

Mp3 Silly Pillows - Silly Image Pillowhead



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Can't decide if they're "indie-pop"? "power-pop"? "sixties-pop"? "punk-pop"? "surf-pop"? "twee-pop"? "lounge-pop"? "psych-pop"? It's pillow-pop. 24 MP3 Songs POP: Quirky, POP: 90's Pop Details: Silly Image Pillowhead contains 24 of the two-hundred-odd home-recorded tracks created by the Silly Pillows during the first half of their career, hand-picked by the band's founder for this retrospective CD. The Silly Pillows began in 1986 as the home-recording concept of songwriter Jonathan Caws-Elwitt. By the time the group entered a period of inactivity in 2000, it had evolved into an "indie-pop" band which -- like many others of the 1990's -- had earned a small following scattered from Manhattan clubs to U.S. college radio airwaves to northern European discos to Tokyo record shops. In the early 1980's, Harvard undergrad Jonathan Elwitt was a retroactive mid-60's-rock enthusiast who had been turned on to punk and postpunk by his college buddies. He spent his weekends and summers as part of a dorm-blaring punk/psych/experimental group called The Killer Asparagus and a Rochester, N.Y. suburban punk-pop band called The Degrad (in which he was joined by his younger brother Sam Elwitt, and which got as far as a Trouser Press-reviewed single in 1983). As a punk/new music/psychedelic-revival DJ at the Harvard radio station, Jonathan was part of an era that also included future Galaxie 500/Luna frontman Dean Wareham; future Harriet Records guru Tim Albarn; future Bullet LaVolta member Corey Brennan; and future record industry mover-shakers Geoffrey Weiss, Jim Barber, Kate Tews, and Patrick Amory. More an artist and listener than a music authority, Jonathan's direct involvement in the station was largely motivated by his romantic connection to music aficionado Hilary Caws (they have been together as a couple since 1983; they hyphenated their names in 1985). Jonathan spent his first couple of post-college years noodling around with primitive, solo home recordings in a punk/experimental vein (both he and Sam had always made the most of tape recorders and tape decks to spread their musical wings since before

their voices had changed). But in 1986, he gained access to consumer-friendly multi-track technology, and he used it to craft a more poppy, 60's-influenced style. Around the same time, he first invited Hilary to share some of the vocals on his songs, and he began using the name "Silly Pillows" for the tapes that featured her on some tracks. Jonathan and Hilary's DIY 4-track-cassette activities were concurrent with similar efforts by Sam and by a Boston crony named Seth "Xerox" Feinberg. Though both Sam and Seth boasted greater musicianly virtuosity than Jonathan, the three shared a propensity for concise, catchy hooks, vocal harmonies, and layered guitar-and-keyboard arrangements. Like those of Sam and Seth, Jonathan's compositions and arrangements showed a reverence for bands like the Hollies, Zombies, Kinks, and Byrds (the Beach Boys became a prominent stylistic source to them all a few years later), as well as the styles of the psychedelic garage bands. Jonathan's music also revealed the influences of then-recent acts like punk-pop legends the Buzzcocks and '80s paisley-power-poppers The Three O'Clock; while his interweaving of vocals with Hilary recalled early Jefferson Airplane. Between 1986 and 1988, cassettes circulated among the three songwriters (and to Hilary's younger brother Matthew Caws, of The Cost of Living and later Nada Surf) -- but rarely any further. Unbeknownst at that time to Jonathan, this "lo-fi", home-recorded approach to underground pop -- with its significant treatment of the home-cassette format as a vehicle for collections of finished recordings for a listener to enjoy (rather than just "demos" to sketch out song ideas for other musicians) -- was becoming a widespread phenomenon. So was the Swingin'-London-meets-punk-flavored "twee" aesthetic (spawned chiefly by another recent favorite of Jonathan's, the Television Personalities), with which a hip listener might have identified the Silly Pillows sound (though Jonathan was ignorant of twee as a trend). Though the Silly Pillows' early work was contemporary with the heyday of seminal indie-pop labels K in the U.S. and Sarah in the U.K., the Pillows' first exposure was through the genre-neutral forum of the "home cassette underground", a loose network of DIY-ers, community radio DJ's, and cassette-friendly magazines who collectively made a place for virtually everything that musicians of all tastes created at home. With a boost from an enthusiastic Option and Sound Choice reviewer, Jonathan initiated himself into this community in late '88 by repackaging his home-recorded output into an ongoing series of "official" tapes suitable for write-ups, airplay, mail-order and trades. (As he did so, the distinction between "Silly Pillows" and "solo Jonathan" tracks quickly blurred.) Once immersed in this wide-open "home-taper" world, Jonathan sought out the individuals -- like Linda Smith, Ray Carmen, and Galen Herod -- who were specifically doing

