatsoever, rather the singer sings vocables throughout, would completely remove linguistic meaning from their music to avoid predetermining the meaning of the songs. Thus, like absolute music, the meaning lies in the music itself, not the words. Shields sheds light on this subject. He explains,

We treat the vocals, in a way, like another instrument, without trying to submerge them, or bring them out. A lot of people go to some effort to make the vocals articulate or heard, we just treat it like another instrument that has its place on the track.<sup>74</sup>

In a different interview, O’Ciosoig affirms the position of the band’s vocal philosophy.

He states,

They are an instrument, basically. They don't seem that quiet to us. What's the point in making them really loud so everybody else who doesn't listen to music that way can hear them, when we can hear them fine?<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps the music industry was not fully prepared for this aspect of My Bloody Valentine’s music for they had major difficulty understanding the concept.

“Only Shallow”

“Only Shallow” is the title of the first song on the album and is 4:17 in length. After a brief snare fill, the whole band enters, minus voice, with a heavily driven sound. The guitar riff is almost angrily whining, like a hungry cat waiting to come inside from a

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<sup>73</sup> Bilinda Butcher and Kevin Shields, <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/lyrics/loveless-lyrics.html> (accessed on September 21, 2005)

<sup>74</sup> Danny Housman, “My Bloody Valentine.” *Hype* (August, 1992) <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/hype-aug92.html> (accessed on October 4, 2005).

<sup>75</sup> Harp, <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/mondo2000.html>

long day of exploration or like the sound that a stampeding elephant makes. In discussing how he created that “elephanty, shivering guitar bit,”<sup>76</sup> Shields says,

That's just two amps facing each other, with tremolo. And the tremolo on each amp is set to a different rate. There's a mike between the two amps. I did a couple of overdubs of that, then I reversed it and played it backwards into a sampler. I put them on top of each other so they kind of merged in.<sup>77</sup>

Shields's explanation of how he produced just one riff on the album offers a clue to why the recording process was so lengthy. His obsession with creating original sounds, for example experimenting with different amp and microphone positions, is no doubt one of the causes of the excessive studio time for *Loveless*.

After the twenty-four second introduction of “Only Shallow,” the soft, airy voice of Bilinda Butcher enters the mix. The excitement of the introduction calms down as she sings the words, “sleep like a pillow no one there, where she won't care anywhere, soft as a pillow touch her there, where she won't dare somewhere.” Butcher's singing style on this first song reflects the words she sings. The light quality of her voice, sung as if she is lulling a baby to sleep, shows her sense of compassionate musicianship and her ease at portraying the words in a delicate manner. The introduction theme intersects the verses and becomes points of repose throughout the song in a rondo-like fashion. There is no chorus per se in this song, rather a few verses with instrumental breaks in between them. At about 3:40 into the song, we are deceived into thinking the song is over as the last chord dies out, yet then, suddenly, a new idea swells out of the decaying sound. From this point to the end of the piece, a distorted guitar and a synthesizer perform an atmospheric interlude between the first song and the second. Without a break, this idea ends and we are plunged into the second song on the album.

As the song that opens *Loveless*, “Only Shallow” sets the mood of the album well. Its heavy drumbeat and noisy guitar riff during the instrumental breaks provide a subtle yet dynamic contrast to the interspersed verses. While its two contrasting sections suggest to the listener that this album is going to be simultaneously beautiful and heavy, the most important thing that “Only Shallow” accomplishes is introducing the listener to a new sound innovation for rock. The initial emphasis on the drums is somewhat

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<sup>76</sup> Diperna.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

deceiving, for with the exception of the sampled drumbeat that begins “Soon,” the last song on the album, “Only Shallow” is the only song that begins in this manner. There is, however, a possible connection to beginning the first and last songs with a short drum introduction—this may have been a way for My Bloody Valentine to round out the album and give it a sense of completeness. The difference in the mood-setting effectiveness by the drum introductions of the first and last songs is substantial. The consecutive four sixteenth-note snare drum hits that serve as a pickup to the first beat on “Only Shallow” where the rest of the band enters, sets a rather angry and maniacal tone for the song. When the guitar riff enters, it only furthers this extreme mood.

Although this musical point is subtle, by the instant of the third verse, when the band has delivered the dichotomy between the instrumental breaks and the verses several times, a new barely audible vocal idea from Butcher enters and adds a new layer to the ambience of the song. This fresh melodic idea soars above the main lyrical line and does not coincide rhythmically with the verse vocal melody. Rather than singing words here, she uses vocables such as ooh and ah. Although Butcher sings the main melodies of the verses, she also uses her voice here.

In addition to simply listening to My Bloody Valentine’s music as a method of analysis, one can also visually analyze their music as well. At *To Here Knows Web*, there is a link to a website called *Tremolo*<sup>78</sup> in which one can view several videos from *Loveless*. While the songs sound the same, the band provides insight into their image by displaying the authentic nature of their shoegazing ritual. After carefully watching the video for “Only Shallow” through a few times, I experienced a feeling of satisfaction. For about two years now, I have been heavily researching and listening to shoegaze and it is relieving to know that my passion has not been futile. The video takes place in what looks to be an abandoned warehouse. The band performs almost indifferently for themselves and to the emptiness. The video’s images convey a washed out, blurry quality with grayish lines splattered across the screen reminiscent of a television with bad reception. At times throughout the video, the picture and audio are out of synchronization. For instance, at one point we see O’Ciosoig playing along yet he is

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<sup>78</sup> <http://www.planetjesterz.com/mbv/index.php>

playing slower than the music itself. This gives the video a frustrated sense of delay. Of other interest in the video for this song are the actions and movements, or lack of movements, of the band members. The movements of Debbie Googe and Colm O’Ciosoig suggest that they seem more interested in the music than the two guitarists do. Googe is facedown, swaying, head banging, and bent over her bass for much of the video. Her straight, shoulder-length hair covers her face, which we get only brief glimpses of throughout. O’Ciosoig, as is stereotypical with a rock drummer, has no choice but to move his body. His long hair shifts in front of his face as he bangs his head. We can see his right leg moving up and down in order to play the kick drum. His arms move swiftly as he hits his cymbals and snare. His torso leans from side to side and front to back as he performs his role as the drummer of the band. It is apparently not Googe or O’Ciosoig, then, which gave My Bloody Valentine the label of a shoegazer band. Although Googe is staring at her shoes throughout the video, she does not maintain the static posture that was common with shoegazers. On the other hand, Bilinda Butcher and Kevin Shields remain markedly more motionless in the video than the other two members do. Shields, in particular, other than his hands moving to play his guitar, does not move from his position at all. His feet remain firmly planted on the ground, as if they are stuck there with glue. He consistently aims his head downward. His face is expressionless. He almost looks bored like he is simply going through the motions of being in a rock band. From his demeanor, it would seem as if he does not even like his own band’s music. Butcher’s movements are also restrained. She maintains a static stance and looks down at her fret board. While she sings, however, she looks into the camera. Her facial expression is one of innocence, hopefulness, and longing. She does not exaggerate her expressions while she sings and her portrayal of the mysterious lyrics is genuine.

