

SOME- WHERE OVER

THE RAIN- BOW

After 30 years as the Wonka-esque ringmaster of **the Flaming Lips'** psychedelic circus, Wayne Coyne shows no signs of slowing down. MAGNET visits stately Wayne Manor to talk cocaine and hand grenades, and how the new Lips album wound up on the dark side of the moon.

STORY BY
Jonathan Valania

PHOTOS BY
George Salisbury



WE'D BEEN TRAVERSING THE SPINE

of Tornado Alley for the last two hours when the stewardess announced that we would be landing in Oklahoma City in a few minutes, and that we should fasten our seatbelts and return our minds to the upright position, when the drugs took hold. ¶ We are, as the saying goes, off to see the wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Odd—or, if you prefer, the Wizard of OK, a.k.a. Wayne Coyne, frizzy-brained mainman of the Flaming Lips, the P.T. Barnum of The Stoned, a.k.a. The Man Who Had A Headache And Accidentally Saved The World. Why? Because, because, because of the wonderful things he does, of course. The balloons. The confetti. The blood. The boobies. The strobes and the smoke and the bunny costumes and the dancing Santas. The blood. The crowd-surfing bubble-walking. The giant hands that shoot laser beams. The blood. The limited-edition marijuana-flavored brains inside a gummy skull. The rocket ship he built in his backyard. The way he's made a 30-year career—spanning 15 albums, 18 EPs, 22 soundtrack appearances and exactly one hit song—feel like one million billionth of a second on a Sunday morning that you'll never get back, and you wouldn't have it any other way.

The Wizard lives, appropriately enough, somewhere over the rainbow, precisely one state down from Kansas, on the wrong side of the tracks in Oklahoma City, a municipality of half a million people, built upon vast reserves of fossil fuels and the oceans of sweat equity it took to extract them. Architecturally speaking, OKC looks like the sprawling low-rent campus of an unaccredited Christian college, the kind that still doesn't allow interracial dating. The city was founded back in 1889 during the Great Land Rush, which basically meant the federal government had run all the Native American tribes off their land and was ready to cede up to 160 acres to any white man who would occupy and cultivate a plot. Fifty-thousand settlers lined up to lay claims to the 10,000 available plots of land. By the end of the day, Oklahoma City went from population zero to population 10,000. They drank creek water and cooked with buffalo dung. Schools opened within a couple weeks. By the end of the month, Oklahoma City had five banks and six newspapers.

Fast-forward 94 years. One Wayne Coyne, pirate-hatted fry cook at Long John Silver's, invites Michael Ivins, he of the my-chemistry-

experiment-blew-up-in-my-face haircut, over to jam on the *Batman* theme. Though neither said so at the time, each thought the other was not very good. But despite that fact, or perhaps because of it, the Flaming Lips were officially born.

Barring the occasional burr-headed, jug-eared, angry loner driving a Ryder rental truck packed with enough ammonium nitrate to blow the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building to smithereens—killing 168 people, including 19 children under the age of six—not a lot happens here, and most of the locals seem fine with that. Probably the last exciting thing to happen here was Coyne getting caught trying to bring a hand grenade through airport security last fall. (More on that later.)

Born in Pittsburgh and raised in OKC, the youngest of five siblings who could have passed for the cast of *Dazed And Confused*, the Wizard has chosen to remain in his hometown, despite his worldwide fame. He lives in a run-down, low-income section of the city, which was, up until a few years ago when the hipsters and the art farmers started showing up, a forbidden zone that you would only venture into if you wanted to get stabbed or buy crack, or a little of both.

Many of the homes in his neighborhood—mostly small, one-floor shotgun shacks—are boarded up, or should be. The Wizard bought his current residence—a handsome two-story brick house with Frank Lloyd Wright-esque accents—literally for a song, i.e. the Lips' one proper radio hit, 1993's "She Don't Use Jelly."

