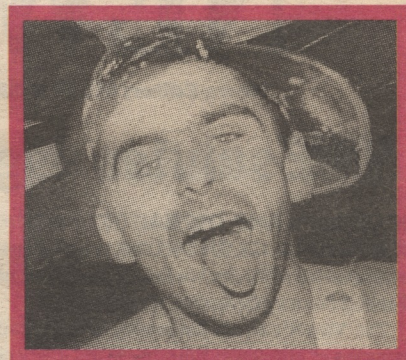


T&C & SYMPATHY: The fight to save your favourite venue

NEW NME EXPLORE MUSICAL

Dynamic Duodenum

LIVE MAYHEM! ON INTO '93
with **BACK TO THE PLANET,**
MOLLY HALF HEAD and
THE AUTEURS!



CHIA PET
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MAMBO TAXI
BILLY BRAGG
CORNERSHOP
SUPERCHUNK
ALICE IN CHAINS
LEONARD COHEN
UNCANNY ALLIANCE
SEVEN YEAR BITCH



GASTRIC TREATY!
Tanya Donnelly goes BELLY up in '93



Tanya: "Wounded nerds are attracted to us, but I'd rather attract them than people who look up my skirt."

NICE

● Deep in the heart of the majestic redwood forests of Santa Cruz lurks a 30-strong film crew trying to capture an MTV-friendly, no-expense-spared image of a frankly uncomfortable BELLY, Boston's own weird-pop specialists in warped-American-underbelly mystique. JOHN MULVEY avoids punching the director to talk to squirrely star-in-the-making TANYA DONELLY about fairy tales, fantasies and trees. Branch manager: KEVIN CUMMINS

"Here, sown by the creator's hand,
In serried ranks, the redwoods stand;
No other clime is honoured so,
No other lands their glory know.
The greatest of earth's living forms,
Tall conquerors who laugh at storms;
Their challenge still unanswered rings,
Through fifty centuries of kings."

'The Redwoods', Joseph B Strauss (builder of the Golden Gate Bridge and clearly no poet)

Peace? A noble, timeless quality of silence? A spiritually cleansing sense of isolation? The redwood forest as a sacred retreat from the brash trash excesses of the 20th Century?... Dream on...

For today, better forget that back-to-nature shit. Today, the sepulchral calm of the Big Basin Reserve, breathtakingly high in the Santa Cruz mountains of California, has been invaded by the pernicious devil-spawn of the age; by the movie-makers and rock stars.

A can of air freshener is on hand for those LA smog-monsters who can't deal with real fresh air; leads creep around the trunks of 250-foot-high trees; cameras crush mushrooms to mulch as they circle and track around; one pounding song echoes out on a constant loop, and a small, stupid, excruciatingly self-important man shouts: "Where's the Talent?" into his walkie-talkie again and again and again...

The 'Talent', meanwhile, are sat shivering in a camper van, suffering hippy guilt at the fortune being squandered on their career out there. Belly's big push for stardom starts here, and they don't seem quite sure what to make of it.

For 'Feed The Tree' - the first single on Sire, their new label in America - no expense has been spared. The video director, an intense Spielberg type with the kind of faraway look that suggests in his mind he's helming the new Schwarzenegger mega-vehicle, has been endowed with a budget big enough to consider flying everyone off to New Zealand or Romania.

The crew number around 30, are equally intense members of the Hollywood wannabe periphery, and operate a hierarchy of beards; from the director's bushy movie-brat fuzz, through the cameraman's

hefty moustache, down to the production assistant's optimistic goatee tuft. And the chief make-up woman exudes West Coast New Age bollocks, gives serious advice on liposuction, and slips through more total costume changes than the Talent. Lights! Camera! Moral quandaries!...

"It's really, really hard for me to justify this," says Tanya Donnelly, hiding in her mobile dressing room from the sub-zero temperatures outside, "thinking and saying the things that I think and say every day, and then having somebody spend so many thousand dollars on a few-minute f—ing advertisement for a record. I spend so much time grappling with that, with how I can fit it into my life without being, a) hypocritical, or b) a liar... you know... just full of shit..."