Another point of interest in the video for “Only Shallow” is the types of instruments and equipment the band uses. The stacks of Marshall guitar amplifiers in the background illustrates that My Bloody Valentine was aiming for a massively loud guitar sound—again, reaffirming the importance of the guitar’s role in their music. If My Bloody Valentine were actually performing in that type of setting, the guitars may have

been louder than the drums.<sup>79</sup> O’Ciosoig is playing on a Premier brand drum set with two toms, a snare, a kick drum, a high hat, a ride cymbal, and a crash cymbal. Googe is playing with a pick on what looks to be a Fender bass, probably a Jazz or Precision. Butcher is playing a Fender Jazzmaster and Shields is playing what looks to be an Ibanez copy of a Fender Jaguar.

### Creating Thick Guitar Sounds without Overdubbing

It is important to note here that critics often accused My Bloody Valentine of a practice known as overdubbing due to their thickly orchestrated guitar sound. These criticisms have negative implications for My Bloody Valentine, particularly because it describes their unique sound as something *anyone* could do through studio trickery. Perhaps guitarist critics of *Loveless* were simply frustrated with trying to mimic My Bloody Valentine’s guitar sound and felt inclined to reduce their pioneering work to a simple belittling explanation. In the overdubbing technique, recording engineers layer multiple instruments over top of each other during the recording process, producing a particularly full sound. Many are aware of certain albums, such as *Siamese Dream* by The Smashing Pumpkins, which exploit the overdubbing technique. The thickness of the guitar sound on that album, in particular, is astounding. According to Kevin Shields, however, it was the way he and Butcher played their guitars that produced their wall of sound, not because of layering. He explains,

People always say, 'Oh, they must have hundreds of guitar overdubs on there.' But there are actually very few. A lot of the bigness of sound has to do with the fact that I use a lot of open tunings. A lot of the chord progressions are quite basic, but the open tunings leave a lot of room for odd variations of a basic chord. The open strings clash against the others in interesting ways. Then we sing simple melodies over the top. But sometimes what people mistake as lots of guitar overdubs are just these inversions of the chords. Mixed in with the way I use the tremolo arm, they create a sort of overdub effect.<sup>80</sup>

As Shields clarified in the previous quote, he used many alternate and open tunings for his guitar parts on *Loveless*—one of the various ways he fashioned the uniqueness of the

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<sup>79</sup> I know firsthand from seeing bands perform in small settings or at house parties that feature guitarists using Marshall cabinets at loud volumes completely drown out non-amplified drums. While it is still possible to hear certain drum timbres in this type setting, especially the unclear remnants of cymbal crashes, the guitar’s presence is unmistakable.

<sup>80</sup> Diperna.

album. The standard tuning for a guitar is E A D G B E from the lowest pitched string to highest. While many bands use simple alternate tunings, especially what guitarists call dropped D, in which the guitarist tunes the lowest E string down a whole step, not many of them are as complicated as Shields's. Christopher McClister, who is responsible for the "tabs" section at *To Here Knows Web*, gives suggestions as to the alternate tunings for many of My Bloody Valentine's songs. On "Only Shallow," for instance, he suggests the tuning E B E F# B E—Not too bizarre of a tuning. However, some of McClister's other suggestions are a little more complex. His two suggested tunings for "Soon," for example, are E E E E B E with a capo at the second fret, or E B D F# B F#. While the second tuning suggestion for "Soon" is reasonable, the first one is rather peculiar. Tuning the A and G strings up to E seems like it would be difficult to do without breaking one. The only reasonable option would be to tune them down a perfect fourth and a minor third, respectively, but which may create the problem of the strings being too loose to send a proper vibration to the pickups.

In addition to altered tunings, My Bloody Valentine also used the concept of volume as an instrument, as implied by G.E. Light, to obtain their signature sound, especially during live performances.<sup>81</sup> Apparently, during the band's performances their mix was relatively similar to their recorded sound, owing, partly, to Shields's obsessively long sound checks. As one concertgoer explains,

Though the lights turned against the audience were blinding throughout most of it, I remember the image of the drummer, Colm, blazing away at the cymbals with an expression of glee on his face. If I hadn't seen him, I wouldn't have known he was even playing.<sup>82</sup>

This idea of volume as instrument also has implications on *Loveless*. While the album sounds magnificent at any volume, due, in part, to its incredible production value, it sounds especially good when listened to at ridiculously loud levels.

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<sup>81</sup> G.E. Light, "My Bloody Valentine: Only Shallow." *Stylus Magazine* (August, 2003) <http://stylusmagazine.com/feature.php?ID=1445> (accessed on September 26, 2005).

<sup>82</sup> Housman.

## “To Here Knows When”

“To Here Knows When” is the title of the fourth and perhaps most aurally overwhelming and beautiful track on *Loveless* and is 5:31 in length. The introduction sets the hazy mood of the piece. Each instrument, minus voice, enters together in a wash of sound that instantly sends the listener soaring. Shields’s guitar hums like a jet airplane creating sonic booms as it flies overhead. He creates an impressive Doppler-like sound effect with his guitar. A synthesized motif, added to this climbing and diving guitar drone, contributes an ambiguous element to the song. The guitars on this song, as on much of the album, appear to have heavy effects on them, although, as Shields tells his critics, they do not. For example, he explains,

There's no chorusing or anything like that. But there's one very definite effect that I do use, and that's reverse reverb, mostly on a Yamaha SPX90. It inverts a normal reverb envelope without making the notes backwards. There are certain settings I use that, along with the way I have the tone of the guitar set up, create a totally melted sort of liquid sound. I don't use any of the original, dry guitar signal; it's purely the reverb. When I use that sort of effect on guitar, that means there's one guitar on the track.<sup>83</sup>

In addition to this, the altered tuning of E A D G B D adds to the thick, ambient sound of the song. At any random point during “To Here Knows When,” the guitars and the mix in general may sound either murky and dark or brilliant and bright. There does not seem to be any pattern to this effect. The beat and the rise and fall of this false phase effect do not synchronize; rather the music simply climbs and plummets randomly. The drums on the track, barely audible over the wall of guitar sound, do not sound like a real acoustic drum kit, rather they sound as if Shields and O’Ciosoig synthesized them using a drum machine. According to *To Here Knows Web*, My Bloody Valentine sequenced much of the drum parts on the album. As the site tells,

Most of the drum sounds on 'Loveless' are triggered and sequenced; Colm played either electronic drums or natural drums on tape triggered to electronic sounds into a computer sequencer. The drum pattern was then quantized (each trigger was put to the nearest beat) and replayed. Colm's drum playing is characteristic but usually off-time. The drums on 'Loveless' have Colm's characteristic playing, but they are all exactly on the beat, re-done by a computer. From an interview with Kevin Shields: “Actually we started the album with live drums, but Colm got very ill so we sampled his drums and his rolls. So even when a track is programmed, it has elements of his feel.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Diperna.