Since then, he has purchased the houses and the property they sit on to the left, right and rear of his house, built a recording-studio annex and surrounded the whole thing with a high, corrugated metal fence. Wayne Manor is not so much a residence as it is a compound. It's a great place to raise a cult or sit out a Mexican standoff with the ATF. A taxi driver dumps me in front of the main house, but only after I convinced him that, no, I wasn't coming here to score drugs; rather I'd flown here to interview the singer of the Flaming Lips.

"Oh, I heard of them," he says, looking back at me in the mirror, his glare of suspicion softening into something approaching friendly. "They're pretty far out."

For someone who's been a fan and a follower of the Flaming Lips for going on 27 friggin' years—who was there when the acid hit the punk rock, when Jesus still shot heroin and priests still drove ambulances, back before she started using Vaseline, before clouds started tasting metallic, back before we realized the sun don't go down, it's just an illusion caused by the world spinning 'round—going to Wayne Coyne's house is, without exaggeration, like winning a golden ticket to visit Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. I amble up to the gate and cash in my golden ticket: Coyne's cell phone number.

I peck out a text to announce my arrival, and before I can send it off, the gate swings open and the Wizard emerges, accompanied by a comely young lady who has, he explains, just finished gluing the crescent of glitter-rock sequins that semi-circle his left eye for the impending MAGNET cover shoot. (Although the photo shoot never materializes during my stay, he will continue to wear the sequins for the two days I spend

with him, no doubt savoring the double-takes and poorly disguised sideways glances they elicit in the restaurants, bars and coffee shops we will frequent along the way.)

He is dressed in a long, high-necked, blue woolen overcoat flecked with dog hair, fitted mustard-yellow slacks, tennis shoes and, despite the late-winter cold, no socks; this will remain his attire for the duration of my two-day visit, which, presumably, was the case long before I got here and will remain so long after I'm gone. The Wizard is the kind of guy who, when he finds an outfit that is the perfect mix of comfort and style, wears it until the wheels come off.

He smiles warmly, inviting me into the main house, where I am immediately set upon by a bitey, stranger-hating Chihuahua named Thor, who, by way of greeting, chomps down on my ankle and refuses to let go. This is not playful biting; this is "get the fuck out of my house" biting. It hurts and draws blood. If Coyne wasn't here, I would drop kick Thor into next week. He

"Aaron Sorkin kind of wanted to stick it to George W. Bush, and he hinted around that he wanted to tie Yoshimi into a 9/11 conspiracy and the robots and all this stuff would be a metaphor for that, and I didn't want to do that that. I don't know him, but I get the feeling that he's not used to hearing people say no."



is exactly no help.

“Oh, Thor, come on,” Coyne says, rolling his eyes, hands on his hips, with the tone of voice a parent would use to express his or her disapproval of a child making fart noises with his mouth at the dinner table.

I grit my teeth and smile, pretending this is the playful nipping Coyne treats it as because I’ve only been inside his house less than a minute, and it would, in all likelihood, be interpreted as rude for a 200-pound stranger to drop-kick a seven-pound Chihuahua into next week in his own house. Actually, that’s not exactly true—that isn’t Thor’s house. Thor belongs to one of the myriad elfin, bearded and bespectacled young men who toil in the Wizard’s dream factory.

“Let me get with my guys back there and tell them that the dreaded MAGNET reporter is finally here, and I’ll get them set up on the things that we’re working on,” he says. “Come back. I’ll show you.”

I finally shake loose from Thor’s death grip and follow Coyne through a series of spaceship-like hallways that lead to the laboratory in the back where the aforementioned bearded and bespectacled young men are working on the Wizard’s many mad scientist-like experiments in brain-melting psychedelic retail and shock-and-awe marketing.

Affixed to the wall of the workshop is a corrugated cardboard placard, the kind po-faced homeless men hold up at intersections, with the following magic-markered across it in panhandler script: WILL BUILD DREAMS FOR FOOD. Like the Wizard, the Flaming Lips’ workshop is a study in perpetual motion. Having grown up in small house with eight people, the Wizard is accustomed to lots of people and chaos.