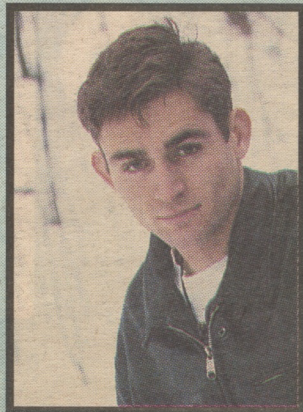
"Our usual argument is that some day we're going to get into a position, via these kind of ads, where we'll be able to make some kind of difference. What I'm afraid of is that they're making an REM-level video for a band that's nowhere near that level. They're making a video that doesn't have anything to do with the people who're gonna buy our record initially and that makes me really nervous..."

The make-up woman reappears to touch up her masterpiece. Another crew member wanders in from the wild wonderland and gushes, "This is the cutest place I've ever seen." And the arsehole assistant director comes crackling through on the radio for the hundredth time: "WHERE'S THE TALENT?"

SO WHERE is the Talent? It isn't hard to see why Belly's American record company have such high hopes for the band,



Brothers grin: Chris...



...and Tom

ONE, SQUIRREL!

why they'll cajole them into high-gloss, highly commercial videos that Tanya admits she "has little respect for".

While the Throwing Muses – particularly on their last album with Tanya, 'The Real Ramona' – took dense, tangled, fiercely personal music and gave it an occasional accessible tilt, Belly reverse the process. If the Muses serve up frequently terrifying trauma in manageable bite-sized chunks, Belly deal in saccharine lightly laced with strychnine.

'Star', their debut album recorded last summer, is a heady, unabashed pop record with a likably weird edge – a 'Modern Rock' marketing man's wet dream, basically. Pretty much everything is in place without any need for contrivance: galloping, immediate rushes of songs that flirt with rock and cuddle up to a happily mutated close cousin of pure pop; lyrics that enchant, confuse and add that desirable warped-American-underbelly mystique; and a smart, giggling, permanently grinning ("That's a f—ing involuntary muscle spasm. I've no control over that") real STAR fitting perfectly into the limelight up at the front.

Tanya Donnelly was made to lead a band. Indeed, it remains a mystery how she stayed in Throwing Muses so long, where the scattershot genius of her half-sister, Kristin Hersh, kept her necessarily in a supporting role.

"I was always perceived as being the friendly, approachable one," says Tanya about her time in Boston's premier rad-mad-fem-totally-outre-there guitar band, "and Kristin was seen as the crazy one. But it was really strange – I'm much more guarded personally than she is. Here's the bubble; you stand that side, I'll stand this side."