"underground pop". As was the custom, he got involved in tape trades with these artists, as well as with some of the more experimental people -- Ken Clinger and Dan Fioretti -- whose work he and Hilary enjoyed. (And in the early 1990's, Jonathan and Hilary would collaborate extensively with Fioretti, in addition to their various collaborations with Sam, Matthew, and a friend named Cheryl DeLuke.) Other tape-swappers who crossed paths with Jonathan in the years that followed were pop-psych fellow-travelers Christopher Earl (Squires of the Subterrain) and Robert Schneider (Apples in Stereo). The packaged-for-release Silly Pillows tapes made their way to Europe through a German collector-turned-label-impresario. Partly as a consequence of this (and also of the Pillows' presence in a hip fanzine called Writer's Block that linked the home-tape universe to the burgeoning world of indie-pop), the SP catalogue was welcomed as part of the "international pop underground" that comprised the K bands, the British twee groups, and the bumper crop of like-minded bands from France, Germany, Japan, Scandinavia and North America. By 1992 -- the same year Hilary decided she didn't want to sing anymore -- the first of the band's European indie record releases was in the offing. The Pillows were now being treated (especially abroad) as "elder citizens" of the indie-pop scene. They had, arguably, been peripheral to the scene up to this point; but they had more or less been absorbed into it now by the fans, labels, DJ's and fanzine writers who embraced, supported, and promoted them. Consequently, from 1993 to 1999, the SP's saw a slew of vinyl and CD releases in Germany, Norway, and Japan. Some of these releases comprised old home recordings, while others represented the current work of the group. This group was, as of 1993, a revamped Silly Pillows that Jonathan had assembled, a studio-ready ensemble that included guitarist/flex-instrumentalist Sam (whose previous and concurrent musical adventures included Cost of Living, Sea Monkeys, and his own Nutley Brass); co-vocalist Cheryl; and bassist Michael E. Fiato. By early 1996 the band also included drummer Dave Joachim; keyboardist Charlie Zayleskie; and old home-recording penpal Linda Smith (who replaced Cheryl). The Silly Pillows studio recordings made between fall of 1993 and spring of 1995 -- heard first on two vinyl releases, and then all together on the Up in the Air CD [Perfect Pop Records, 1995] -- are considered by many to be the band's best work, balancing the enhanced fidelity and polish of studio time (and the musicianship of Sam and Michael) against the rough-edged, enthusiastic pop charisma of Jonathan and Cheryl. Jonathan's artistic agenda had by this time crystallized into a quest for upbeat, friendly grooves that evoked "exuberance, sincerity, and beauty without sadness." Jazzy vibraphone sounds and loungey bossa-nova beats could sometimes

be heard complementing the playful lyrics in the band's quirky pop brew. Often writing with Sam or Cheryl -- and later with Michael or Charlie -- Jonathan now also used the expanded lineup to make the Pillows a vehicle for collaborative songwriting. The Silly Pillows' broadened international exposure in the mid-90's culminated in a flurry of interest in Japan. It was there that the worldwide explosion of indie-pop bands was being most intensively celebrated at the consumer level (and most extensively exploited at the corporate level). Silly Pillows imports were going strong there, and a Japanese-indie-released split-single featuring the Pillows charted in 1996. As a result of Japan's enthusiasm for the band, a retrospective Silly Pillows disc was released on a Japanese major-label subsidiary in 1997. But the timing proved poor. 1998 saw the release of *New Affections*, the band's last album of new studio recordings for Little Teddy (the ambitious pop/punk label that released much of the Pillows' work). This disc represents the most fully-realized incarnation of the combined input of the group, both as arranger-performers and as writers, with Michael, Dave, and Charlie expressing themselves as Jonathan and Sam's full creative partners. The co-vocalist slot was now filled by Belinda Miller, a DJ at the legendary WFMU who had begun singing with the group in early '97 (Linda had departed in fall of '96). With a perky Belinda joining a manic Jonathan at the front of the stage (Time Out New York compared them to Mexican jumping beans), the Pillows continued to build their reputation as a fun NYC club act. From 1996-1999 their live credits -- thanks in large part to the support of Chickfactor and the booking efforts of Belinda -- included venues Mercury Lounge, Fez, Maxwell's, and Acme, and bills with Magnetic Fields, Holiday, and the Rubinoos. *New Affections* brought the Pillows a slightly-elevated level of attention at U.S. college radio stations, along with continuing critical notice and even a brief moment in the spotlight on MTV. Their U.S. record sales and name-recognition were undoubtedly up a tiny notch in 1998. But though the Silly Pillows continued gigging through 1999 and recording through 2000 (producing a couple of tracks for compilations and a final online-only release of 5 songs), the group had disbanded by fall of 2000. Since then, Sam and drummer Dave have each been active in various bands, as has Michael (who became part of the Liz Jee Band and Bouva). Charlie has resurfaced in the Stew ensemble, and Linda, whose one-year stint with the Pillows was essentially a side project, continues to receive respect and attention for her distinctive recordings as a solo singer-songwriter. Meanwhile, in the early 2000's Jonathan dabbled in the occasional solo recording. By late 2005 Hilary's interest in singing had revived, and the couple began recording at home again under the name Original Silly Pillows (and, for techno-flavored efforts, Deco

Pillow). Silly Pillows-related websites can be found at epix.net/hce/silypillows.html ,
myspace.com/originalsilypillows , myspace.com/silypillows , myspace.com/decopillow , and
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