“I think that’s probably why I live the way I do now,” he says. “Even today, there’s shit going on everywhere and I just walk around like, ‘Oh this is normal.’ I’m just used to a house that’s always full and buzzing.”

He shows off some of his latest inventions. In advance of Valentine’s Day, he’s cooked up a couple of edible oddities. “Well, we have two things—we have a giant chocolate, life-size human heart that is covered in red chocolate. Inside is a bunch of pink goo,” he says, showing off a mock-up of the chocolate heart. “Inside the goo is a USB drive that has a Valentine’s playlist that we put together. It has two unheard tracks; it has a Flaming Lips song, then a cover of John Lennon’s ‘All You Need Is Love.’ It was originally supposed to be Jeff Mangum singing it. He agreed to it; we made arrangements to record it when he played Oklahoma City. But then something happens and he can’t come by, and I say, ‘Well, I know people in Dallas. Do you just want to do it when you play there, like after soundcheck?’ and he says yes. I get that set up, and the day of the show he says, ‘I can’t do that either.’ He is always apologetic; he is very nice. So, I set it up for later, like after the show, but it turns out he can’t do that. Next

day he is going to Houston, and this sounds like it could really work out; he is going to do it before soundcheck. I say, ‘Cool.’ It doesn’t work out, but he can do it after the show, and then that doesn’t work out. After about a week of this, it’s like, ‘Jesus!’ Then he loses his phone so he can’t even do anything by the phone. So I ended up getting Edward Sharpe.”

Another beardo works on the fairly mind-blowing cover art for a seven-inch. It’s a live shot of the Wizard sporting a pink boa and the giant laser-shooting hands. The color is super-saturated, and the image of Coyne has been digitally cloned so there are five big-handed Coyne’s in a row, like a human accordion or a centipede. Yet another beardo is busy editing a completely batshit insane video for the song “Ashes In The Air,” a collaboration with Bon Iver’s Justin Vernon. In the clip, an extraterrestrial baby crash-lands on Earth and is rescued by yet another extraterrestrial played by Coyne, who is wrapped foot-to-neck in tinfoil. His body is surrounded by a sparkly computer-animated aura and topped off with a giant eyeball digitally superimposed over his head that rapidly morphs into a vagina, and then back to an eyeball, over and over.

“So, the baby represents Justin Vernon, but he’s faceless because his identity was stolen from him by demons from space,” says the Wizard, laying out the dense Asimovian narrative of the video. “So, my character, with the all-seeing eye-vagina on his head, is kind of the keeper of the cosmic justice. He takes this baby and returns to Earth to infuse it back into Justin Vernon. He’s coming to Earth, and the spaceship breaks apart, and part of it crashes, the baby part crashes somewhere in New Mexico. But his spaceship crashes—we’re saying that it crashed outside of Burning Man; that’s why all of these bloody, naked people are everywhere, because they were watching the giant burning man, and when the spaceship crashed into all the hippies, it blew everybody up, and now they’re all lying around naked with their brains exploded out of their heads. So, he’s trying to carry this baby back to try to find Justin Vernon to infuse him back into his real identity. That why we see Justin’s face on the baby in the end. Before he gets fed into the meat grinder.”

We adjourn to the kitchen, passing through the living room again, affording Thor another bite of the apple, which earns him yet another mild and completely ineffective scolding from Coyne. I shake Thor loose for the second time and take a seat at the kitchen table where, at the crack of 2 p.m., Coyne is tucking into his breakfast: exactly one half of an avocado, jerky and alfalfa sprouts on a cracked honey wheat sandwich. If you ever wondered how, despite his 52 years on earth, Coyne maintains his skinny-as-a-snake physique, the answer is simple. He is always moving and barely eats or sleeps. Later tonight, we will go to fairly fancy restaurant where Coyne is a regular, and the entirety of his dinner will consist of a glass of champagne and a single shrimp that he

will nibble on for the duration of the meal.