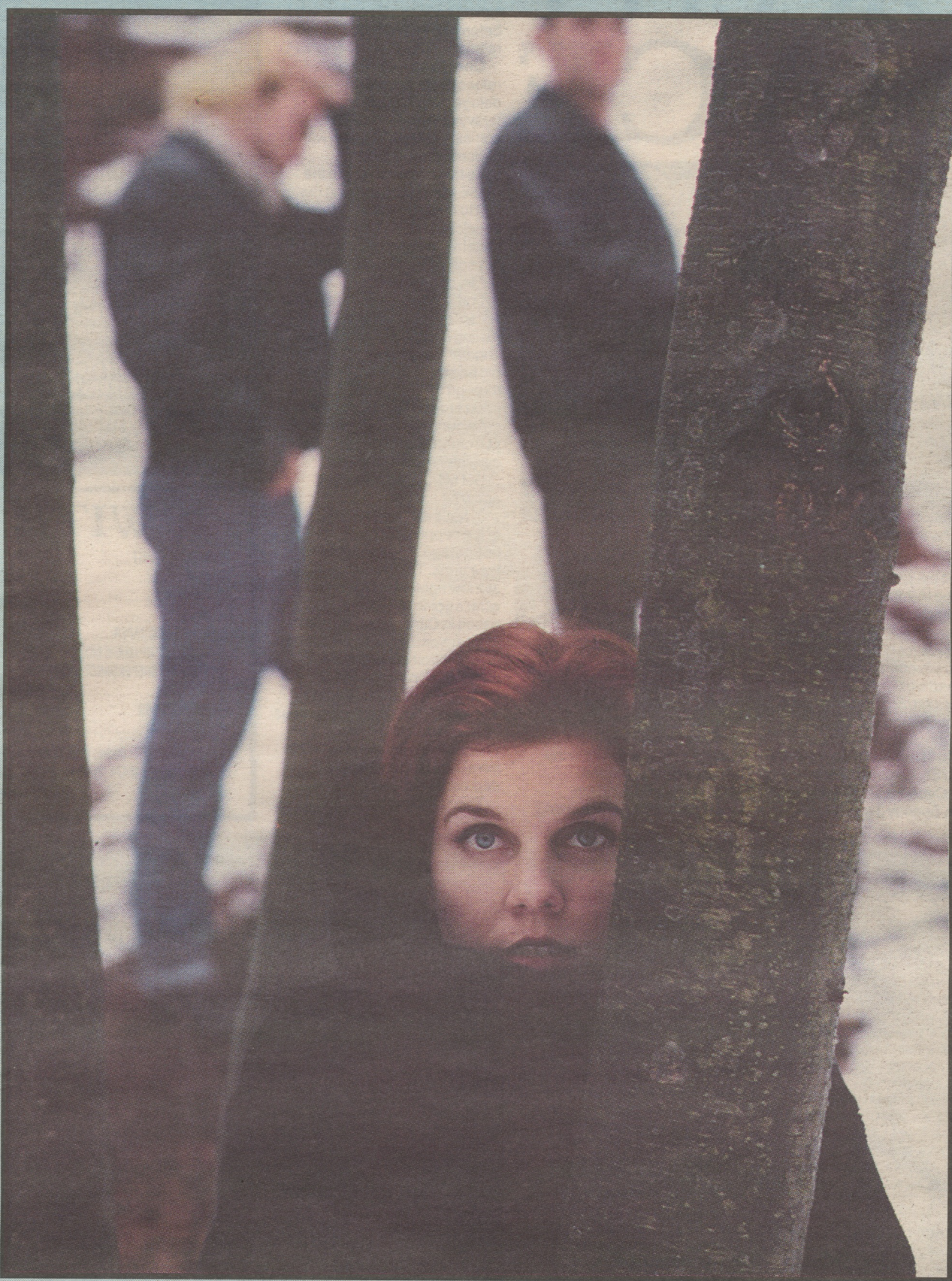
"Like them, we have a nerd fanbase. Wounded nerds everywhere are attracted to us, but I'd rather attract them than people who want to look up my skirt."

Tanya leaving the Muses, after the long promotional trawl for 'The Real Ramona' in 1991, was one of the best things that happened in music that year, in spite of the dewy-eyed rantings of recidivists who'll claim that, apart, they've both lost the plot. Remarkably, two equally excellent bands have crawled from the emotional rubble: the heavy, purgative mind-war of the power trio Throwing Muses; and the giddier adrenalin buzz of Belly.

There are currently, then, three members of Belly: Tanya, clean-cut guitarist Tom Gorman and his drumming-graphic designing-surfing brother Chris. A pair of ex-Muses bassists, Fred Abong and Leslie Langston, have already been and gone in the band's short life, leaving them on the look-out for a new recruit...

...And leaving them looking seriously unbalanced as the camera zooms in on the trio miming in a forest glade that evening, bathed in arc lights that transform the great outdoors into a studio set for a very expensive version of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

"It's so beautiful, it doesn't look real," wonders Tanya, awed, between takes. Tom and Chris, meanwhile, poke at a viscous, gooey blob on the ground identified by a park ranger as a regurgitated slug dumped there by a passing owl.



Trunk's not dead! Belly get even better than the arboreal thing

"Fairy tales have come naturally to me ever since I was little. That's the way I think, that's the way I talk. I'm basically very immature... Straightforward things in my life get clouded by a fairy tale atmosphere." – Tanya

As the call goes up for another take, and the night gets colder than California is ever meant to be, it's a shame the renegade owl didn't drop it on the director's head...

FINALLY, FILMING finishes for the day. We drive for an hour or so down nerve-jarringly twisting, steep, dark forest roads, back to San Jose. The band and their manager, Gary Smith (who also looks after Juliana Hatfield and produced, among many others, Pixies' 'Come On Pilgrim') are preoccupied with what the director plans for tomorrow, when two models he's hired to play topless wood nymphs are due to turn up (Update: thankfully, they were expunged from the video's sleek, dizzying final cut). The mind boggles. And Belly feel sick.

