Give Me an Orange

There is a special pleasure that comes from things that are genuinely fucked up. Things that only try are one of the late 20th century's greatest annoyances (I have in mind, especially, TV commercials that try to convince one that a product whose manufacturer has paid millions of dollars to have said product advertised in prime time in all fifty states is actually quite subversive, and that only an elite group of in-the-know individualists could ever appreciate it), but things that succeed are one of life's timeless pleasures. I don't mean bizarre, who's-drugged-the-water-supply things, like infomercials for magic fat-burning creams in which the smiles on the faces of the people in front of the camera make you wonder whether the people behind it aren't brandishing heavy weapons, and I don't mean odd, does-it-really-exist things, like the Zip Code Rapists, who are deserving of any plug I can manage to sneak in no matter how far out of my way I have to go to do it. The particular joy I'm talking about is reserved for a precious few things in this life, and it's a joy whose expression finds its repose in a face cloudy with disbelief while the mouth attached to it, hanging half-open, slurs: "Whoa. Dude. That's some enormously fucked up shit."

It gives me the pride of a surrogate parent or a good housesitter, then, to alert you to the existence of a CD by this deeply aberrant, singular thing that calls itself Pantychrist. The self-titled CD is on Seeland, which is a good sign, since Seeland is Negativland's label, and Negativland, in the ongoing war against the bad guys, represent the good guys, having done so faithfully for a number of years. Pantychrist is a collaboration between a drag queen named Justin Bond; a monkeyer-with-of electronic instruments and toys named Bob Ostertag; and an ungodly DJ-guitarist hybrid named Otomi Yoshihide. The CD arrived in my mailbox with a lengthy presskit, most of which was devoted to an incident in
which Justin Bond and Madonna snapped at each other in public. Do you care? No, me neither. In short order, it wound up where most of the press kits that come to this house wind up; but in the once-over it got before beginning its crumpled trip to the round file, suspicions began to arise as to whether the record it heralded might have precious little going for it, since name-dropping is the first refuge of the creatively bankrupt. Luckily for everybody, one’s only been listening for about 27 seconds before these arrhythmic equilibrium-disrupting dry-heave-inducing popping sounds start coming out of the speakers, and they have the initial effect of causing a person to light the press kit on fire and hold it above one’s head while screaming: “I live for Charol! I carry a torch for the salad days of Gazzari’s on the Strip! I want an orange and white basketball like the ones they use in the WNBA, and I want it now!” Underneath these electronically generated sounds, a beat comes in for a few seconds; then it’s gone, replaced by the sound of a monkey going completely out of its mind; then, at 1:37, there’s a really cool marimba sound that you wish would stick around, only it won’t. If you are familiar with a Japanese band called Melt-Banana, then you have an idea of how frenzied these opening few minutes are. If not, try putting a whole coconut, shell and all, into a high-powered blender with its lid left off, and then punch the liquefy button. The ensuing chaos in your kitchen will provide a visual rough equivalent to track 1, “Overture,” from the Pantychrist CD. After that things get really weird.

Once I lived in an apartment building in Portland, Oregon. Four floors above me lived a guy named Brad. He was a drag queen, and he was about 6’2”. He used to throw lines into conversations that didn’t seem to fit, until I learned that these lines were usually taken word for word from the film of Mommy Dearest, a memoir, by her daughter, of Joan Crawford’s rather unorthodox approach to motherhood. I spent a good deal of time with Brad and his friends in the fall and winter of 1984 and the spring of 1985, and I learned a lot about drag queens—their oft-imitated-never-duplicated speech patterns, their likes and dislikes (in the parlance of the day, the things they thought were “just cunt” and the things they thought were “too tired”), their fierce loyalty to their friends—and one of the things I learned was that the film Mommy Dearest would have played strictly to empty theaters if not for the drag queens in the audiences at every screening. Living in that well-remembered red brick building in Portland, I became accustomed, after a while, to hearing “No more wire hangers...ever!” as shorthand for “Someone is this room is acting dictatorial” and occasionally as cryptic longhand for “I’m terribly drunk.” Having one’s circuitry rerouted in order to understand dialect is a little exhausting, and I found that if one was feeling tired or irritable, the last place one wanted to be was in a room full of drag queens working on their third Bartles and James. It could have the effect of making one worry that the earth was going to start flying headlong toward the sun. Even after months of listening to endless conversations about who’s been just too beastly to whom, the strangeness doesn’t wear off; not much, anyhow. And so, when Justin Bond, on the CD’s third track, launches into his imitiation of Justin Bond’s persona imitating Faye Dunaway imitating Joan Crawford as remembered by Ms. Crawford’s daughter and then rethought for the screen, it freaks me out. It freaks me out because the haunted-house sounds supporting his monologue, and the hacking cough samples strewn disconcertingly throughout it, make me feel as though I’ve already been listening to a drag monologue for 72 consecutive hours with nothing to drink but espresso shots. And even if you have exactly no associations of any kind with Mommy Dearest, I’d wager that when, over low rumbling keyboards and kettle drums, Justin Bond rasps: “Welcome to Bitter Mommy’s Club Areola,” it’ll freak you out, too. When, at the end of the “song,” he spits out a languid: “There’s nothing in this house that belongs to you. Remember that,” you will believe him.

And this is, for better or worse, Justin’s house. You can tell that it’s Justin’s house because he does a monologue over every track on the album except for the overture, which lasts for five minutes and fourteen seconds, which means that the album is basically forty-five minutes of a drag queen doing schtick over some extraordinarily strange musical constructions. You can also tell because a few numbers are simply awful, and should have been left off the record, but they weren’t, because nobody asked you. It’s Justin’s party, and if he wants to include 4:18 of monologue about a quadriplegic in a wheelchair rolling off the wharf into Chesapeake Bay and call it “Suzanne,” then that’s his prerogative. You can tell because a couple of his stories take turns that just don’t pan out, leaving you confused and disappointed.

You can tell because there are a couple of musical segments so fascinating and cool-sounding that you, if it’d been up to you, you would have just left them alone—the otherworldly, ethereal keyboard part in the middle of the George Shearing pastiche “The Tigress Inside,” which Bond drowns out by raising his voice, is a good example of this. You can tell because Bond’s delivery of his material is, overall, so incredibly on that it’s hard to imagine that he’d get as careless as he occasionally does—you’d think, in other words, that the guy who was smart enough to pace the line “Why can’t everything be nice, and pretty?” so carefully as to make you hear that it’s a comma and
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not a question mark after "nice" wouldn't go on to have sentences that never, ever come to their logical conclusions, or which stray off in inexplicable directions.

In the end it doesn't matter much, though. The kitchen sink filled with noises that constitutes the way this record is fleshed out instrumentally, the New-York-imagining-Berlin-in-the-eighties syndrums that sputter along under half of the songs, the splatter-paint free association of Justin Bond making up stories as he goes along (which I'd bet is the case at least one-third of the time), the errant DJ scratching: either you like things that are completely fucked up and unapologetic about it, or you don't. I do, and if you've ever bought a record just because it was too God-damned weird to just let it sit there on the rack getting ignored, then you're like me, and you probably ought to pick this one up.