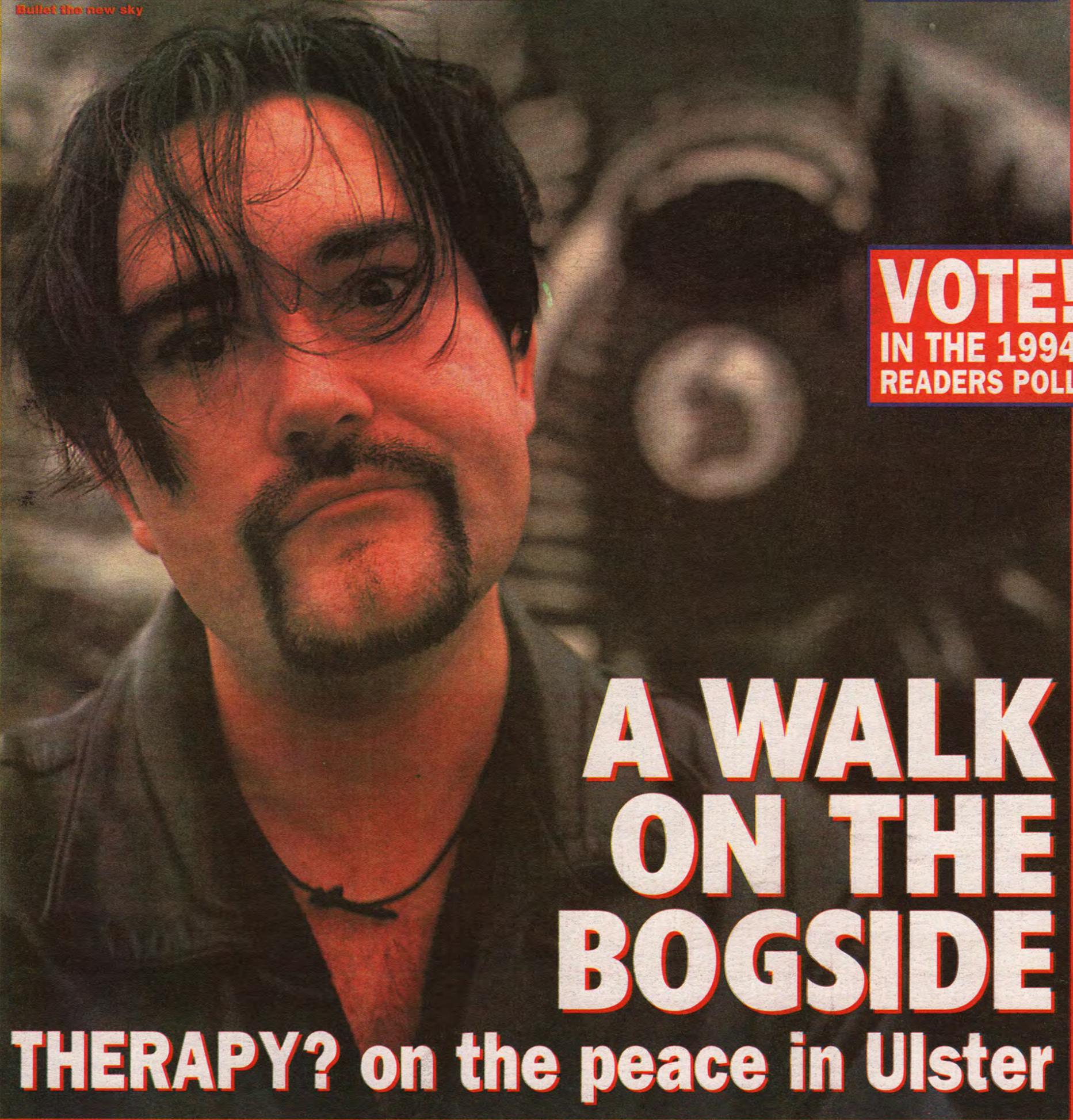
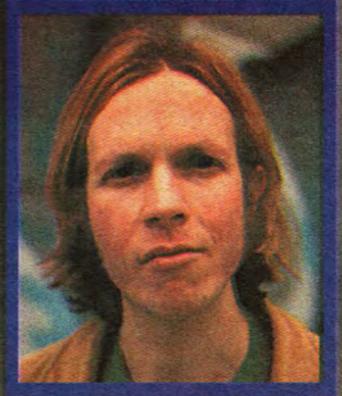


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WHAT'S THE FREQUENCY, GUINNESS?