<sup>84</sup> Evan Olcott and Ezekiel Das, “Frequently Asked Questions.” *My Bloody Valentine: To Here Knows Web* <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/faq/index.html> (accessed on September 30, 2005)

The bass guitar sounds like it is playing drones below the register of the guitars and adds to the humming quality of the song.

The form of “To Here Knows When” is introduction, verse, chorus, interlude, verse, and chorus. While this arrangement is similar to other songs on the album, the asymmetrical chorus lengths set this song apart from other pop songs. In particular, the second chorus is unusual in this song. While the first chorus is only twenty seconds long, the second chorus starts at 2:09 and ends after a seventeen second fade out at 4:51. The effect of this extra long chorus recalls the repetitive character of minimalist music. The rhythm of the drums remains constant throughout this chorus. A synthesized melodic figure repeats incessantly in a high register. Butcher, singing low in her range, repeats the same brief chorus melody. The altered tunings of the guitars combine to create mesmerizing drones. Thus, the repetition of the chorus for just over two and a half minutes provides the listener with the opportunity to lose themselves in the music, similar to the effects of minimalist music. When asked if he had listened to Philip Glass or Steve Reich, Shields reported,

After *Loveless*, a friend of mine called Johnny said did you sample Steve Reich and I said who is Steve Reich? so he gave me a tape of Steve Reich and Terry Riley and I loved Steve Reich. So probably yeah, from the minute I hear it it sounded like I'd heard tons before.<sup>85</sup>

Although Shields had apparently not heard of minimalism before creating *Loveless*, he seemed to have understood its aesthetic without knowing it and applied it to his band's album.

Underneath the thick layer of sound in “To Here Knows When” is a peculiar hum, almost a low gurgling noise, upon which the remainder of the music rests. The effect is evocative of the droning noise the wind makes when driving down the highway with the windows down. “To Here Knows When” is certainly suggestive of an enjoyable traveling song. The drums, guitars, and voice, all create a sense of forward motion, especially the high, airplane-like drones that Shields creates on his guitar. As the song fades out a heavily distorted guitar comes in playing a new idea at 4:47, unrelated to “To Here Knows When” or the following song. This idea bridges the gap between tracks four and five on *Loveless* and contributes to the album's unification.

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<sup>85</sup> Kevin Shields, interview on America Online. (February 7, 1997)  
<http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/aol-7feb97.html> (accessed on October 18, 2005)



The video for “To Here Knows When” presents new information about the instrumentation of the song. Upon a close inspection of the washed out, blurry video, it appears that Debbie Googe is actually playing guitar on this song. Although it is hard to decipher through the super-imposed images of the band members in a cloud-like haze, at a couple points during the video, it is possible to see Googe with a Gretsch guitar slung over her shoulder suggesting that there is no bass part on this track at all. If this is true, then it is a highly unusual occurrence in rock. Bass is usually a required element in rock for it fills out and gives depth to the overall sound. Rarely does one find a song without a bass part. Despite the possible absence of a bass part, the thick sound of three guitars coupled with My Bloody Valentine’s unique playing methods still gives the song a fullness that it would not have otherwise.

The video is a live representation of the cover art on the album. The only difference is that instead of pinks and reds being the dominant colors, on the video a hazy white pervades the back and foregrounds. The video opens up with kaleidoscopic type images of what looks to be Bilinda Butcher spinning around in circles as if on a pottery wheel. As she spins in front of the blindingly white background, light blues and pinks tinge her body. When the vocals enter, the kaleidoscope display ends. At this point, we see the band members heavily clouded and white washed faces and bodies while they play their guitars. At any given moment, there may be several layers of images fading in and out of the picture, much like a visual representation would look of the song’s overall sound.

The video also provides information regarding My Bloody Valentine’s unique sound. It becomes evident while viewing the video that both Butcher and Shields are holding onto their tremolo bars as they strum their guitars—a highly unusual technique. This is definitely not a coincidence and instantly sparked my curiosity. I hurried to the case of my 1966 Fender Jaguar and got it out. After plugging it into my amplifier and putting the tremolo bar in I began strumming some chords while holding the bar. While it took a little getting used to in order to play like that, I quickly got the hang of it and noticed that it gave the guitar a natural flange effect as it made the pitch wobble. The main purpose of the tremolo bar on guitars, historically, has been to raise or lower the pitch of a single note or any combination of notes by simply pulling or pushing on the

bar. In other words, lead guitarists mainly use the tremolo bar when they are playing flashy guitar solos. In indie music, however, as a reaction to the ostentatious guitar hero, it is extremely rare to hear rock guitar solos. It would seem, then, that indie bands would have little use for the tremolo bar, other than to create a new method for its use, much like My Bloody Valentine did. Part of the unique sound on *Loveless* may have resulted from this novel playing method. Fortunately, Shields and Butcher did discuss their guitar techniques in interviews. In one such interview, Shields explains,

It moved us into another dimension really. We didn't have a trem arm until the You Made Me Realise EP. A friend of mine lent me his Jazzmaster and I started using it initially to simulate bending notes. It occurred that you could play chords and use the trem arm at the same time, 'cause the arm was so long, and get this amazing sound that wasn't like string bending but was much better, sort of chord bending! It was a revelation that helped us get away from the Mary Chain comparisons and gave us this drive to make more music. We felt we'd discovered something new and original so we wanted to use it a lot.

People make this mistake by thinking we use lots of effects to get our sound. They're always asking what rack we use or whatever. That sound is purely physical. It's a movement, a manual moving of the strings. The short travel of the Jazzmaster and Jag trem that gives it that characteristic sort of upwards drone to the chord. We never pull the trem up, just gently ease it downwards so you get this drifting upwards until finally the thing's in tune.<sup>86</sup>

Butcher briefly interjects saying,

A hazy feel, sort of hypnotic and free moving.<sup>87</sup>

Shields then continues,

I do feel that, along with the reverse reverb thing was ours, we defined it. The trem's not an effect, it's an emotional thing and using it's as important as what strings or what chords we play. It's part of the whole feeling, the essence of the song.

When you use a lot of open tunings and you've got strings that are close in terms of their actual tuning to each other, say you use a drone chord, because of the tension slowly being altered any movement of the trem arm alters the pitch of each string by different amounts. They travel differently and that creates a real dissonance, a shaking, a blurring, pulsing effect. When you add distortion you start to get all the harmonics going against each other too and then suddenly resolving each other as the trem gets back to balance.<sup>88</sup>

In other words, their innovative use of the tremolo bar allows them to feel the music they create physically; they alter the pitches of the strings subconsciously. It is a truly organic way of playing the guitar.