The kitchen table is covered with multi-colored magic markers and what looks like children’s coloring books, but upon closer inspection is the onset of a comic book. “It is called *The Perjinky Effect*,” he says. “‘Perjinky’ is me mispronouncing a scientific word for when you look up at the night sky out of the peripheral vision of your eye, you’ll see pink that is not really there.” The plot can be summed up thusly: The specter of death tries to destroy the sun, but the sun is saved by a pair of vomiting brains that wind up dying in the end.

By way of a warm-up, we start by getting Coyne’s side of the story in the various Lips-related controversies that have played out in both the news and social media as of late. First up, Erykah Badu. Here’s what we know: Badu agreed to duet with the Lips on a cover of Roberta Flack’s “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face” for a collection of studio collaborations with guest vocalists—Chris Martin, Nick Cave, Jim James, Yoko Ono, among others—called *The Flaming Lips And Heady Fwendz*. She also agreed to appear in a video for the song that features her singing naked in a bathtub, but filmed from the shoulders up, interspersed with full-length shots of her buck-naked sister sitting in the same tub while glitter and milky white goo pours down on her in slow-motion.

It is unclear what was agreed to prior to the video’s release, but when it went live on the internet last June, Badu was not amused. Initially she seemed onboard, tweeting, “Those nude photos posted by Wayne (flaming lips) are of the beautiful Nayrok my lil sister and bestee. We do look alike. Video looks cosmic.”

But a few hours later, she seemed to have done a complete 180, complaining on Twitter that she’d never approved the edit that was posted, and demanded the video be taken down immediately.

“I never would have approved that tasteless, meaningless, shock motivated video,” Badu wrote. She went on to accuse Coyne of misleading her. “You did everything wrong from the on set,” she wrote. “First: You showed me a concept of beautiful tasteful imagery (by way of vid text messages). I trusted that. I was mistaken. Then u release an unedited, unapproved version within the next few days. That all spells 1 thing, Self-Serving. When asked what the concept meant after u explained it, u replied, ‘it doesn’t mean anything, I just want to make a great video that everyone is going to watch.’ I understood, because as an artist we all desire that. But we don’t all do it at another artist’s expense. I attempted to resolve this respectfully by having conversations with u after the release but that too proved to be a poor excuse for art.”

Coyne insists that Badu was fine with it until she started getting some blowback from the more conservative wing of her fan base. “Well, I mean, I don’t really want to tell everybody the truth just ‘cause that’s sort of the sacred oath

that you take when you say, ‘I’m going to work with you,’” he says when asked to give his side. “I’ve never told anyone what really happened, but people that work with Erykah Badu, secretly—there’s a secret code amongst everybody who’s ever worked with Erykah Badu. You see each other and you’re like, ‘Um, I know.’ Look, there’s no way anybody could make a video with Erykah Badu if she didn’t want to. They don’t happen in five minutes. It’s not like you can trick someone and turn a camera on when they’re not looking. It took months to set up. Took two whole days to shoot it—it’s not like this was a trick. But I think when Erykah got a bad reaction—and some of her fans are conservative church-going people—I think when they reacted to it badly, she just reacted badly, too. But the truth is, beneath all that, she would never take me to court because she agreed to do all of it.”

Then there’s the Wayne Coyne Hand Grenade Incident. Back in November, Coyne triggered a full-on lockdown of OKC’s Will Rogers World Airport—meaning nobody could come in or out, no flights could land or take off—when he went through the security checkpoint with a hand grenade in his carry-on bag. This, too, was much ado about not that much, he says.

“It all started at this house party in Fayetteville after the show,” he says. “You go around in everybody’s room and people are drinking and getting fucked up or whatever. This one guy had this cool collection of guns and grenades and swords or whatever, and they were all painted with this weird gold shit. And I said, ‘That’s cool.’ And then as we were leaving the party, he brought down this grenade and said, ‘Wayne, you liked this so much, you should have it as a memento of being here.’ Threw it in the bag when I got in the car because we were flying out early the next day. We get home without incident, and I think that bag sat here for a couple days, and then I’m running to the airport again. It’s like, ‘Fuck, let’s go!’ I put my bag on the conveyor belt, and they all know me there. I mean, I’m there so much. Plus, we have our picture on the window along with other famous people from Oklahoma that happen to be alive.

