

LEAD LINES

Edited by John Callaghan



EL NIÑO

El Niño is a weather system wreaking havoc on the world. It's also a rock band from Bloomington, Indiana, whose music is a veritable shopful of scoop-your-own flavours. The band themselves refer to their sonic produce as 'millennium rock', but we shall extend a hand of forgiveness and offer an alternate description of, let's see, a platter of rocksome punkitude plus delicate hayseed overtones, soured in '60s topping. With feedback.

And it could so easily have gone wrong. Not long ago El Niño were virtually falling apart under the constant pressure of regularly spending \$100 dollars to get to a show – only to be paid \$30. Then their luck changed. They nabbed a support tour with Pusherman. Oasis manager Marcus Russell caught one of the shows. He bought a CD. Three months later, he telephoned the band – catching them teetering on the very brink of splitting – with some kindly career advice. Encouraged, the band signed to his Ignition

label and duly made their English debut at the 1998 Reading festival. Luckily, for those of us who hate saccharine-sweet fairy stories, there was a kick in the tail: the band were on so unmentionably early in the day that guitarist John Hicks had failed to locate any breakfast and thus threw up promptly after the show. Rock'n'roll? That's more like it.

Still, after Mr Hicks' multi-coloured up-chucking episode the band's good fortune



continued. First came a tour with Lisa Germano (the band cocked a canny ear to the headliner's *Reptile* song and decided then and there to concoct a speeded-up version for future album inclusion). Then, Radiohead producer Nigel Godrich offered his services for the band's full-length debut, *Galaxy Class*. 'We were floored,' says Hicks, simply.

So it's been the Anglophile connection that has helped El Niño over the hump, it seems.

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'It's hard for people to swallow original music over in the States,' Hicks confirms. 'All the kids are happy to go out to see bands that play other people's songs, but sadly when you play your own stuff the crowd tends to be smaller. You can build up a following, but it's slow. I got so excited by the look on people's faces on my first trip to England. The enthusiasm people have for new songs gave us all hope.'

John Hicks' trademark is his habit of gaffer-taping his FX pedals to the front of his stage guitar in the cause of swift mid-riff knob-tweaking. 'I found myself bending over so much to change things while I was playing – you know, levels and speeds and rates and stuff,' he explains, 'that I figured that I should just put it all up on my guitar. It makes a lot more sense, because I can alter stuff in the middle of solos.' The full Hicks effects armoury – some on the floor, 'cos sadly Les Paul Customs and triple-P90'd Gibson Explorers can only carry so much clobber – contains an Electro-Harmonix Electric Mistress, a Mu-Tron phaser, a Digitech Whammy pedal, a Vox wah-wah, a Tech 21 XXL distortion and a reissue Big Muff fuzz. Listen to tracks like *Codie Clear* and *Still The Same* for fine examples of the wailing, haunting outcome – some, Hicks admits, more the result of pure chance than carefully planned and executed digit manoeuvres. 'It's not all intentional,' he winks. 'Sometimes the most bizarre mistakes can fit in *really* well.'

Alan Bone