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<sup>86</sup> Cliff Jones, "Valentine's Day" *Guitar Magazine* <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/guitar-unknown.html> (accessed on October 18, 2005)

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

### “I Only Said”

As far as hooks are concerned on *Loveless*, “I Only Said” probably contains the most memorable one on the album. It is hard to deny the catchy nature of the siren-like guitar riff that pervades the track. The riff floats above the remainder of the spacey, driven sound coming from the rest of the band due to the high register of the notes on the guitar. To play the riff, I begin on the high E string at the nineteenth fret producing the note B5. The song is in the key of E, so this high fifth of the key distinctly establishes E. Then, suddenly, I slide the note down a whole step for a split second to produce the diatonic neighbor tone A5 only to instantaneously re-slide back up to the fifth. In essence, this part of the riff is an ornamented B. The second part of the riff mirrors the first with the exception of the starting note. This part starts on E5, slides down to D5, and once again slides back up to the E. While it is possible to play this part of the riff on the first string for it creates a better sense of fluidity, playing it on the second string makes for a much easier shift. Another way to play the riff is by bending the notes rather than slurring them, although it is considerably more demanding. We hear the riffs as such: ABABA/ABABA/etc., with A and B representing the first and second parts respectively. The manner Shields plays this riff against the chords in the instrumental section gives the illusion of it crossing over the bar line in a syncopated fashion. Shields attained the siren sounding guitar riff, again, through his relentless experimentation. As he explains,

What that actually is, is a guitar through this strange Seymour Duncan amplifier that's got a graphic equalizer preamp. I just had 1kHz really overdriven through it. So you get this honky guitar sound that automatically gives you a wah-wah effect - especially when you use the tremolo arm. But what really made it sound like some kind of wah pedal was that, after recording it, I was bounced it to another track through a parametric equalizer. And as I was bouncing, I was chasing chords and stuff like that, twisting the eq knob in real time.<sup>89</sup>

The vocals on “I Only Said” are as hushed as ever—the words are almost indistinguishable—with Shields singing solo in an ethereal voice on the track.<sup>90</sup> The vocal melody is simplistic and remains in a medium to high tessitura in Shields’s range. As far as the form is concerned, it deviates from the normal form of most of the songs on

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<sup>89</sup> Diperna.

<sup>90</sup> Without the obtaining of a video bootleg of a live My Bloody Valentine performance, I never would have guessed Shields was singing on this track.

*Loveless* by adding a bridge section from 1:48 to 2:09 yet, still, there has not been anything resembling a standard chorus on the album. An initial reaction to this mystery is that My Bloody Valentine wanted to rid themselves of any sort of catchy or memorable choruses in their songs in order to rebel against the mainstream. Standard choruses of most rock songs, for instance, usually contain the most appealing moments in the song—the parts that fans get stuck in their heads. Again, Brian Eno's thoughts on My Bloody Valentine's sound come to mind. Thus, My Bloody Valentine, following their indie roots, created a new anti-rock song form of sorts on *Loveless*. The lengthy outro section of "I Only Said," for instance, like the parallel section of "To Here Knows When" is over two minutes long, contributing again to the minimalist qualities that thrive on this album.

The texture of "I Only Said" is similar to the rest of the album thus far containing two guitars, bass, drums, vocals, and random synthesizer parts. The thickness of the guitar tones is remarkable. At certain points, the rhythm guitar's effect sounds frustrated and whining; once again, Butcher and Shields use their tremolo bars to create additional harmonic tension by delaying the stable pitches of the chords. The random movements of the pitches provide countless analytical interpretations with each new listening. The way the airy vocals blend into the mix of "I Only Said" is sheer precision and beauty. The surrounding result of the mix is reminiscent of the aural effect that standing in the middle of an orchestra playing with static effects would generate. The twentieth-century idea of the Sound Mass, as heard in such pieces as Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, comes to mind when listening to the thick wash of ambient notes the innovative guitar techniques create on this song and on the album in general.

### "Soon"

At the end of "What You Want," there is an extensive transitional piece that sounds from about 4:18 to 5:33 where the initial drum hits for the last song on *Loveless*, "Soon," begin. This short synthesized piece has a definite minimalist quality to it as the same two bars of music are repeated continually during the one minute and fifteen second piece. The sense of harmonic stagnation and drone sometimes associated with minimalist music saturates the piece. It is a curious piece for the album, due to its length and

content, yet it sets up the most pop-like tune on *Loveless* well by creating a pedal point-like tension that resolves when “Soon” begins.

The final and longest song on the album, “Soon,” is probably one of the more accessible songs on the album due to its poppy beat and vague harmonic progression. That “Soon” was the first single off *Loveless* surely has much to do with this. This song demonstrates a major difference in the standards of single lengths between independent and non-independent musics. By following corporate rules, radio stations would never play the almost seven minute long song. Songs on mainstream radio are short—usually three to four minutes long. Unfortunately, those who hold the reigns of corporate music think that the attention spans of the masses are insufficient. While this may be true to a point in our fast-paced society, it does not mean that unimaginative music will satisfy us forever.

Once again, this song contains no chorus. A B A B A B A B A best represents the form—The A sections being instrumental breaks and the B sections being verses. Without carefully listening to the timbre of the vocals, at first I thought it was Butcher singing on this song. However, upon watching the video, it appears that Shields is actually singing in a high register on this song, much like he does on “I Only Said.” The bass line for “Soon” stands out when compared to the bass lines on the rest of the album. After an introduction containing four bars of drums followed by eight bars of the ambiguously appealing chord progression on guitar, the bass comes in with a highly motivated eighth-note figure. This bass line adds to the dance-like, determined quality of the final song on *Loveless* by contributing perpetual movement.

The video for “Soon” is visually similar to the other videos for this album, complete with whitewashed, superimposed images of the band playing their instruments. A major difference, however, is that the video, at 3:15, contains a markedly abridged version of the song. The reason for the brevity of the video is unclear, as the single of the song on *Glider*, at seven minutes in length, is not a radio edit. There are brief sections of Butcher playfully dancing around minus her guitar—the most movement from any of the band members throughout the viewing of all the *Loveless* videos. O’Ciosoig is not playing his kit; rather he is simply keeping time with a tambourine. In addition to many other songs on *Loveless*, My Bloody Valentine sequenced the electronic sounding drums

on this song. Other than that, the video for “Soon” is as vague as the sound of the album—attempting to represent visually what the band was aiming for sonically. Near the end of “Soon,” a peculiar thing happens. The song suddenly decreases in volume creating a sonic shift in the texture. The bass and tambourine drop out leaving the remnants of voice, guitar, and drums to fade slowly out until the end of the song. When I first heard this effect, it instantly made me think of the way the song would sound coming out of a car radio, much like the ending of “Have A Cigar” from Pink Floyd’s album *Wish You Were Here*. Comparisons aside, however, this effect is a clever way of rounding out the album and letting the minimalist ambiguity of the final track fade into the depths.