“So, it’s going through, and they look at the thing and they go, ‘Wayne do you know you have a grenade in your luggage?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I do, yeah. It’s this thing that I got at a party; it’s no big deal.’ And they said, ‘Well, we’re going to try to just get it out of here before the police get here.’ But for whatever reason, someone must have already said, ‘There’s a grenade at the airport,’ and so 10 minutes go by and they’re like, ‘Well the police might get involved.’ Then the police show up, and they know me and are like, ‘Let’s try to do this before we have to get the TSA involved.’ The Transportation Security Administration. They all know me, and they can see the merry-go-round is already starting to go and we can’t stop until we get to the end of it. And then they get frustrated,

and they’re like, ‘Well, we can’t do anything either.’ One TSA agent shows up. I’m like, ‘I didn’t realize it was there, and I am not a terrorist.’ I mean, I’m a traceable person and they’re all nice and they’re all great, and I don’t have any qualms with anybody there. It’s all just bureaucracy. TSA guy gets there. He’s real nice, but it’s Saturday, so they have to call some people. It takes a little while for the TSA to literally walk in, grab it, say, ‘It’s what you told me it was’—meaning it can’t be detonated—and five minutes later it’s all back to normal, you know. So, it’s really this unfortunate, you know, this thing happens and there a chain of events that has to happen.”

One passenger at the airport that day told OKC-based blog *The Lost Ogle* that he missed his flight because of the lockdown and was forced to fork over \$1,000 to rebook:

I think Wayne Coyne should reimburse me, at a minimum I want to drop acid with him and Yoko Ono. Can you help me out to let Wayne know that his music is fucking weird and I could use that \$1000 ASAP. Thanks

Ahem.

Then there’s the rumor that Coyne killed all the celebrity *Heady Fwendz* collaborators, drained their blood and sold it for thousands and thousands of dollars. The first part I just made up, but the last part of that is true. The Lips were selling a very limited-edition double-vinyl version of the *Heady Fwendz* album that comes in a clear plastic sleeve filled with blood drawn from nearly everyone who appears on the album. There were only 10 copies made, priced at \$2,500 a throw, with all proceeds going to the Academy of Contemporary Music, the real-life school of rock in downtown OKC founded by Lips guitarist/songwriter Steven Drozd and Lips manager Scott Booker, where young people learn not just the mechanics of rock, but how to navigate the business side as well.

With two notable exceptions, Coyne managed to get everyone involved to donate a few vials of blood for the cause. “Didn’t get Nick Cave’s ... didn’t get Yoko’s, but did get Sean Lennon’s and Charlotte (Gainsbourg)’s,” he says, pulling a bloody copy of *Heady Fwendz* out of the refrigerator. “But we feel like we got a little bit of Yoko’s with Sean’s.” And, by that line of reasoning, a little bit of John Lennon’s blood, too.

Then there’s the rumor that the Flaming Lips are working on a \$20 million Broadway version of *Yoshimi Vs. The Pink Robots, à la* Green Day’s *American Idiot*, with famed screenwriter Aaron Sorkin. Partly true. Yes, a Broadway version is in the works, and yes, \$20 million has been raised to cover the development and production costs. (“These people are union; they have to get paid,” says Coyne. “It’s not like they’re in the Flaming Lips.”) While there was in fact a meeting with Sorkin to gauge the potential for a collaboration, that one brief meeting was the extent of Sorkin’s

“Some people are going to come expecting the mega-party vibe of the old show and hate the new show. At the same time, if we didn’t change things up, you’d have people coming out and being like, ‘This is the same thing they did three years ago.’ Either way, it’s a risk. I say risk on the side of the new. I think that’s a good way to live your life, too.”

involvement with the project.