Round midnight, we end up in a bar near San Jose airport that

is a sleazy classic of kitsch '50s Americana, the Biju (sic) Lounge. Tanya aches like hell from having stood out in the cold all day, grazing on junk food, but is still twitchily hyperactive – like a squirrel, if you believe how she describes herself in 'Feed The Tree':

"That's what I was like when I was a child. I was a squirrely child, now I'm a squirrely adult: small, hyper, SNAP! I snap."

She clicks her fingers dramatically. Singing of squirrels is strange territory for rock music, but it's typical of Tanya and Belly's penchant for a kind of twisted quaintness, a barbed take on innocent childhood fantasies.

There are a lot of fairy tales-turned-sour in their repertoire, from the blatant (although far from straightforward) Pinocchio reference of 'Gepetto', to the spooked and simple 'Witch', to the entrancing *Jungle Book* cover

version, 'Trust In Me', to great swathes of queasily romantic images of moons and stars and dogs and, inevitably, forests.

It may sound like a rather unwelcome re-run of the sweet-turned-oh-so-shocking tactics that the dread legions of goth tried to scare – and more regularly bore – us stupid with a few years ago. But, thankfully, there's no self-conscious theatrics here. This is the way, a little worryingly, that Tanya Donnelly looks at life:

"Fairy tales have come naturally to me ever since I was little. That's the way I think, that's the way I talk. I'm basically very immature... No, I'm kidding, but I honestly don't write parables to avoid saying something straightforward. Straightforward things in my life get clouded by a fairy tale atmosphere."

"It's a very powerful way to talk about things. Imagery is

really important and people respond to that. For some reason, every other art form is allowed to use imagery to convey a message, but pop music has to be literal... which isn't something I agree with."

She pauses a moment, realising she's talking herself into something akin to another world.

"I was trying to downplay the fairy tale aspect in a phone interview the other day, and I looked down at the bedside table, and my Hans Christian Andersen was just lying there... But I hate that word, fairy tale, 'cos it's *Sleeping Beauty* and I'm concentrating on the Brothers Grimm."

"There you go, the Brothers Grimm," butts in Chris, with predictably wicked relish. "Kids get eaten, their hands get hacked off..."

"That's what children should be reading. That's what I grew

up reading and I'm not... I mean... I dunno..." Tanya appears to have second thoughts about claiming she's not twisted (after all, take 'Slow Dog' – the story of a woman with a decomposing dog strapped to her back).

"It's healthy for children and adults to have stories. I think if I were prone to writing straightforward songs and I deliberately clouded them in fairy tales you'd be able to tell immediately that they were completely fake."

So if your tales all evolve so naturally, why did you use an image, or at least a name, as familiar as 'Gepetto' for a song title?

"It comes from Pinocchio. He was the puppet-maker."

Yeah, exactly.

"Yeah, so what's your point? TEQUILA! I NEED ANOTHER TEQUILA!"

She collapses into giggles. It is late.

"Gepetto" is about the way children relate to each other, and how there's a lot of dark, weird stuff in a child's world."

It's a very sexual song, all that stuff about "So he's lying on top again".

"Well, when you're kids together it's sexual. I mean, come on, there's a lot of sexuality in childhood, a lot of it. That's where a lot of sexual weirdness starts. When I was six or seven-years-old, my friends and I were like, 'You be the boy now'. Stuff like that, really sexy" – she whispers in fake shame – "like dry humping."

"I was five when I started getting horny for the first time. This boy and I were in kindergarten and we liked each other, and then he tore the head off one of my dolls and I hit him on the head with a fire engine. That was the first time I felt I'd hurt the person I flirted with. You know that moment when you've said something or done something and you've gone one step too f—ing far? That was our moment, and we were five. And when I have that experience in my relationship now it's the same feeling, like 'This is totally f—ed up now and before we had this beautiful thing'."

"Now it's got a stain on it," adds Chris gleefully.

"How did we get to this?" asks Tom, bemused. "This is the first time I've heard this particular version of what 'Gepetto' is about."

You amaze me...

Most of the tracks that make up 'Star' were written by Tanya before Belly had even formed. And while most dwell in a realm of distorted reality that only she can easily decode – obviously, even Tom and Chris don't stand much of a chance – the album's stand-out track, 'Untogether', flaunts a brand of unswerving

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The "Talent"

BELLY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

honesty that disturbs her. After singing in her own language for so long, the act of writing a song which is accessible – and openly nasty – is a little unnerving:

"I've never written a song like that before, where I've brought the people in my world into it specifically. For a while I didn't want to put it on the album, because every single verse is aimed at a specific person, and it seems almost unfair to be able to do that. It's very bitchy."

