

A dark motorcycle with a glowing headlight is parked in a desolate, foggy landscape. In the background, there is a barbed wire fence and a quote in large, blue, semi-transparent text: "Life's Not Complete 'Til Your Heart's Missed A ...Beat".

“Life’s Not Complete  
'Til Your Heart’s  
Missed A  
...Beat”

**Prefab Sprout was the brainchild of Paddy McAloon, a softly-spoken songwriter from County Durham, who at one point declared, “Who are my rivals?”**

It was a good point.

Who else has tried to forge music that is as bizarrely constructed yet sweetly melodic; so oblique yet giving; with a sense of complete wonder at the creation of such music in the first place?

I could write about how the later Sprout albums are glossy smokescreens to get subversive little musical twists and thematic curveballs into a mainstream context, but aside from possibly wasting my time (yes, it is the ‘hot dog, jumping frog band’), I’d rather concentrate on the earlier music, which has an unrivalled allure.

**M**y first real introduction to the band was via their Greatest Hits record, which a girlfriend had resting on her dressing-table, alongside open diaries and ripe perfume.

I suppose an awkward teenage crush was the perfect initial context; nestling up against someone, sat up on their bed with the remnants of childhood lingering all around.

I still remember the aching backing vocal of Wendy Smith on 'Good-bye Lucille' startling me with its scolding sigh of "Oooh Johnny, Johnny Johnny" before Paddy begins his remonstrance that experiencing heartbreak is essential to a full life. Even now, I still thrill to the line, "*Life's not complete 'til your heart's missed a beat,*" where McAloon pauses before the last word to emphasise his phrase. It's one of those obvious yet satisfying moments that pop music delivers when crafted by a sure hand.

Years later, I found Swoon, which is a masterpiece of understated, awkward, lo-fi jazz-pop. From the title and its enigmatic sleeve through to its curious music, the album has me under its spell. I suspect McAloon would handle the production differently were he to tackle these songs again, but there's a

spark and a naivety that cannot be faked.

Made in 1983, the album's primary appeal is its scatter-shot stylistic ambition wherein McAloon appears to flit from tenderness to cleverness both lyrically and musically. It's breezy and foppish at times, with sprightly bass-playing to the fore. However the rat-a-tat chord changes and intricate rhymes betray a wilful intellect at play.

Notorious chess grand master, Bobby Fisher, makes an appearance in 'Cue Fanfare', alongside the whiskey priests and Judases in the Mexican borderland riddle outlined in 'Don't Sing'. Familiar themes crop up in the same song, within the exquisitely-put phrasing of, "Like most, I'll come when I want things done/Please, God, don't let that change/The anguish of love at long-range." Throughout, McAloon makes numerous memorable romantic pleas:

the fur" - I Couldn't Bear To Be Special

Indeed, this whole article could've just consisted of the entire lyrics to Swoon, which indicates how much I value the idiosyncratic vision that McAloon had when he wrote those songs.

Steve McQueen, the second release from Prefab Sprout, refines the playful songwriting of their debut, adding a synthesised gloss, courtesy of producer Thomas Dolby. A new strength of purpose flows through the record, although the approach to the songs and their sound is still leftfield enough to warrant the opinion that McAloon remained a pop wildcard. On many songs, regret comes to the fore, as on 'When Love Breaks Down' or 'Desire As' where McAloon sings, heartbreakingly, "I've got six things on my mind/You're no longer one of them... It's perfect as it stands/Why then crush it in your perfect hands?". It seems so casually callous,

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**"I've learnt today, while falling apart  
The most eloquent way to speak or to pray, is straight  
from the heart" - Green Isaac**

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"My heart is aligned / It couldn't be neutral, it couldn't be that way inclined" - Cruel

"I couldn't bear to be special/ So don't look at me and say/ That I'm the one who makes the cornball things occur/ The shiver of

but it captures the feeling of the end of an affair; an appreciation of beauty coupled with a need to move on.

As well as a nod to more traditional pop structures, and more adult topics, Steve McQueen contains plenty of curveballs. Bonny may well

be the band's most accomplished song, but there was still a place for lyrics about being unable to breakdance on one knee (Moving The River) and multifaceted dissections of bubblegum country music in 'Faron Young', a pulsating pastiche of American twang.

The timeless sleeve of Steve McQueen signifies many of the themes that lie within: the way backing vocalist Wendy Smith clings to McAloon as he moodily poses astride a classic motorcycle that symbolises the open road, speed and, of course, freedom. And yet, there's a conflicting element to the image that can be attributed to the bleak countryside in the background; a note of realism and a reference to the band's origin. There's also an awkwardness to the pose as if the other members don't quite believe the utopian promises embedded in the faint posturing of McAloon and Smith.

Throughout, there's a youthfulness in McAloon's voice that's never really gone away, apart from the marginally more weathered and fragile tone recently showcased on the Steve McQueen reissue, where a bonus disc was provided with stunning, new acoustic renderings of certain songs. This boyish aspect to McAloon's singing is a crucial part of what makes pop such a magical, transformative experience. It's an enthusiasm for life that belies



the cruelty of humankind; it's the freshness of a new day that mirrors our only way of dealing with experience. Or you could call it corny and unrealistic if you're being cynical, but that would be to ignore the wry humour regularly doled out in Prefab Sprout songs. For instance: "The world should be free, but don't you go following suit," sings McAloon as he jealously chides a tempted lover in Cruel.

If there's a quintessential sound that defines Prefab Sprout, it has to be the mesh of Smith and McAloon's voices. Her candyfloss tone illuminates his masculine warmth and emulates the ageless spirit of the song writing. Mundane words are made to soar, and random scales are thrown into songs if levity is called for. It's like having a button in the studio marked 'tenderness' that you can rely on, only this is that most unique of instruments - the human voice.

It seems a shame that Prefab Sprout and their early records don't get the credit they deserve from the revisionists, but fashion dictates so many histories of popular culture and there can be few less trend-based pop practitioners than Paddy McAloon. It can be guaranteed that no-one else will write a song called 'I Never Play Basketball Now'.

As I earlier stated, McAloon never saw a difference between what he did and what artists like Chic, Michael Jackson or Prince did. It helps to explain the way his accent strays across the Atlantic, into a realm that few performers can pull off without seeming disingenuous, or the way he suddenly yelps a falsetto just when you least expect. Prefab Sprout's music came from a different planet - Planet Pop - where boundaries are irrelevant and eyes are wide.

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