“He kind of wanted to stick it to George W. Bush, and he hinted around that he wanted to tie Yoshimi into a 9/11 conspiracy and the robots and all this stuff would be a metaphor for that, and I didn’t want to do that that,” says Coyne. “I don’t know him, you know, but I get the feeling that he’s not used to hearing people say no.”

That was the end of that.

Then there’s the rumor that Ke\$ha is, despite all appearances to the contrary, somehow cool and not just a dumb-as-a-rock, white-trash queen who’s routinely victimized by her own wardrobe and literally shits out hits that sell in the gazillions. Coyne is actually the guy who started that rumor, and he’s sticking by his story. Back in January, Coyne blew up Twitter for a day when he tweeted a picture of a mirror with lines of white powder, a rolled-up dollar bill and the words “Yep ... recording with Ke\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$ha!!!”

Coyne insists there’s a perfectly good explanation for that picture: “There was a bottle of Tums in the studio, and I crushed some up and cut it into lines, and put that rolled-up dollar bill next to it because I thought it would be funny,” he says. “I didn’t think people would take it seriously. I can see how people took it seriously, because people think she’s crazy and (the Flaming Lips) do drugs all day and night.”

Ahem.

Then there’s the one about the Lips setting a world record by playing a 24-hour concert. That’s a misleading mash-up of two separate truths: Back in June 2012, the Lips did break a world record (set by Jay-Z) by playing eight concerts in eight different cities in 24 hours.

Prior to that, back in the fall of 2011, the Lips recorded and posted to their website a song that is 24 hours long. Both undertakings started as a stupid dare, but, under Coyne's supervision and flair for the ridiculous, soon became a reality.

"Steven already had a piece of music that went for about a half hour, but it felt like five minutes," he says. "So, I thought, well, why don't we see if we can make that longer and we'll just go into this epic world of marathon songs? So, we had to psyche ourselves up, like, 'You know Brian Eno has a song that plays for 30 years on a mountain-top—beat that!' We're like, 'Fuck him, we could do that. You know, we'll put one on the moon, and it will last 100 years!'"

Both undertakings seem like a recipe for complete chaos, but, as Coyne points out, chaos can be an asset when strategically channeled. "I've used it to my benefit a lot—in the chaos, you might get exactly what you want because no one notices," he says. "Do you remember streaking? You know, here in Oklahoma City, that would be big news when someone did some streaking. Anyway, one night back in the '70s, my brother and some of his friends went into a pizza parlor and said, 'We don't have any money, but we're going to order pizza and we're going to eat it. We're going to try to get out of here without paying. It's not the worst crime in the world, but what the hell, right?' So, they're eating the pizza and they're looking for a way out. Guess what happens? A streaker comes in the front door. Runs around, gets on the tables, dick flopping around, fucking yelling, 'Yee-haw!' And in the chaos, they walk out without having to pay for the pizza, and so, you know, I think all that is

mostly good news."

Barely controlled chaos is the engine that's been pulling the Flaming Lips' train to the place where accidents become inventions for the last 30 years. Whenever possible, leap headfirst into the unknown, says Coyne, especially when it comes to collaborating with outsiders.

"When these opportunities come up, if it's (a chance to work with) cool people, I usually always say yes," he says. "I don't really care about the money. If it's someone that I think is cool and I'd like to do it, I just say, 'Oh, that's cool, let's go!' I mean even that Super Bowl commercial. The ad agency (Duotone) approached us, and they're cool. They really try to do cool things, and when they would talk to us about it, they were like, 'We don't just want you to give us a song—we want you to be in this commercial.' We're like, 'OK, but why?' And they were like, 'Well you guys have an appeal in this absurd way that we think will work,' and we're like, 'Yeah, well, I don't think it will, but let's keep trying, you know.' Because you keep thinking that somewhere along the way, they're gonna wake up and say, 'We really don't want the Flaming Lips in the commercial. We want their song, we like their production, but they're a bunch of weird old guys—why do we want them in the commercial?' But they never did."

MAGNET: Do you guys really drive around in tour bus that says FLAMING LIPS on the side like in the Super Bowl commercial?

