

MIKE PITT

White noise is a type of distortion.

Text Mark Jacobs Photography Alexei Hay Styling Michael Philouze

From *Bully* to *The Dreamers*, **Mike Pitt** has long since been revered as a major playa on the cinema underground. Now it's time for his tunes to do the talking. **Signed to Thurston Moore's Ecstatic Peace Recordings**, armed with a guitar and a glut of songs, here in his latest incarnation as singer/songwriter, **we present Mike Pitt... the tortured artist.**

Michael Pitt will tell you, as he will have to tell others, that he is and always was, a musician. More specifically, he is the vocalist and guitarist who leads a convincing noise band called Pagoda. But until the world hears otherwise, he will be known as an actor with the good taste for choosing movies that are meaningful to the margins, like *Hedwig And The Angry Inch*, *Bully*, *The Dreamers* and *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*. "I don't want to pretend that what I do doesn't exist," he says softly and methodically about his acting work, which now counts three movie projects in the pipeline. "But it's taken me a long time to reach this point. I'm just trying to get this album out there. I want people to know about it. Really, the only goal is for me and my musicians to pretty much break even."

On this particular Sunday afternoon, Pitt is in the kitchen of his Brooklyn recording studio wearing a perfectly distressed sweater with thumbholes forced through the cuffs. It is on the second floor of a worn-out two-story Spanish storefront down the avenue from a 33-story glass condominium that suggests an uninspiring future for the neighborhood. He once lived here with his girlfriend, but the couple now share an apartment elsewhere. However, Pitt has been feeling nostalgic so they have been sleeping on a mattress on the floor of the control room, beneath a magnified slice of *The Garden Of Earthly Delights* by the painter Hieronymus Bosch that is attached to the wall with duct tape. "I want to make music like that," Pitt says about the pretty nightmare of a painting.

Determined and steadfastly independent, he recorded Pagoda's eponymous debut without any outside financial support, first in Milan while living in a hostel, and then in New York City. "I knew I had to have it exactly how

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I wanted it and I was very fearful of record people," he says, adding that the band will initially limit its tour to the east coast of the United States, "because we have money issues and don't have a van." While he was researching his lead role in Gus Van Sant's *Last Days*, in which he plays a Kurt Cobain-type wraith who keeps busy by quietly, poetically dying, the director encouraged him to spontaneously perform for Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth who recognised his talent and signed him to his Ecstatic Peace label.

Pitt lights cigarettes off a new looking stove that is cleaner than what the articles written about him would have you believe, unlike the improvised bedroom next door with the tiger-print dollar store blanket, the burning candle and the plastic container with the last of some cereal and milk, which is more in line with what you would art direct if you had to style an environment for him based on his press. His life story has been sufficiently mythologised, a street punk fairy tale centering on his difficult childhood in New Jersey, where he fell through the cracks of the local high school. "Which kind of gave me the incentive to move to New York and just say 'Fuck it, I can't get any lower than I am right now'," he says. Then acting happened to him and he developed a malcontent's reputation that often overshadows his impressive but finite body of work.

As it turns out, Pitt has spent some time at Home Depot picking out wall tiles and new wood flooring and then arranging for it all to be installed.

I ask him what's in the rest of the building. "Rats. Big rats. But my cats are here," he says, and calls for a feline named Crackhead who doesn't appear. "My cats fuck 'em up. So they don't come around." We sit down to talk.

Do you feel more exposed in your film work or singing your lyrics?

Both. I think if I was a painter I'd probably feel exposed. When you reveal things it's sometimes the best work. Sometimes you feel like you're taking a shit in front of someone, to put it in a really crude way. Music can be like that for me.

When was the last time you felt like you were taking a shit in front of someone?

The other day. I was playing the album for someone and they put it in right away while I was there. I'm less uncomfortable playing live. For whatever reason.

You're known as an actor...

Film work is what I could break into the easiest but I was always making music. I was writing songs even before I learned how to play guitar. Whether or not people would ever hear the album didn't matter, it's just something that I do, the same way that I write every morning. I recorded an album in 2004 and it's taken a long time to get it out because of the film work, which I am very passionate about, and to release it in a way that it wasn't going to be exploited or look as though I was using my fame for my music because it's quite the opposite.

