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RECORD REVIEWS

Screamfeeder Kitten Licks

Hearing Screamfeeder's 1996 opus 'Kitten Licks' is like being transported back to an indie-rock golden age, writes **DARREN LEVIN**.

How can one album transcend the zeitgeist and yet be utterly of its time? Hearing Screamfeeder's *Kitten Licks* again is a transportive experience, like watching a film you loved as a kid or flipping through an old album of family photos. It instantly conjures memories of eyebrow rings and bottle dye, of waking up early for *Recovery* and staying up late to watch *Rage*. It makes judging a reissue like this on musical merits alone a difficult ask, because it's wrapped up in the kind of nostalgia that irons out all kinks.



I first heard *Kitten Licks* as a teenager in mid-1996, a time when Australian indie – stuck for so long in the quagmire of grunge – finally began to develop an identity of its own. Seattle's downcast posturing had been replaced by a buoyant and effervescent pop, brimming with the kind of idiosyncrasies and cultural quirks that make music from this country so frustrating at times, but also so great. That it was released in the same year as You Am I's *Hourly Daily*, Regurgitator's *tu-plang*, Powderfinger's *Double Allergic*, Spiderbait's *Ivy And The Big Apples*, Magic Dirt's *Friends in Danger*, Bluebottle Kiss' *Fear of Girls* and The Fauves' *Future Spa*, was no coincidence. Radio support had re-energised a sleeping giant – and when 'Buy Me A Pony' topped the Hottest 100, you really got the feeling that anything was possible again.

Whether conscious or not, *Kitten Licks*' classic opener 'Static' was emblematic of this time. It tells of an imaginary radio station transmitting into the ether with the faint hope of someone eventually tuning in. "If I transmit long enough, someone will roll through the dial," sings Tim Steward, guitars swirling around him. "They'll stop on some static/And they'll listen for a while." The idea that you could stumble across something life changing simply by turning the AM/FM dial had been evoked by everyone from Elvis Costello ('Radio Radio') to Paul Westerberg ('Left Of The Dial') and Lou Reed ('Rock and Roll'). And it rang especially true for rural and outer suburban teenagers in the mid-1990s (myself included), whose exposure to independent music came not through the internet, but triple j.

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Our national youth broadcaster flogged *Kitten Licks* – and rightfully so. It was brimming with the kind of hooks that'd sell millions if Screamfeeder weren't so intent on doing things their own way. There's nothing straightforward about 'Dart', the best of the album's three

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1. Static
2. Bridge Over Nothing
3. Dart
4. Bruises
5. Explode Your Friends
6. Down the Drinker
7. Dead to the World
8. Gravity
9. Ant (demo)
10. End of the Wire
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■ Track By Track: Tucker B's

brimming with the kind of hooks that'd sell millions if Screamfeeder weren't so intent on doing things their own way."

really were.

On paper, Lloyd and Steward are a vocal mismatch: he's fey, nasally, cosmopolitan, strained; she's breathy, effortless and noticeably Brisbane. On 'Dart' they split vocal duties between verses and choruses, but the pattern is never repeated. By keeping us guessing for the album's duration, Screamfeeder really had us in the palm of their hands. It's why it's easy to forgive such travesties as the saxophone solo at the end of 'Pigtails On A Rock' (more Rob Lowe in *St Elmo's* than Clarence Clemons in 'Thunder Road'); the yawning vocals in 'Explode Your Friends'; and 'Ant' with schoolyard lyrics and a riff that should've remained a rehearsal room jam. The addition of b-side 'Summertime' at the expense of a couple others – it's the best of six included in this reissue – would've rounded out this collection perfectly.

Still, history won't judge *Kitten Licks* on these missteps, nor will the years condemn. Though they've gone on to release two more commendable LPs and a truly great single in 'Hi Cs', this – as Kellie Lloyd notes in the liners – is their defining moment; the one they'll be remembered for. For the rest of us, it's a postcard from an indie golden age – *our* golden age – and it's unlikely to fade.

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Kitten Licks Deluxe is out now through Low Transit Industries. The band will perform the album in its entirety on June 27 at the East Brunswick Hotel, Melbourne, and on July 4 at the Amplifier Bar, Perth.

- Published on Wednesday, June 17 2009 by **Darren Levin**.

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singles, a sort of call-and-response between Steward's impenetrable verses ("Cram you twice a day"?) and a chorus sung by Lloyd that turns the whole thing into a teenage battle cry: "Every lesson you take/Every question at stake is one big lie." How can you not be seduced by that at 15? It starts with a strange, jarring riff – Archers of Loaf, odd timings – and winds up as a nursery rhyme: "I'm in denial/"Losing litres by the mile/I'm cruising up your dial." They

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