### Where *Loveless* Lies

The discussion of these four songs from *Loveless* has provided a brief excursion into the mysterious, complex sound world of My Bloody Valentine. In particular, this analysis has covered certain musical phenomena, such as form, texture, and sound, which are significant and unique traits to the album itself. Not only does this album present common shoegaze attributes such as thickly orchestrated guitar textures and incomprehensible lyrics, it also presents new ideas of form in pop song writing, such as the exclusion of solo sections, transitional sections, and emphatic choruses, incorporates minimalist musical concepts, prophetically demonstrates the use of the voice as instrument (i.e. the words are highly indecipherable thus removing linguistic meaning from the lyrics), and innovative electric guitar techniques, such as altered tunings and the use of the tremolo bar while strumming to give the instrument’s sound an unusual Doppler-like effect. It is in these ways and more that this album astounded the musical world of the early 90s and continues to resonate in the ears of a new generation of listeners today.

## CHAPTER 4

### *LOVELESS AND ITS LEGACY*

A decade and a half has passed now since My Bloody Valentine's culmination of their musical output—a symphony of beautiful noise. Lyrically ambiguous and sonically lush, My Bloody Valentine's exotic world of innovative sound possibilities left us with an undeniable work of genius: *Loveless*. Unfortunately, their ultimate album proved to be their undoing. While some are still waiting for new material from My Bloody Valentine, it probably will not happen. The band knew they created something distinctive, something timeless, something that could not be outdone, whether or not they ever admitted to it. What will follow in this chapter is a series of dissected reviews, both positive and negative. The main purpose of this is to support my view of the importance of this album in regards to its unity, innovations, and impact as the most often cited album containing the characteristics of shoegaze/dream-pop.

#### Some Official Reviews of *Loveless*

In a February 1992 *New York Times* article, writer Jon Pareles makes claims about the cohesive character of *Loveless*. He explains,

“Straightforward” may be the last word most listeners would use to describe the band's current album “Loveless.” The songs sound molten, edgeless; both the beat and the vocals are inundated by noise, some of it from guitars, some of it from less definable sources. Within the clouds and swamps of sound are three-chord rock songs and words sung earnestly by Mr. Shields or ethereally by Belinda Butcher, but the focus is radically different from most rock music.<sup>91</sup>

By referring to most rock music, he implies that no other band was making music like My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*. While other bands may have attempted to match the distinct sound of My Bloody Valentine, none of them did it so naturally. Although this article is a preview for a show My Bloody Valentine gave in New York City, the author

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<sup>91</sup> Jon Pareles, “Slightly Skewed Valentine.” *New York Times*, February 28, 1992, C27.

wrote in an enthusiastic tone. He explains, “My Bloody Valentine is a pioneer of what is sometimes called dream-pop,” and that “My Bloody Valentine remains more radical and more disorienting than the bands it has influenced; parts of “Loveless” managed to sound as if the CD itself has been warped.”<sup>92</sup> This warped sound contributes to the holistic quality of *Loveless*, yet, as we shall see later in this chapter, it would also become irritating for some listeners. In an earlier *New York Times* review, a different writer agrees with Pareles’s claims. It states,

...While most current rock prizes crisply articulated digital sounds and rhymes, My Bloody Valentine offers pure defiance: songs in which thickly layered guitars and nearly indecipherable voices add up to a tuneful murk, elusive but memorable...<sup>93</sup>

While warped and tuneful murk may simply be different ways of describing the same aural phenomenon, each of these writers concur that *Loveless* contains sounds unlike anything else in popular music and are ultimately difficult to describe.

Ira Robbins, the *Loveless* reviewer for *Rolling Stone*, begins his review by amplifying the importance of independent music labels, such as Creation Records, by poking fun at a brooding fictional conglomerate record company. He says,

As the world’s record-company giants consolidate into the mythical OmniVox Unicorn, pockets of independent-label resistance endure, even thrive, on the strength of artistic vision rather than unlimited capital. Since the mid-Eighties, London’s Creation Records has wielded a mighty influence on the trend-mad taste of young Britons, successfully promoting its characteristic breed of noisy pop as the introvert’s alternative to gregarious dance music.<sup>94</sup>

Of the most important issues Robbins raises in this introductory paragraph, his sentiments about indie labels being vital to keeping a check on mainstream labels and the mainstream’s habit of creating uninspired music and bands for the selfish end of monetary gains is noteworthy. Thus, he implies that music is more honest, to avoid the descriptors good or bad, when the purpose of financial profit is left out of the equation. Later in the review, Robbins discusses *Loveless*. About the album he says,

...A challenging storm of bent pitch, undulating volume and fractured tempos, *Loveless* has a calm eye at its center, an intimate oasis from which guitarists Bilinda Butcher and Kevin Shields

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Unsigned review of *Loveless*, by My Bloody Valentine. *New York Times*, January, 1, 1992. <http://www.buy.com/retail/product.asp?sku=60145397&loc=109&PageFormat=7> (accessed on December 12, 2005).

<sup>94</sup> Ira Robbins, review of *Loveless*, by My Bloody Valentine. *Rolling Stone* (March 5, 1992) <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/mybloodyvalentine/albums/album/231754/rid/5941869/> (accessed on February 23, 2006).



gently breathe pretty tunes into the thick, sweet waves of droning distortion. Despite the record's intense ability to disorient – this is real do-not-adjust-your-set stuff – the effect is strangely uplifting. *Loveless* oozes a sonic balm that first embraces and then softly pulverizes the frantic stress of life.

Shields's songs are strong and catchy enough to be stripped down without falling apart. Under his production guidance, the group washes them in layers of warped harmonic guitar noise and sampled orchestra, keeping the lush sound moving around an echoey cavern filled with fog. The surges of *Loveless* – in songs like "Only Shallow," "When You Sleep," "Come in Alone" and "Soon" – send the listener falling weightlessly through space, a fantastic journey of sudden perspective shifts and jagged audio asteroids. In My Bloody Valentine's magical kingdom, cacophony is the mind-altering path to beauty.<sup>95</sup>

In this excerpt, Robbins, like other writers, reaffirms that *Loveless* is difficult to describe without the use of flowery writing. While others might disagree, this type of writing is highly phenomenological in nature. This is one of the reasons why phenomenological analysis or experiential reflection in popular music writing is vital. More importantly, as we shall see later in this chapter, it allows for the analysis and discussion of the writings of amateur music critics. In summing up Robbins's review, he implies in his line about "the surges of *Loveless*" that he believes parts of the album stand out to him more than others. Despite this implied opinion, he does not negatively criticize the album in any way, knowing, even in 1992, that *Loveless* was an eminent musical hallmark beyond condemnation.