After nigh-on three years in the wilderness, LFO, the one-time future of techno, are back to claim their crown. But, they reckon, there is no plan and no crown, unless you're talking about the Rose And Crown. ROGER MORTON operates the analogue beer pump. Voltage controlled lens filter: STEVE DOUBLE



Now that's what we call a scratch mix: LFO's Twiddydee and Twiddydum (l-r) Jez and Mark

It was a strange day in Technopolis. Popped into the boozier at lunchtime and found half of Kraftwerk standing at the bar. Florian had been on a bender and was looking rough. Ralf had a black eye from walking into a lamp-post after 18 vodkas.

Apparently they'd had a big win on yesterday's 3.30 at Newmarket and ended up sleeping in an office when they missed the last bus home. Ralf couldn't manage his pork pie and had to feed it to his whippet.

Well, it just doesn't happen, does it? You don't bump into Cabaret Voltaire pushing a trolley full of cider round Safeways. You don't meet Mantronik having a nosh-up with the wife and kids in Burger King. Arthur Baker and Afrika Bambaataa don't co-own a chip shop in Rotherham, and Giorgio Moroder isn't a part-time bingo caller in Hull.

The mould-blasting pioneers of the hypnotic

electronic groove are not inhabitants of the greasy, fag-ash real world. They cruise from Electric Café to Kling Klang Klub to Silicon Studio in hermetically-sealed bubble cars with adjustable bpm windscreen wipers and smart drugs on the dashboard. Surely.

So why, therefore, are two of techno's most renowned innovators sitting contentedly in a grimy East End pub knocking back the pints and gabbling like regulars? Why? Because the great lost double act of techno is back. Mark Bell and Jez Varley are back. LFO are back and the sober salons of electronic listening music are about to receive a double dose of Low Frequency Intoxication.

NAMED AFTER the Low Frequency Oscillator twiddle knob on old synthesizers, LFO are the Tweedledee and Tweedledum of tonemanship. Mutual fans of '80s electro and hip-hop, they met at a breakdancing competition in a Leeds shopping centre in '84. Warp co-owners Steve and Rob heard one of the pair's early bedroom tapes played at the Leeds Warehouse, figured they'd found the new Kraftwerk and signed them instantly.

The first single, 'LFO', was a completely

uncompromising robo-bass stunner which, according to pop rules, should have remained an obscure classic. In fact it sold 130,000 copies and the LFO phenomenon was up and pulsing.

LFO's history is subsonic myth. This is the group who inspired Richie Hawtin to start making music,

unveiling the brutal, shunting crushed grooves of new single 'Tied Up', it wasn't surprising that they received a returning heroes' welcome.

Mark and Jez, however, do not disport themselves like heroes. Down the pub, bevies lined up, they shrug self-effacingly at the fuss.

Currently deeply enamoured of the weird timings and raw distortions of Locust, who they consider to be as important as The Aphex Twin, they're still an impressively broadminded pair. They talk about the Gravediggaz. They talk about Depeche Mode. Their current working partnerships extend from the fractal guitar world of Spiritualized to the poppiness of Björk, who they've just written a track for.

"I think people do expect us to just like techno full stop," says Mark. "Like, I suppose we imagine other people to be total techno boffins, totally boring and just into twiddling knobs. But we've always liked other stuff. Guitars or whatever. On this album there'll be bits of guitars on it that I played. Maybe that's a problem, I don't know what people are going to think when they hear it. But we just do things to please ourselves really."

