

## Radiohead's Yorke: "It's difficult justifying being a rock band"

by Greg Kot  
Knight-Ridder Tribune

When Radiohead played at Hutchinson Field in Chicago's Grant Park, it put an exclamation point on an extraordinary 10-month run for the British band, perhaps the likeliest mainstream success story in rock since the '70s heyday of psychedelic conceptualists Pink Floyd.

Radiohead's 1997 album, "OK Computer" changed the landscape for mainstream rock. Major labels went hunting for the "new Radiohead," and tastemakers such as REM's Michael Stipe and U2's Bono endorsed the British quintet's innovations: a bold merger of anthem rock, skewed tunefulness, thoughtful introspection and haunted sonic atmosphere.

Then a funny thing happened on the way to their coronation. Radiohead had twins: "Kid A," released last fall, and "Amnesiac," which came out in early June. Together, they represent a full-blown detour into the avant-garde side of the rock spectrum from a band supposedly on the brink of mainstream superstardom. Instead of anthems, "Kid A" and "Amnesiac" offer disquieting lullabies. Instead of singer Thom Yorke in full neo-operatic roar, they present Yorke adrift in space, if not muted entirely. And instead of ringing guitars, they brim with computer-generated sounds. Remarkably, "Kid A" debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard album chart, and "Amnesiac" at No. 2, perhaps the most radical-sounding albums ever to enjoy such exalted chart positions upon their release.

Like Pink Floyd's 1973 masterpiece, "The Dark Side of the Moon," these albums have invaded the popular consciousness not with their instant pop tunefulness, but with their alluring otherworldliness. They find Radiohead expanding on the most radical elements of "OK Computer" rather than the ones most instantly accessible. So far, the public has followed the band down this more personal path.

In any case, these albums aren't just

a blip in Radiohead's development. In an e-mail interview, Yorke says they're more like a new beginning.

Q. Some of your bandmates say you initially wanted to release the material that eventually ended up as "Kid A" and "Amnesiac" as a double album. What persuaded you to change your mind? Do you feel in retrospect this was the correct decision?

A. Do you? Imagine the (creative) would have gone! They are separate because they can't run in a straight line with each other. They cancel each other out as overall finished things. Originally we thought about making them EPs, but that would have been a copout. They come from two different places I think. ... In some weird way I think "Amnesiac" gives another take on "Kid A," a form of explanation.

Q. You have guitarists in the band not playing guitar on these two albums. You have members of the band not playing anything at all on certain tracks. How well did the band adapt to this way of working? Are you all on one page in terms of how far to push the envelope, what kind of band Radiohead is and what it should sound like?

A. There is a restriction about people doing their own musical patch, which just gets a bit daft after a while. It wasn't really the point. I think everybody was surprisingly cool with not being involved necessarily directly in certain tracks. It was a bit boring at points, however, staring at laptops all day is only so rewarding. But it was quite liberating to get used to the idea of music on a screen. Being in a band is also about having and sharing ideas, especially now that there is so much instrument changing going on. ... The trick is letting someone pursue an idea without stepping over it too early - that's the hard bit. I felt very strongly that if we wanted to pick up different styles, go completely electronic, whatever, that it is all still us, otherwise you are pandering to the nice little stylistic

boxes, to this tribe or that tribe.

Q. Bono says U2 has "reaped for the job of the greatest rock band in the world." For U2, being a rock band and being part of the rock tradition is important. How important is that to Radiohead? Do you still consider Radiohead part of the family of rock bands, past and present? And if so, is it important for Radiohead to be part of a larger dialogue with other bands - raising the stakes, pushing the art form and in turn being pushed by each other to outdo yourself with each album?

A. All of that stuff is not interesting to us. Bono said to me I'll be on the corner of the bar singing quietly into the mike while he's belting it out demanding your attention - that's right I think. I'm not sure we are in a rock band anymore, and competition between bands is a bit destructive sometimes, re: Suede-Blur-Oasis Brit-pop scene a few years ago. We tried to stay away from any of that. It doesn't seem to matter much anymore. We were influenced so much by (pioneering German electronic bands) Can and Kraftwerk and Faust, and (avant-garde classical composers) Olivier Messiaen and (Krzysztof Penderecki), and the 13th Floor Elevators, and all this electronic malarkey, it is difficult to still justify just being a rock band and that's it. I think technology and absolute no musical or technological restriction is going to change the way we feel about music. Laptops are the new electric guitar, I reckon, but I still love electric guitars, and drums and singing. ... And I don't disown our old stuff at all. Family? An interesting choice of words. Both U2 and REM are cool and generous and have been absolutely supportive of us and we are very grateful, very lucky.

Q. A number of so-called Radiohead "imitators" crept up in the last few years, in the wake of "OK Computer." How big a factor was that in the radical new direction taken by "Kid A"? Do you feel proud or dismayed by the fact that other bands are so obviously influenced by your sound and trying

to make their own version of it?

A. This question makes me feel ill. A&R departments all around the world went on a feeding frenzy for months circa 1998-99, as Colin (Greenwood, Radiohead's bassist) puts it, and perhaps now we are witnessing the results. We, however, have moved on.