Sticking with *Rolling Stone*, another reviewer, Don McLeese wrote a review of a live My Bloody Valentine performance from the *Loveless* era for the magazine. While a live performance analysis of the band might make up another thesis chapter, it is nonetheless fascinating to hear about My Bloody Valentine's live aura. About their 1992 Austin, Texas show, McLeese writes,

After a five-minute barrage of feedback strum climaxed My Bloody Valentine's performance, the pair of good 'ol boys working back-gate security pronounced the band the loudest and worst they'd ever heard. In rock, what goes around comes around, though not necessarily in a manner designed to please earlier generations. Where punk was supposed to spell the death of the guitar hero, it has belatedly produced a mutant strain - one that's in gloriously high-decibel evidence on the current tour pairing Britain's My Bloody Valentine and Massachusetts's Dinosaur Jr.

Masterminded by guitarist Kevin Shields, the two-man, two-woman Valentine turned ambient guitar into a force field of sound - New Age repetitions to rattle the teeth of the deaf. Even more than on the record, the band made melody subliminal and vocals an indecipherable element of the mix, distilling its sound into a warped drone of controlled chaos (like the Jesus and Mary Chain

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

with its batteries running down). By the time Shields said good night - the first words to the audience by any member of the band - no one could hear him. ...<sup>96</sup>

This review is intriguing because it describes things that one would not know simply listening to the album. It affirms My Bloody Valentine's shy shoegazer stage presence and explains the importance of dynamic intensity to their unique sound.

As the magazine that originally presented the term shoegaze, the British publication *New Musical Express* was with the scene from its inception. *Loveless* reviewer for the magazine, Dele Fadele, begins his article by creating an analogy of My Bloody Valentine returning as the leaders of the shoegazing scene. He writes,

Recently, some deep-sea divers stumbled on an underground cave thousands of feet below sea level. Stalagmites, stalactites and mini-icicles greeted their brave entrance, almost too beautiful to behold. Once their dazzled eyes adjusted to the scene, however, they noticed intricate drawings of animals on the cave walls which, presumably, had been there years before the Ice Age, 200,000 years before Christ.<sup>97</sup>

Keeping with a comparable tone, later he says,

...“Loveless” fires a silver-coated bullet into the future, daring all-comers to try and recreate its mixture of moods, feelings, emotion, styles and, yes, innovations.

The challenging thing about MBV is the way they force you to trip over yourself with mixed metaphors and, worse, when trying to quantify them with language. The frustrating thing is that they have no obvious information -political or otherwise - to impart. Kevin Shields and Bilinda are too busy serenading each other about private matters to let the world in on their sometimes lovelorn, sometimes suicidal, always sick words. You just hear echoes of words buried beneath monolithic obelisks of noises and silences, melodies and pummelled rhythms.

This is perhaps intentional. Maybe Kevin is reacting against a literary Irish heritage, perched above his head like the Sword of Damocles, by keeping his words to himself. But in times when children of conscientious objectors are forced to wear burning rubber tyres in black-on-black struggles in South Africa, when unionisation - which was hard-sweated and fought for - is being outlawed in humane Britain, My Bloody Valentine are vaguely saying f---all and encouraging others to follow suit. They maybe supreme poets of sound, the most inspired venturers beyond the precipice since Sonic Youth, but they still make you feel the same apprehension most people feel when their plane takes off, the same emptiness.<sup>98</sup>

Most of the rest of this review contains Fadele's track-by-track reaction to the album. He does, however, sum up his response to *Loveless* as a whole, giving it an eight out of ten.

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<sup>96</sup> Don McLeese, review of concert performance by My Bloody Valentine, Liberty Lunch, Austin. *Rolling Stone* (April 2, 1992) <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/rs-2apr92.html> (accessed on February 23, 2006).

<sup>97</sup> Dele Fadele, review of *Loveless*, by My Bloody Valentine, *New Musical Express* (November 9, 1991) <http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/nme-9nov91-2.html> (accessed on November 11, 2005).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

He writes, "'Loveless' ups the ante, and, however decadent one might find the idea of elevating other human beings to deities, My Bloody Valentine, failings and all, deserve more than your respect."<sup>99</sup>

Mainly known for his work in New York City's popular newspaper *The Village Voice*, Robert Christgau is an important music critic. Giving *Loveless* an overall A-, he stealthily admits in his review of the album that it did not overly impress him at first. He says,

If you believe the true sound of life on planet earth is now worse than bombs bursting midair or runaway trains--more in the direction of scalpel against bone, or the proverbial giant piece of chalk and accoutrements--this CD transfigures the music of our sphere. Some may cringe at the grotesque distortions they extract from their guitars, others at the soprano murmurs that provide theoretical relief. I didn't much go for either myself. But after suitable suffering and peer support, I learned. In the destructive elements immerse.<sup>100</sup>

In relating to Christgau's feelings about *Loveless*, I had a similar response due to the album's unexpected sound. Although, in contrast, my initial listening of the album was a good thirteen years after its release, I understood its significance after a time when realizing that no other album to this day has matched the brilliant effect of it.

In a unique article on shoegaze for *3:AM Magazine*, Andrew Stevens upholds My Bloody Valentine's omnipotent status in the shoegazing scene. While discussing *Loveless* he explains,

In 1991, *Loveless* by My Bloody Valentine became the industry standard for shoegazers and provided its zenith in terms of artistic credibility. Beset by problems emanating from periods of lethargy and perfectionism in the studio, the album attracted publicity merely on the strength of the delay of its release, although a decade on the wait appears to have been worth it as it is frequently voted as a 'classic album.'<sup>101</sup>

Again, Stevens, like many other critics, considers *Loveless* to be at the pinnacle of its genre.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Robert Christgau, review of *Loveless*, by My Bloody Valentine, *Consumer Guide Reviews*. [http://www.robertchristgau.com/get\\_artist.php?name=my+bloody+valentine](http://www.robertchristgau.com/get_artist.php?name=my+bloody+valentine) (accessed on January 12, 2006).

<sup>101</sup> Andrew Stevens, "Leave Them All Behind – 'Shoegazing' and British Indie Music in the 1990s." *3AM Magazine*. <http://www.3ammagazine.com/musicarchives/2003/jan/shoegazing.html> (accessed on November 22, 2005).

## Reviews from Amazon.com

Amazon.com contains some of the best reviews of *Loveless* that I have seen.<sup>102</sup> What is more exciting than that, of course, is that Amazon.com allows regular, everyday customers the opportunity to have their voices heard as music critics. While it is obvious why only writers with expertise in music and criticism write for big publications, it can be relieving to hear what the public has to say about a particular band or album. On the day that I accessed Amazon.com for this paragraph, there were an astonishing 364 customer reviews of *Loveless* amounting to an average review of four and a half stars out of five.

The negative customer reviews, in general, seem to miss the point of the album or place it completely out of context. One such reviewer that puts the album out of context says, “Of course, Sigur Ros do the same thing. But they do it hell of a lot better than MBV.”<sup>103</sup> Firstly, comparing a band that released its last record in 1991 with a band that is currently active in 2006 is fallacious, unless citing them as an influence. Granted Sigur Rós is an amazing band (I’ve seen them live three times), however, the possibility exists that without the pioneering work of bands like My Bloody Valentine, current bands that create lush orchestral soundscapes may have a perceptibly different sound.