It's a hate list?

"Yeah, and I'm not even angry about those things any more. I wrote it at a time when everything in my whole life changed; my relationship, the place I lived, my friendships, my band. I'm mainly concerned with the second verse (*where a man making "outrageous demands" is dismissed as "he's not touching me any more"*) 'cos it's mean, and I don't like being mean, even though it's my absolute right to be...

"...My tubes are in revolt right now."

Oh dear. It's been a terribly long day.

**"So shall they live, when ends our day,
When our crude citadels decay;
For brief the years allotted man,
But infinite perennials' span."**

A TRUE story. In the mid-west of the USA, where foliage grows far more sparsely than in these parts, farmers would plant trees in the middle of huge, horizon-straddled fields for a point of reference as they ploughed around and around. Underneath the tree, where nothing would grow, the earth was gradually filled with corpses and turned into a family graveyard.

A recognition of a tree's immutability by connecting dead souls to it to live on for eternity (religious theory)? The creation of a life-chain, from dead matter to power-giving sustenance (hippy theory)? Or a cheap place to dump rotting old folk (honest theory)? Let's guess... Anyway – to battle heroically through to the salient point – hence 'Feed The Tree'.

"It's a euphemism for dying my mom uses, it's like pushing up daisies," explains Tanya, before switching to one-world-earth-mother-everything's-gone-green piss-take mode, "and when you're dead, your body becomes food for the rest of the planet, plus your soul evolves... so *who loses*, basically?"

More giggles, inevitably. And, eventually, a proper explanation of "*Take your hat off boy when you're talking to me/And be there when I feed the tree.*"

"The song says basically respect my ass and be there until I die, which is a lot to ask, really."

"It's like the vows of matrimony," reckons Tom.

How fitting. Tanya is engaged to Chick Graning, former singer with the sadly-ignored country-rock deviants Anastasia Screamed, and backing vocalist on 'Star'. After being raised haphazardly by hippy parents who eventually divorced, she's accidentally stumbled on a weirdly romantic, unfashionable love ideal she clearly revels in.

Sometimes, perhaps, it pays to think in the terms of fairy tales (Caution: those of a wayward and cliched rock 'n' roll disposition may feel a little unwell during the next few paragraphs).

"I really respect old couples, I have to say, there's something about an old couple holding hands that tears me apart more than anything else."

"...In a good way," qualifies Tom, wryly.

"Yeah. Mating for life is something that I find really attractive. Marriage has never been a goal of mine. A lot of the time, the concept strikes someone before the person does, and with me it was the opposite. And I come from a generation where everyone's parents are divorced – except for Chris and Tom's..."

"...Which makes them the freaks."

"Exactly. It's always like, 'Eugh, a married couple! That's weird, it's almost incestuous. Your parents *sleep together*? Eugh!' I'm not a fan of marriage as a concept, because I've seen a lot of bad ones and seen a lot of people stick it through when really they've just hated each other for years. That's a really unhealthy, horrible thing to do. But there is an aspect of mating for life that I really respect. I mean, in this world, God, it's a totally amazing stance to take – this is the person I've committed myself to and I'm gonna take care of him and he's gonna take care of me, and that's that."

And you feel that now?

"Right now I do, yeah. We're very close. It's the first time that I've felt that in this way, that I've ever been best friends with somebody too. Just completely... comfortable, in the best sense of the word."

JUST BEFORE the lights are turned off back in the Big Basin Reserve, the director conjures up two wooden boxes filled with leaves, dolls and other junk. They are an LA jet-set-hippy's idea of sensitive artistic interpretation, they have been crafted by someone possessing all the finesse of a pretentious nine-year-old, and they have "Feed the trees" scrawled on them.

Belly have put up with plenty to produce a polished, MTV-friendly video today, but this ageing trendy chancer's purposeful misunderstanding of the song in order to latch an eco-angle on to it is too much. It is sad, it is wrong, it won't work, and Belly will not let it pass. A small victory, perhaps, but a satisfying one.

Listen well, movers, shakers, manipulators and profit-makers: make them stars, please, but make sure to respect their collective ass, too. Trust me, it'll be worth it.