"To me, it doesn't even seem like three years," says Mark in full Leeds Lad accent. "It doesn't seem like that long ago. We've been doing it constantly anyway but we just haven't released anything. I think other people see it like that, but I don't feel it. The other week we went to that Megatropolis and somebody says, 'I've got one of your records, I got loads of all this old stuff, I picked it up in a second-hand shop'. As if our records are antiques. But it doesn't feel like we've been out of the scene."

"A lot of things happened with different styles of music coming, but we always kept doing things. We've worked with loads of different people. We

worked with Karl Bartos, who used to be in Kraftwerk. But it was like there was no real rush and we didn't have any deadlines from Warp, they just said, 'Do it when you're ready'. I think one of the problems with this sort of music is people put out albums and you can really hear that they've done it in a few weeks and it just seems like one idea all the way through."

"We've done a lot of experimenting with the live thing," joins Jez. "We were picking all the best live shows in Helsinki and New York and Zurich. So we were doing them in different ways. We've done them with sequencers and then brought in reel to reels and brought in weird analogue synthesizers. All sorts of things."

If LFO's absentee period has been used for experiments in the sound lab, then we can forgive them. Their early records went further, weirder, deeper than anything else at the time and, judging by the nearly 30 minutes of alternative mixes of 'Tied Up', they're still belligerently pushing out the parameters of sound. Given the flood levels of trance, jungle and hardcore it's near impossible to extend techno boundaries without falling into the pit of unlistenable avant-garde noise.

But LFO have done it. With electro and acid mixes and nine minutes of Spiritualized waveform ambience, 'Tied Up' is dance music as sound fetishism. Mark and Jez claim their rutting, sucking and stripped aural invention isn't designed for use in S&M dungeons, but you can see the application.

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DOWN AT the photo-shoot, Mark and Jez take their tops off in preparation for Chantal's fingernails. In theory they're just 'testing out' the new girl at Warp with some kinky photo shots, but isn't 'Tied Up' and its accompanying Skin Two-friendly video something of an S&M tease?

"Nah it's just you get older and you get a bit more perverted," laughs Mark. "I think people perceive it that way but when we first thought of calling it 'Tied Up' it was to do with the fact that

"There's loads of noises around all the time.... Like the other day in McDonald's there's, like, a chip timer and it goes, 'Tss! tss! tss!' and there were something wrong with it and it were going, like, 'Tsscht! Ttscht!' It was amazing." – Mark

with this sort of music you're just categorised so much. Like we can only get played in certain areas. There's so many clubs that just specialise in one sort of music. So it's kind of us being tied up. There's bits of music that we've done before that we'd have loved to release as singles but you know it won't work because DJs won't play it."

With their Speed Jack alias as an outlet for straight trance floorfillers, Mark and Jez are stubbornly experimental with LFO. Working at home in their own studios, passing disks back and forth, they spend half their time digging out the unique sounds that make their records so striking.

"It's hard to stop listening," says Mark. "There's loads of noises around all the time and you can't stop criticising them. Like the other day in McDonald's there's, like, a chip timer and it goes, 'Tss! tss! tss!' and there were something wrong with it and it were going, like, 'Tsscht! Ttscht!' It was amazing."

FOR ALL their sound vocabulary inventiveness, LFO are not tech bores. Fan letters from the depths of the continent saying, "I too have zees keyboard" are a source of much mirth to them. Jez's video machine, which lies in mangled bits on his living room floor, testifies to their tech irreverence. "If it doesn't work, kick it," he says.

Currently deeply enamoured of the weird timings and raw distortions of Locust, who they consider to be as important as The Aphex Twin, they're still an impressively broadminded pair. They talk about the Gravediggaz. They talk about Depeche Mode. Their current working partnerships extend from the fractal guitar world of Spiritualized to the poppiness of Björk, who they've just written a track for.