In another negative review, the reviewer states “...that will be your reaction to this cd. it sounds like a warped vinyl lp stuck in a groove.”<sup>104</sup> Clearly referring to the production value of *Loveless*, this reviewer thinks there is something wrong with the overall sound of the record. The reviewer obviously missed the point of the record; it is supposed to sound like that. The belief that My Bloody Valentine would have spent such a great deal of time in the studio only to release an album they did not approve of is surely mistaken.

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<sup>102</sup> [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

<sup>103</sup> Alex Tiuniaev, “I’m sure this one will enrage the fans.” review of *Loveless*, by My Bloody Valentine, *Amazon.com: Reviews for Loveless*. [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000002LRJ/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_2\\_1/103-2784422-3025460?%5Fencoding=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=5174](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000002LRJ/ref=cm_cr_dp_2_1/103-2784422-3025460?%5Fencoding=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=5174) (accessed on February 22, 2006).

<sup>104</sup> Grew up in the 1960s, “There’s something wrong with this cd...” review of *Loveless*, by My Bloody Valentine, *Amazon.com: Reviews for Loveless*. [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000002LRJ/ref=cm\\_rev\\_next/103-2784422-3025460?%5Fencoding=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=5174&s=music&customer-reviews.start=51](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000002LRJ/ref=cm_rev_next/103-2784422-3025460?%5Fencoding=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=5174&s=music&customer-reviews.start=51) (accessed on February 22, 2006).

Still another negative reviewer sarcastically suggests,

Wow!!! This album is so mindblowing -- I mean layering hundreds of guitars -- wow, what a novel idea!!! And its so critically acclaimed -- I guess I'd better give it five stars!!! I mean, every second I listen to it my whole body shakes in glorious orgasm!!! Oh God! ...I'm shaking right now!!!<sup>105</sup>

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, many critics of *Loveless* mistook Shields's guitar sounds as the result of obsessive overdubbing. As Shields clarified, however, it was not simply studio trickery—it was the novel guitar techniques he used that created the massive guitar sound on the album.

In a more well thought out negative review, the reviewer, even admitting that he does not “get it,” still misses many important points about the album. Using an exaggerated tone, the reviewer, for instance, says “Sonically, I find *Loveless* to be the most gut-wrenching horrific unattractive [*sic*] pile of terrible sounds that I have ever experienced [*sic*],” and “The biggest issue with the music (as with much popular music that uses distorted guitars) is that one of the key elements of music is all but ignored: dynamics. There is only one dynamic in *Loveless*: painfully loud.”<sup>106</sup> While a superficial listening of the album may suggest to a novice listener that only one dynamic, loud, permeates the entire album, My Bloody Valentine's dynamic changes are subtle and require greater patience in the listener in order to understand their effect. In order to prove that there are dynamic contrasts on *Loveless*, I have created a table that maps out these subtle differences. Keep in mind that all the dynamic markings I have chosen are relative.

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<sup>105</sup> N. Wilson, “Yet another reviewer fakes an orgasm.” review of *Loveless*, by My Bloody Valentine, *Amazon.com: Reviews for Loveless*. [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000002LRJ/ref=cm\\_rev\\_next/103-2784422-3025460?%5Fencoding=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=5174&s=music&customer-reviews.start=61](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000002LRJ/ref=cm_rev_next/103-2784422-3025460?%5Fencoding=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=5174&s=music&customer-reviews.start=61) (accessed on February 22, 2006).

<sup>106</sup> Galikai, “Quite possibly the worst album I've ever heard.” review of *Loveless*, by My Bloody Valentine, *Amazon.com: Reviews for Loveless*. [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000002LRJ/ref=cm\\_rev\\_next/103-2784422-3025460?%5Fencoding=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=5174&s=music&customer-reviews.start=71](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/B000002LRJ/ref=cm_rev_next/103-2784422-3025460?%5Fencoding=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=5174&s=music&customer-reviews.start=71) (accessed on February 22, 2006).

**Table 5: Dynamic Contrasts on *Loveless***

1. “Only Shallow”

Introduction/Breaks—fortissimo  
Verses—forte  
Bridge to track 2—mezzo piano

2. “Loomer”

Introduction/Breaks—mezzo forte  
Verses—between mezzo forte and mezzo piano

3. “Touched”

A section—mezzo forte  
B section—mezzo forte  
C section—mezzo piano  
B’ section—mezzo piano

4. “To Here Knows When”

Introduction/Break—forte  
Verses—mezzo forte  
Choruses—forte  
Outro—gradual decrescendo towards the end of final chorus  
Bridge to track 5—mezzo piano

5. “When You Sleep”

Introduction—fortissimo  
Verses—forte  
Break 1—forte  
Break 2—fortissimo  
Outro—fortissimo  
Bridge to track 6—mezzo forte

6. “I Only Said”

Introduction/Breaks—fortissimo  
Verses—forte  
Outro—fortissimo, gradual decrescendo near song’s end

7. “Come in Alone”

Introduction—fortissimo  
Verses—forte  
Breaks/Outro—fortissimo

8. “Sometimes”

Introduction/Verses/Breaks—mezzo piano, very gradual crescendo throughout song to mezzo forte

**Table 5: continued**

9. “Blown a Wish”

Introduction/Breaks—forte  
Verses—mezzo forte  
Outro—forte—gradual crescendo, never reaches fortissimo

10. “What You Want”

Introduction—fortissimo  
Verses—forte  
Breaks—fortissimo  
Bridge to track 11—between mezzo forte and mezzo piano

11. “Soon”

Introduction—mezzo forte  
Verses—forte  
Breaks—mezzo forte  
Outro—mezzo forte, sudden dynamic shift at 6:38 to piano with a fade out.

Granted many of the songs on *Loveless* are loud and not something one’s Grandma would listen to, however, it is important to remember that dynamics are not simply loud and quiet. There are varying degrees of volume possibilities and My Bloody Valentine clearly did not use only one dynamic level on *Loveless*. As far as this reviewer’s other humorously overstated comment I highlighted, I am sure the reviewer has heard worse. To the reviewer’s credit, nevertheless, Shields mentioned at one point that if he made another My Bloody Valentine album, the band would do more with dynamics.

The positive customer reviews on Amazon.com far outnumber the negative ones. While it is not necessary to mention all of these reviews, many of them exhibit similar qualities and thoughts. For example, many mention the greatness of the album, that the album is indescribable, that the album is the sound of the heavens, that it is one of the most influential albums ever released, that it is not from this world, that it is emotionally heavy and musically perfect, that the album is way ahead of its time, that we may never truly understand what Kevin Shields was trying to accomplish, and that *Loveless* is an absolute masterpiece. The amount of people that this album has positively affected is quite astounding. The beautiful thing about this album is that it has changed so many people’s lives and caused them to think differently about music and music’s possibilities.