COYNE: Hell no! No band would ever go on tour with their name on the side of the bus. I mean, Ken Kesey did. After he went to jail three times,

he stopped putting his name on the bus.

MAGNET: What do you say to people who call you a sellout for doing commercials for mega-corporations like Virgin Mobile?

COYNE: The company that did that commercial is called Traktor, and they also made the video for "The Yeah Yeah Yeah Song," and I love those people and I just like hanging out with them. They were like, "Would you like to be the mad-scientist brain washer?" I thought, "Sounds absurd, why not?" To me, it was just doing something creative with my friends. But I can see how people might think I'm the spokesperson for Virgin phones. I can see why people see it as a sellout, but I don't care.

Talk turns to the Flaming Lips' new album, *The Terror*. The LP has polarized critics—some love it, other want to burn it with fire. Former *Chicago Sun-Times* critic and current host of NPR's *Sound Opinions* Jim DeRogatis, long a champion of the Lips, who in fact once penned an adoring biography titled *Staring At Sound: The True Story Of Oklahoma's Fabulous Flaming Lips*, issued a venomous condemnation of not only the record, but the band itself and Coyne in particular:

Unending turds from The Terror such as "You Lust," "Butterfly, How Long It Takes To Die," and the title track aren't even as memorable in a background-music way as the instrumental stretches of Zaireeka or the tossed-off soundtrack for Christmas On Mars—another turning point, in retrospect, since, if it had been a success instead of a novel footnote, it might have given our auteur the second act

of his artistic career, transforming himself from the low-budget maestro of a modern Pink Floyd into the second coming of David "Eraserhead" Lynch.

Instead, at age 52, we have an older, but much more foolish and seemingly thoroughly lost and rapidly fading Technicolour guru who may not have run out of shtick or homemade tricks onstage quite yet, but who has at long last depleted or betrayed a musical vision that gave us one of the richest and most consistently rewarding catalogs of the indie '80s, the alt '90s, and the early days of the new millennium.

Ouch, babe. I give Coyne the opportunity to respond to the gauntlet throwdown. "He wants attention, and if I even say anything about it he wins," he says. "He's always done things for attention. I thought we were still friends. The first time I read it, I thought it was a joke. But, in the end, I think it comes down to the fact that nobody pays attention to him anymore."

Coyne asks what I think of the new album, and I tell him I find the record to be pretty dark and forbidding sonically—perched somewhere between early Hawkwind and late-period krautrock. And lyrically, it's just so bleak and hopeless. I like it, but I'm not sure anybody else will.

The lyrics document a traumatic, hope-crushing loss of faith in the transcendental power of love. File this under Art Imitates Life: Around the time *The Terror* was being written and recorded, Coyne was in the final stages of splitting up with Michelle Martin-Coyne after 25 years together. She's been living in London for the last year. At the time of this interview, Coyne asked me not to write about the break-up of his marriage, but since then he's spoke openly about the split and how it's reflected in the bleakness of the new album.

"I don't really listen to the record that much now," Coyne recently told *Mojo*. "I mean, I like it, but it has an effect on me, too. I'm not really a hopeless person, but when I get immersed in it, I start to believe the things that it says. Some of it, it's uncomfortable for me, 'cause (the split) was not that long ago. I'm an optimist, to my detriment sometimes ... For me, it was sort of an embracing of hopelessness. Just saying this hope that you have in this, just let it die, and try something else. Michelle and I had been together a long, long time, 25 years. If I'd died two years ago, that would have been successful."

The breakup would explain why the Wizard seems a little sad these days. Why the new album is such a bummer. Why the chocolate factory seems a little dreary and run-down and absent a woman's touch. Why the Wizard seems to have lost interest in his greatest trick: making people smile. He recently told an interviewer, "When I see videos of Flaming Lips shows, it's a catastrophe of excitement—it's light and confetti in your face. So, we're going to take a left turn and not do shows like that for a little while."

