

roomforwar

The Flaming Lips fight fanaticism, phantoms and fait accompli from far out in left field

> BY DONNY KUTZBACH

Less than an hour from Buffalo, nestled in quaint Chautauqua County, is the village of Cassadaga. It's barely more than a speck on the road map that boasts a mechanic shop called Gay Mark Tire and Wheel and a population somewhere under 700 people. If you started counting all the otherworldly streams, well, the number of "residents" would multiply tenfold.

Spirits draw in Cassadaga, you see. It neighbors the community of Lily Dale. Founded in 1879, Lily Dale is an epicenter of the modern spiritualist movement and thus a hotspot for those looking to communicate with those dearly departed loved ones who've moved onto to the next plane.

Other kinds of spirits, however, are drawn to a nearby barn-like building tucked away in the Cassadaga's rambling woods. This isn't a dusty, old, hay-filled stable or tractor port. Instead it's neatly stocked with state-of-the-art (as well as prime vintage) recording equipment. Welcome to Tarbox Road Studios, one of the planet's most sought-after places to record an album.

It's somewhat fitting that in a studio a stone's throw from a major spiritual Mecca, the Flaming Lips would choose to record a tripped-out, heady concept album that encapsulates a metaphysical battle pitting cosmic dropouts against globe-dominating fanatics. Not that there was any other choice for the Lips than Tarbox Road and Dave Fridmann.

The Oklahoma City-based band began recording with Fridmann in 1990—when Fridmann was just getting into making records with his own band, Mercury Rev—for *In a Priest Driven Ambulance*. He continued to produce all the Lips' recordings since, barring 1993's *Transmissions From the Satellite Heart*, and became the band's de facto "studio member" by time of 1999's landmark *The Soft Bulletin*.

"I want to be Dave Fridmann," gushes noted producer/mixer and Tar Box regular Armand-John Petri. "He's one of the greatest producers in the world."

"I've been to Electric Ladyland, Hit Factory, Record Plant, Bearsville and Westlake, but Tarbox Road is the greatest studio I've ever been in. Dave's equipment is great, it has an atmosphere of family and there's no pretensions."



Petri has been a frequent visitor to Lips' recording sessions over the years and recalls the wonderment he felt dropping by Tarbox last year as Fridmann, singer/guitarist Wayne Coyne, bassist/control board maestro Michael Ivins and drummer/multi-instrumentalist Steven Drozd were arranging the cascading "yeah, yeah, yeahs" of the appropriately titled "Yeah Yeah Yeah Song."

"Their music is important. They are one of the only bands I really want to listen to these days," Petri says. "It makes me happy that there is a band doing what they are doing."

What exactly it is that the Flaming Lips are doing, in a career now stretching to nearly a quarter of a century, is hard to nail down concisely. Their badge as avant-rock pioneers goes unchallenged, though. They've grown from a noisy, acid-damaged, ragtag outfit of Oklahoma post-punks to Top-40 one-hit wonder freaks and ultimately world-renowned indie avatars creating sweeping, abstract pop masterpieces... while wearing pink bunny costumes. Along the way the band has never repeated itself, always reshaping their sonic treads, always with Coyne's impassioned, bending tenor and Ivins' stoic, stone-faced glare.

With their latest, *At War With the Mystics* (Warner Brothers), the Lips' have made their most challenging and reaching record, which in itself is something of a feat, considering this is a band that issued a four-CD opus with each disc meant to played simultaneously on separate stereos (1997's experimental watershed *Zaireeka!*).

At War With the Mystics is a record that the band describes as a collection of "space rock protest songs and commentaries on social responsibility."

But can you dance to it?

The record was lauded to be the Lips' "return to guitar-based rock" but more than anything this album is about the beat. There's a wickedly loony rhythmic heart that carries through *At War*. Nowhere is this more apparent than the wonderfully disjointed freak funk of "Free Radicals," where Coyne argues ideologies over a track that sounds like an inside-out version of something from Prince's *Lovesexy*.

As a whole, *At War* manages to execute perfectly an almost unfathomable fusion of offbeat keyboard experimentation, proggy riff rock, hovering-in-the-clouds psychedelia and unashamed dance-floor wiggle. Credit Drozd's sheer musicianship,

Ivins' ears, Coyne's surreal spontaneity and Fridmann's uncanny ability to tie it all together.

"Mr. Ambulance Driver" is like a warped disco song that you can almost imagine Gloria Gaynor belting out. The great song of 2006 could well be "The W.A.N.D.," with its Black Sabbath-does-the-hand-jive bop, complete with fuzzy wah-wah guitar, snaps and claps, while Coyne rails against poisoned, power-crazed ideology: "Time after time those fanatical minds try to rule all the world."

At War does have "war" at the core—many wars actually: fanaticism vs. level-headed tolerance, spirituality vs. nothingness and the straight ruling class vs. the druggie dropouts. And in these wars, which side are you on? As the "Yeah Yeah Yeah Song" beckons: "If you could make everybody poor just so you could be rich/ Would you do it?" The evocative melancholic coda of "Goin' On" ultimately sends out an existential lifeline. It's a hopeful, piano-based cry out to keep struggling, sent from the heart of America and broadcast to the universe.

Yes, the heart of America. You have to remind yourself sometimes that the Flaming Lips are even from this planet, let alone from smack dab in the center of the USA. Oklahoma is the heart of the heartland. The state can claim both free-thinking, oddball, lysergic lefty Coyne and brash "redneck and proud" country star Toby Keith—arguably popular music's most vocal proponent of the pervading right-wing ethos—as native sons. I can't think of a better example of the Lips' great war in action: two significant pop-culture voices who happen to share geography but are a million miles away philosophically.

Looking back on famous Okies, there's at least a couple to measure up to. One is the "voice of the people" Dust Bowl troubadour Woody Guthrie, who sang with equal fervor about keeping America free and keeping grease in the skillet. Then there's the legendary, lasso-swinging, early-20th century "voice of the people" humorist Will Rogers, who once quipped absurdly, "Politics is applesauce."

You don't have to look long at Keith and Coyne to figure out which one most carries the skewed but honest American wit, wisdom and soul of the icons Guthrie and Rogers into this millennium. He's the one wearing the pink bunny suit.