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"It was great working with Karl. We worked on a track called 'Information' but it didn't get released on Warp. He split up from Kraftwerk and set up his own thing called Electric Music, and then they got in touch with Warp because they wanted to work with us. So we came down to London to meet him."

Was he robotic?
"No he was just totally normal. It was amazing, because we weren't even talking about music, we were talking about all sorts really. Well, we just went to the pub, in fact."

Ah, the pub. Mark and Jez have put in their fair

share of nights at Leeds clubs like Back To Basics and Orbit, but their real home from home, as Kraftwerk found out, is the pub. Or the hotel bar. Or the mini-bar. Mark has a new scar on his chin from falling over dead drunk which he displays with a certain pride. Jez is particularly pleased by a recent drunken bike ride after an R&S party in Belgium where he rode straight into a canal.

Against the hauteur of Sven Vath, the spilled mind-set of Paterson or the intellectualism of Pentatonik, they're an odd techno pair. As eccentric in their own perky Northern way as any tank-driving Cornishman.

Acquainted over the years with all the scene movers and shakers, from Juan Atkins and Derrick May to "that Renaat from R&S", they're still totally unaffected. When they worked with Richie Hawtin last year they had a studio booked for three days and went down the pub for two.

"You need to get to know the person first," says Mark. "We've still got to send some Rowntree's jelly over to Richie's mum. She misses England, I think."

Jez slurps his pint. "Remember your mam once won a competition for Rowntree's jelly and we had a f—ing fridge full of jelly," he says. "I used to take it to school and throw it at people."

OUTSIDE THE gates of Hartley's Jam factory, where the pair are shooting the video for 'Tied Up', complete with rubber-clad dancers, Jez and Mark ponder on why there's such heavy security for the fruit preserves.

"Imagine doing a jam robbery!" says Jez, twirling round with an imaginary shot gun. "Alright, nobody move! We've come for the marmalade!"

Inside the echoing building the video crew are still building the spinning wooden box room where Mark and Jez are to mime clawing at the walls. But there's hours to go before they can film their 'Don't Box Us In' gesture. Jez rubs his head, feeling the cold after the previous night's inebriated encounter with a set of hair clippers down at the Electronic

Lounge. "Oh well. Might as well find a pub." Tell me about your ideas for the album.
Mark: "Well we haven't compiled it yet and we've got absolutely millions. There must be like about 60 finished songs and now we need to listen to them all and do a shortlist. Some of them remind me of different times when we've done them."
"There's that one 'Combat Drinking'. That were from when we went over to see that Karl from Kraftwerk. And he doesn't drink at all. But we got him drinking. We went to this thing called Karnival in Dusseldorf where they constantly drink for three nights. It was just unbelievable. We were doing them tequila slammers and there's this thing where you challenge people. They were saying that the other year a lot of police died from doing it. So we called it that."

You seem to be opposed to the over-serious idea of techno where people think they're making avant garde art.
Jez: "Ah, but we are! No, I know what you mean. People going, like, 'Yeaass, I've done this track and it's called 'Ten Fishes Bubbling In A Bath'..."
You're not very New Age either.
Mark: "Pyramids. Naah. It is like that at the moment with all that ambient sort of thing. A lot of it is just a load of crap. There don't seem to be anything to it. It's just like musical scales for 15 minutes. There's no, like, philosophy around what we do. I think that's sometimes why we haven't done lyrics. I think a lot of people are more egotistical and they just want to impress people with what they're saying rather than the music."

So you don't have erm, a philosophy of life?
Mark: "Heugh. No."
Jez: "The short cut's the long cut. Time for another round, isn't it? Do you want a pint then?"

THE GRAND return of LFO is a beautifully planless affair. They have not come to compete with the interlopers or out-sell the superstars. They don't want to trash Vapourspace or trample on Salt Tank. Hitting the big venues in Orbital style is of no great significance to them. Fame is a blunt spur.

All they're worried about is that whether when the album comes out it'll be recognised as not just another production-line effort, but something that's been brewed for years and distilled and bottled by mastercraftsmen.