It's a big ask of your audience to reinvent the band that makes people happy as the band that bums people out. At South by Southwest, the

Lips played a big outdoor show with Jim James from My Morning Jacket, and managed to clear out most of the crowd by the end. The *Austin Chronicle* gave their set a thumbs-down review.

Coyne insists the new live show is not that different than the old show. "It's like growing your hair," he says. "It's different, but it's still your hair." And besides, he says, when it comes to change and evolving as artists, the Flaming Lips are damned if they do and damned if they don't. "We know that comes with risks," he says. "Some people are going to come expecting the mega-party vibe of the old show and hate the new show. At the same time, if we didn't change things up, you'd have people coming out and being like, 'This is the same thing they did three years ago.' Either way, it's a risk. I say risk on the side of the new. I think that's a good way to live your life, too."

Despite the death-of-love-and-hope-and-sex-and-dreams themes of the lyrics, Coyne insists, *The Terror* should not be interpreted as a confessional record. "It's not that simple," he says. Still, I ask, has he in fact given up all hope that love will win out in the end? "Love is like the sun," he says. "That's like getting a sunburn and forgetting that without it the flowers wouldn't grow. I think when you're younger, you have to believe that love will save you. If you don't believe that, it's just not worth doing, you know, because there's so much pain involved. But as you get older and you see how life is and can be or whatever, you kind of can decide that love isn't bigger than life. I mean, life is a motherfucker and pain is king. At the end of the day, pain is king, and that's not love. I wish it was. When you're young, everything is so good and so bad. I mean I remember when you're sleeping and fucking when you're 19, you don't ever want to wake up. When you're sleeping, it's like, 'I'm sleeping—you can't wake me up.' Now, I don't hardly sleep. And when you're fucking 19, it's like, 'I could fuck for all time!' Same with eating. Everything you do when you're young is one extreme or another, either super good or super bad. But as you go on in your life, those things don't get to you as much. You get a different perspective."

At this point, apropos of nothing that's come before, Coyne segues into a story about attending a one of those group psychic readings where people try to contact lost loved ones. It seems like a non sequitur at first, but at a couple points in the telling, his voice breaks and he tears up—to the point of dissolving the epoxy beneath the crescent of sequins around his eye.

COYNE: I went to a psychic with the last journalist that was here. We didn't go to make fun of it, and I understand what's happening in the room there, you know. These people ...

MAGNET: This is one of these big-group things? Or a one-on-one thing?

COYNE: A big-group thing. It's kind of silly. It's a big meeting room in a hotel, and it's free, but there's a little psychic's market with psychic

"Love is like the sun. That's like getting a sunburn and forgetting that without it the flowers wouldn't grow. I think when you're younger, you have to believe that love will save you. If you don't believe that, it's just not worth doing, because there's so much pain involved. But as you get older and you see how life is and can be or whatever, you kind of can decide that love isn't bigger than life."

things that you can buy. And these people—I'm not saying I'm smarter than anyone else; it's just not my trip—but I understand where they're coming from. They have a son, a daughter, a father, who's fucking dead and gone, and they want to know what happened to them. They can't live until they get some answer, you know, and to them, when they're there and they get this answer, it changes them. [*His voice breaks*] It's hard for me to talk about; it's bullshit, but it works. I saw those people waiting for (the psychic) to call on them, and they're so tortured [*tears run down his face*] and the minute that she would call on them, they would just break down, and I watched them after that. You could tell, they were changed. And so for me, I can easily sit here and go, "All this fake shit," be like fucking [*reaches up to clear the tears from the sequins*] ... I don't want my shit to come off. I'm fixing it ... I don't want to be like some fucking Bob Dylan where everything like, "This bullshit's fake, you know, blah, blah, blah." I don't give a shit about any of that. If it works for you, you should do it, because there's a level that people get to where it's like, you can pile as much fucking absolute truth on that. It's still horrible. Or you can pile on some other version of the truth. If it helps you, if the bullshit helps you more than the truth, take the bullshit. Sometimes the truth isn't the answer."

And then I woke up back in my own bed. Strangely, everything was black and white. **M**

