

BOOKS



Ryan Adams with Whiskeytown at the Borderline, London, May 9, 1998

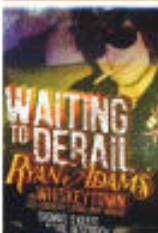
Adams is seen as a gifted manchild forever throwing hissy fits

LAST year, Ryan Adams was cast as the cartoon villain in Lizzy Goldman's gossip *Meet Me In The Bathroom*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he doesn't emerge from *Waiting To Derail* covered in glory either. This back-of-a-beermat history of Whiskeytown, the dysfunctional alt-country band that launched Adams in the late '90s, is written by the group's tour manager, Thomas O'Keefe. He enters the fray in the period between *Faithless Street* and *Strangers Almanac*, with the "buzz building – all systems go". Adams is living in semi-dereliction at 70 Montgomery in Raleigh, beer, fag butts and dirty clothes strewn everywhere. "Half-genius, half-jackass", he's perceived locally as being "heavy on ambition but light on authenticity".

O'Keefe's job is to babysit the rising star on tour. It's a challenge. "90 per cent of the time I could talk Ryan into doing the right thing. Five per cent of the time, I'd cover up whatever idiotic thing he'd done. But that final five per cent? We were fucked." There are pungent road tales aplenty: fights in parking lots; ragingly intoxicated shows; semi-improvised songs about smoking crack performed on live radio.

Adams is a songwriting "warlock" whose gift for spontaneous creativity is "fucking sorcery". Yet he combines "Prince-level productivity" and a "genius for mimicry" with "self-defeating hubris". In other words, he's a gifted but petulant manchild forever throwing hissy fits: radio hosts, sports fans and TVs in bars trigger monumental temper tantrums. In the name of "punk rock", he sets his guitar at ear-splitting volume at every gig. When he finds out Whiskeytown are playing in Aspen – a "fucking skid

REVIEWED THIS MONTH



WAITING TO DERAIL: RYAN ADAMS AND WHISKEYTOWN'S BRILLIANT WRECK
THOMAS O'KEEFE WITH JOE OESTREICH
SKYHORSE PUBLISHING
7/10



LONG SHADOWS, HIGH HOPES: THE LIFE & TIMES OF MATT JOHNSON AND THE THE
NEIL FRASER
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town" – he performs a warped 25-minute guitar assault that forces Kevin Costner to flee in horror. Later, he demands a flight is rebooked with American Airlines because "I like the colour of their planes better". He changes the lineup of the band as though changing socks. For O'Keefe, Adams' bedraggled poor-boy antics are "absolutely calculated... Ryan knew exactly what he was doing."

The tour anecdotes are entertaining but ultimately repetitive, and curiously coy. We learn little about Adams' intense relationship with Amy Lombardi, a record company employee, while drugs – other than weed – are handled discreetly. Though Adams is generally drinking "like a man going off to war", he gets sober long enough to fire two of the band for their own alcohol issues. By the time of Whiskeytown's final shows in 2000, O'Keefe has been squeezed out by Adams' big-shot new manager Frank Callari. When Adams plays a showcase for his debut solo album, *Heartbreaker*, O'Keefe requests a spot on the guest list, to be told there's no room at the inn. Despite all the aggravation, he still seems fond of his former charge. It's a mark of the book's good heart that you can just about understand why.

The timing could hardly be better for *Long Shadows, High Hopes*. After a lengthy hiatus, last year Matt Johnson resurrected The The, who recently played their first live shows in 16 years.

Neil Fraser's authorised biography tracks Johnson – with brio, though in occasionally tedious detail – from his East End upbringing, partly spent above the Two Puddings pub in Stratford, a key live venue in the '60s. He hears the Small Faces drifting up through the

floorboards, and devotes himself to music.

He whizzes through the late-'70s Soho scene of squats, speed, Steve New, Nico and Glenn Branca-inspired jams. Early The The are "diabolically under-rehearsed", while Johnson is intense and unpredictable. Recording "Uncertain Smile" in New York, his drug-fuelled behaviour is regarded by none other than David Johansen as "unprofessional". By the time of *Infected*, he's become a post-punk Kurtz, plunging into Amazonian Peru and Bolivia, "unhinged" chemically, spiritually and psychologically, tangling with the Shining Path and getting up to "things you can't talk about".

Emerging from a period of "extreme hedonism and narcissism", life follows a cycle of binge and purge. Johnny Marr joins The The in a haze of MDMA. *Mind Bomb* is made on a diet of magic mushrooms, grapes and Islam; *Dusk* mines the mortality blues. Mainstream success comes and goes, as Johnson is upended by a series of setbacks: delayed shock at the death of his brother Eugene; industry troubles; money issues; domestic upheaval. Following a show at Bowie's Meltdown in 2002, he finally goes underground. Battling "the residual anger I've carried in my bones since childhood", he's "on the run, trying to escape from my own life". He doesn't touch a guitar for seven years, until gradually undertaking the long march back to creativity.

It's a tricky business, reconciling the personable East-Enders with the troubled soul who once gaffer-taped a cat to a wall and filmed a video in a crack-addled Harlem brothel. Fraser never quite succeeds, but it's an entertaining and sometimes enlightening attempt. ☉

GRABETH THOMPSON

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