"We're going to open our own pub soon," says Jez, "so we can have our own records on the walls and serve techno cocktails."

"We can play at closing time and then kick everybody out after a big sing-along," says Mark. "We're going to call it The Frequency And Oscillate."

Cheers.

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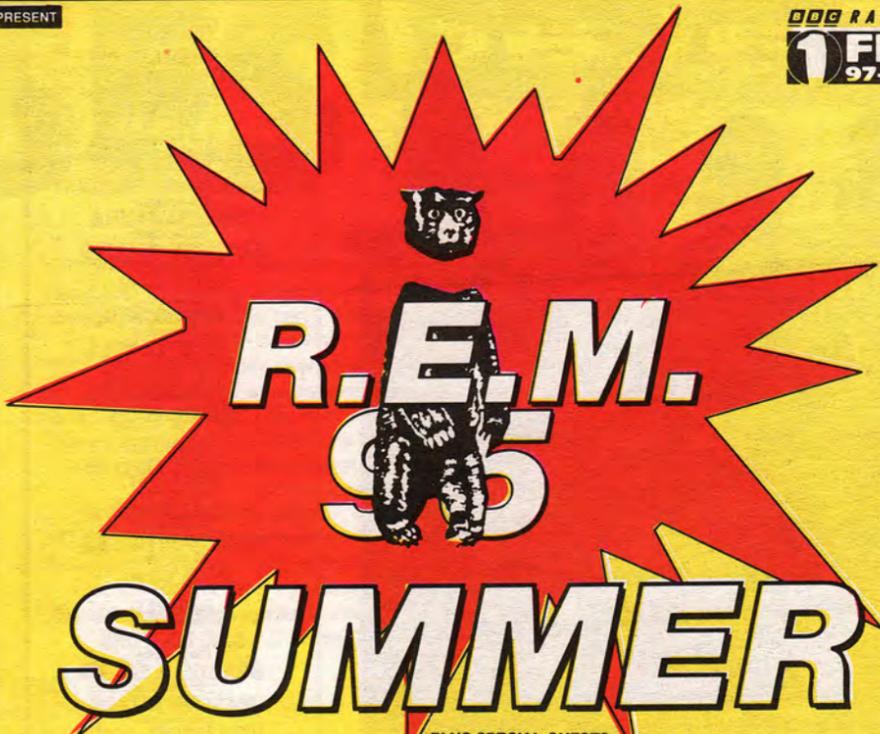
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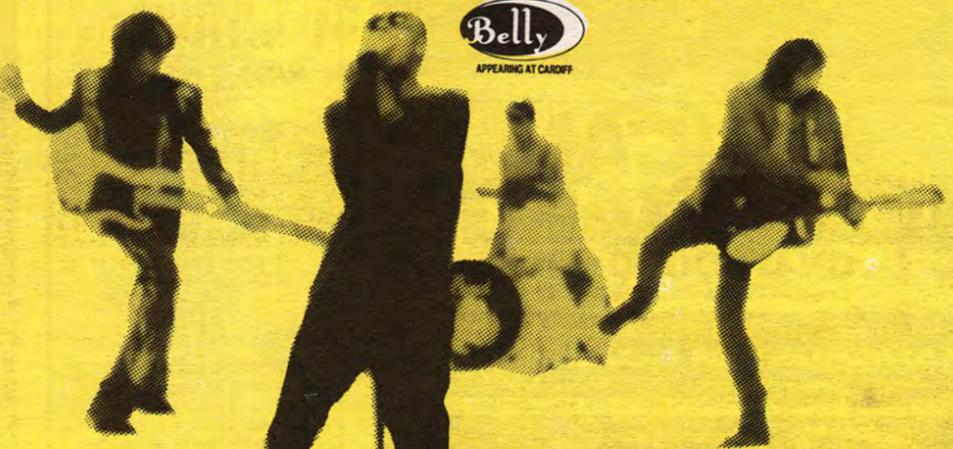
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