Q. Your feelings about Napster: "Amnesiac" and "Kid A" were both widely available on the Web weeks before they were released. Has this helped or hindered the band?

A. Over "Kid A" there was too much paranoia about it being out before we wanted. That was a mistake that made us look precious. This time we tried to be chilled about it. The best bit for Napster for us is all the live bootlegs, people singing along to stuff at gigs that is not even out yet only because we have played it live. Stuff we haven't even recorded yet. Home taping is killing music?

Q. Many listeners perceived "Kid A" as a "radical new direction for the band," and there were rumors that you put it out because "Amnesiac" would be a more pop-oriented record closer in spirit to "OK Computer." Do you agree?

A. No, I really don't. I think "Amnesiac" explains that it was not necessarily such a radical step. I think it was as disappearing for three years and moving on. ... There is stuff on both records that, to me, represents no departure at all, but just survived because it was too good to miss, like "Knives Out." ... There are straight-ahead tracks on both records. I enjoyed having "Amnesiac" to myself for so long. But I don't think it's any more accessible. If we'd released "Amnesiac" first I think the same sort of reactions would have occurred. I don't think "Kid A" is so experimental, I think we're just getting warmed up. ...

Q. How do you feel "Kid A" was received by your audience? Did you expect it would confound them? Did you feel vindicated when it debuted at No. 1 in America?

A. When we found out we went out

to celebrate in New York and sat around a table in an over-priced restaurant in Manhattan not able to say anything because of the shock. We couldn't understand it. Yes, we felt incredibly vindicated and happy after a nightmare couple of years, but we were not deliberately trying to confound people, just do things on our own terms, having worked hard for the right to do so. I think having recorded fairly straight before what we did over these two records seem a shock. But we were not trying to alienate people, our interests had changed musically, and also it was cool to be No. 1 given how (terrible) much of the mainstream was/is at the moment. It showed maybe it's still possible. It made us very 'appy. We were very 'appy.

Q. Both "Kid A" and "Amnesiac" are much more studio-oriented records than was "OK Computer." How is the material being translated into live per-

formance? Do arrangements change night to night, or is there an attempt to develop a suitable live arrangement of a song and play it pretty much the same way each night?

A. Relearning stuff from studio work is cool because it pushes you to try new things. Sometimes they don't, but overall it keeps us interested, which is what we need. Yes, we change things but there aren't any five-minute solos yet - although I'm not ruling it out.

Q. What about concert ticket prices - big bands command as much as \$75 for a show. Some are getting more than \$100. You're charging less than \$40. Where do you draw the line?

A. I don't know about relative ticket prices. We always ask that we don't overcharge, but it's not my department. When you come to see us play you aren't going to Disneyland. ... Or maybe you are. Hmmm ...



Radiohead's Thom Yorke (File Photo)

### THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

The weekly column that asks if there is intelligent life out there

by Mike Pingree  
TMS Campus

**WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU DOING HERE!?** A Colorado man got so intoxicated that his mistook his neighbor's home for his own (they are identical), and got into a gun battle when he entered the man's bedroom. When the drunk discovered his keys didn't fit, he went around back to the sliding glass door of the master bedroom. The 79-year-old homeowner saw him and fired his .357 Magnum. The two struggled for the gun, and both were critically wounded.

**LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PUH-LEESE!** At least a dozen old folks who live in the retirement community of Sun City West, Ariz., have been causing a scandal by engaging in sex outdoors. The community's governing board President Dee Hjermstad said elderly residents have been seen "having sex in the swimming pools, the spas, the bench on Meeker Mountain, a bench in the Doggie Park and in (two) ... parking lots." Offenders have been asked to stop it.

**WHAT'S A MIRROR FOR ANYWAY?** Police pulled over a young man on a highway in central Portugal after they observed him looking into the rearview mirror and shaving as he drove along. He told them he wanted to look his best for an important meeting.

**I DIDN'T HEAR ANYTHING:** A family whose London home was the target of a drug raid filed a complaint with authorities, not that it was wrong to search the home, but that one of the policemen thunderously broke wind in the hallway and failed to apologize. Scotland Yard has confirmed that "an incivility charge" is being investigated, but did not say what penalty the gas-passing policeman would face.

**BUT NOW HE'S EXTREMELY DEPRESSED:** Police say a man who robbed eight gas stations in northern Kentucky used his own car for the getaways, despite the fact that it has vanity plates which spell out his last name. Witnesses had no trouble remembering the unusual license plates. After making the arrest, one cop said, "He was either extremely confident or extremely stupid."

**WHO'S A GOOD DOGGIE? I AM, THAT'S WHO:** Bryan Weathers, a rookie policeman in Emond, Okla., chased a trespassing suspect into the woods and ordered him to give himself up or face a police dog the cop threatened to release. The man refused, so Weathers, who actually had no dog, began growling and barking to himself. The man suspended immediately surrendered. "As he was handcuffed, he kept saying, 'Where's the dog? Where's the dog?'" Weathers said. "My partner slapped him on the shoulder and said, 'There's no dog, buddy.'"

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