It has helped people transcend their natural lives to something beyond their expectations. Although this thesis has just been another person's take on an album that so many have said and thought so much about, I hope those that love *Loveless* and much as I do will find something in this work that they have not thought of before, thus, giving them a better understanding of My Bloody Valentine's vision.

In closing, Douglas Wolk lends his proficiency as the official reviewer of the album for Amazon.com. In his beautifully written reflection, he says,

My Bloody Valentine's entire career has been aiming toward the perfect guitar noise that Kevin Shields has in his head: a pure, warm, androgynous but deeply sexual rush of sound. *Loveless* is overwhelming, with Shields and Bilinda Butcher's guitars and voices blending into each other until they become a distant orchestra, the rhythm section striding in majestic lockstep, and occasional bursts of dance rhythms (as on the single "Soon") buoying the live instruments' warp and drift. Furiously loud but seductive rather than aggressive, the album flows like a lava stream from one track into another, subsuming everything in the mix into its blissful roar, and pulsing like a lover's body.<sup>107</sup>

In wrapping up the effect *Loveless* has on the mind and body, Wolk's description of the album is one of the best I have come across.

### Final Thoughts

While *Loveless* may have received unanimously positive reviews upon its release, it failed to make a significant impact in record sales, especially in the United States. Alan McGee claims that the album initially "did about 100,000 over there."<sup>108</sup> Granted an indie label selling 100,000 records in America or anywhere for that matter is quite fantastic, however, *Loveless* did have major distribution in the States. My Bloody Valentine's American label, Sire/Warner Brothers, was surely expecting the album to make a larger impression than it did. What we must take into account, of course, was a 1991 event that no one in the music industry was expecting—mainly, the explosion of the Seattle grunge scene. Obviously, the bellwether of this scene was Nirvana. My Bloody Valentine released their seminal work in the colossal wake of *Nevermind*—Nirvana's

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<sup>107</sup> Douglas Wolk, review of *Loveless*, by My Bloody Valentine, *Amazon*. <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B000002LRJ/103-1034579-9223810?v=glance> (accessed on February 22, 2006).

<sup>108</sup> Paolo Hewitt, *Alan McGee & The Story of Creation Records: This Ecstasy Romance Cannot Last*. (London: Mainstream, 2000) 120.



multi-platinum chart-topping album that would ultimately abolish 80s mainstream rock and cast a giant shadow over the rock music of the 90s. Nevertheless, while the masses instantly felt Nirvana's influence, the grunge scene did not have a lengthy duration. Kurt Cobain's dying wish to burn out rather than fade away may have come true. Despite the magnitude of *Nevermind*, we realize it was a product of its time. The ageless quality of *Loveless*, however, has caused a new generation to discover the album and grasp its importance.

It is certain that many early shoegazer bands, like My Bloody Valentine, would probably have objected to the descriptor shoegaze for describing their sound. Unfortunately, our obsession with categorization causes us to lump similar groups and aesthetics into particular categories. While many bands today devotedly self-apply the term shoegaze when explaining their sound, those original shoegazer bands were not simply trying to fit into a specific sound ideal. As is the case with most unknowing creators of new genres and styles throughout the history of music, shoegazers were creating their sounds well before any music critic was able to apply stylizing and/or witty terms to their music. Kevin Shields, when questioned about the terms shoegaze and dreampop in an interview, said, "Don't blame us for what the press creates!"<sup>109</sup> Perhaps these terms were simply an alternative way that the music press chose to describe those bands of the early-90s that continued the psychedelic tradition of music in one way or another. While drug use has always been an issue in rock music, there is definitely a specific type of drug that we associate with bands that create music so in touch with the subconscious. Scores of musicians and bands that present ideas of surrealism in their music have used mind-altering hallucinogens such as LSD, mushrooms (psilocybin), and marijuana. In reference to drugs and My Bloody Valentine's music, one comedic journalist says,

NEVER GO through customs with a My Bloody Valentine record. It sends the sniffer dogs barmy. Well, not quite, but certainly MBV's music often gets discussed in terms that wouldn't be out of place in a GCSE Chemistry class. My Bloody Valentine's sclerotic distortions and 'off your face' ambience are bound to lead to insinuations of chemically heightened awareness. Or if you prefer, anyone who makes records this bonkers must be taking wagon loads of drugs.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Shields, Interview on AOL.

<sup>110</sup> Stuart Maconie, "The Artery of Noise." *New Musical Express* (April 21, 1990)  
<http://www.mybloodyvalentine.net/press/nme-21apr90.html> (accessed on March 22, 2006)

As I alluded to in the opening section of this thesis, it was my band's use of drugs that contributed to our hypnotic stillness while performing. Additionally, the use of lots of effects pedals, which causes a guitarist to gaze downwards, or simply having a shyness and/or an aversion to performing contributes some supplementary reasons as to why the mysterious shoegazing ritual transpired. Some combination of the three above-mentioned reasons for shoegazing is probably where the root of this performance phenomenon lies.

My Bloody Valentine began their career like many bands do, struggling with their influences and fledgling musical ideas, dreaming of creating a mass appeal for their music. They paid their dues by making a few unsuccessful EPs and playing some meagerly attended shows. They had to deal with members leaving the band to pursue other interests. They went through the difficult process of trying to find a new singer that could fit in well with their sound. While many bands may have given up by this point, My Bloody Valentine kept struggling and eventually persevered. They signed with one of the most important indie record labels of the 1980s in London. Their following increased significantly by the end of the decade. Their three endless years of recording *Loveless* only furthered their appeal as hoards of devoted fans eagerly awaited their new work.

The creation of *Loveless* was undoubtedly a unique occurrence in the history of recording. While Shields and McGee may have differing accounts of the amount of time and money the album took to record, what is important is that the record was completed—something surely remarkable given Shields's (and McGee's) ensuing mental downfall. During this time, My Bloody Valentine demonstrated flawlessly that the application of mental abstraction, especially from a perfectionist, to sound is an arduous process.

*Loveless* itself ties together the aesthetics of noise and beauty into one concrete statement. It presents the vexing peculiarities of dreams in a musical format so that those who truly understand its meaning may experience a sort of waking lucidity. When we dream, we face the unknown depths of the mind through vague images and indescribable encounters. If ever there were a perfect soundtrack for our dreams, it would be *Loveless*. With these thoughts in mind, My Bloody Valentine's long recording process is not at all

that extraordinary. If anything, their commitment to their indefinable dreamlike art should be lauded.

As the most often cited shoegazing masterpiece, *Loveless* has made a significant imprint on the history of popular music. With a sound that many have tried to imitate unsuccessfully, My Bloody Valentine has risen to a cult-like status owed in part to their decisive work, innovative techniques, and mysterious disappearance.

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