Do you live like a musician?

We're not rock stars at all. Everyone's got fucking bills. Whatever income I made doing those films, and I don't do blockbuster movies, it's a pretty modest income that I have to try and sustain and hopefully make some money at shows. Sometimes we have to rehearse at midnight because everyone's got to work during the day.

Who are your bandmates?

Reese the drummer plays in the subway station to pay his rent. He's an interesting dude because he has this real knowledge of African drumming but he loves punk and hardcore. Willy is this kind of metalhead who grew up in Harlem. Chris is amazing because he has the technical skills you need to play cello but he's also very psychedelic, very into noise.

In *Last Days*, a musician's life has become insular and painful. What's yours like?

I don't believe in rock 'n' roll clichés. I'm not looking to torture myself, although a lot of people aren't looking for that and it just happens. I don't know. What am I trying to say? I'm just trying to live as healthy and happy as I can and just make my music. I'm not trying to be some rock star. The character in the film was a junkie and that's a whole other thing. That's being a junkie.

It's one of the great clichés.

I think they're bullshit. I love my girlfriend. I'm not interested in fucking groupies. All I really want to do is travel and make music. I'm not looking for

limousines and champagne or anything like that.

Do you read the stories about you?

Sometimes. A lot of it is questionable. They get a lot of things wrong.

They make you out to be tortured.

I've been more tortured in my life than I am right now. A lot of times they're trying to create this image. I understand they have to report to the magazine, but if I mention how when I came to New York I was on the street for a while, they turn it into this big deal. It has more to do with their fantasies about what they think a life like that would be like.

This is a nice kitchen.

I didn't want to move into the city so instead I stayed in the neighbourhoods that people were afraid to live in and made a little house for myself.

Do you have a housekeeper come to your apartment now?

Yeah, I do.

Is it a brand new apartment?

It's in Bushwick. I can't see spending crazy amounts of money to live in Manhattan especially when Manhattan pisses me off a lot of the time. But they're going to knock down this building and this whole block, everything. This was a neighbourhood. It was a little rough at times. I was mugged the second day I was here by a 12-year-old with a gun. The way that he controlled the situation really took a lot of balls. He wasn't stupid. He was a smart kid. He got me when I was with my ex-girlfriend and so I was in a vulnerable spot. And I felt really bad for him. I remember thinking as I'm giving him the ten dollars that was in my pocket 'You're so fucked, man. You're going to be in Rikers by the time you're 16. And then you're going to be a criminal and they'll be no going back'. It sucks.

You clearly aren't interested in playing by certain Hollywood rules for your film career, are you willing to play by music industry rules?

I try to use the fact that I'm not trying to make millions and millions and millions of dollars, as far as I'm concerned – and I know in the scheme of things I'm not a well-off person – but for me I am. I'm content, I'm happy. I don't need to be super rich. It won't bring you happiness. One really has nothing to do with the other.

Do you sleep well?

I never sleep well. Only if I really try to tire myself out. But for the most part I'm an insomniac.

Cigarettes?

I got to quit sometime. I love them. They're bad.

Television?

Not really. For a lot of my life I haven't had a television. I recently got cable but I think I'm going to get rid of it because it's a waste of money.

Is there any low culture that interests you?

I like the History Channel. And I like *Animal Planet* and *The Simpsons*. That's pretty much it.

You don't have any appreciation for the absurd?

I'm just not interested. I always feel like I should be playing my guitar. That's the funnest thing in the world. There's nothing that really competes with playing and recording music.

Do you know Jared Leto? It seems like he's trying not to fall into the traps of the actor turned musician but has instead been helpful identifying new ones.

I don't have a lot of knowledge on that person. If I have any knowledge it's from journalists who bring it up.

Some see a parallel because he seems independent-minded.

[He lowers his voice] I think he's part of the problem not part of the solution. But I don't know his work very well as an actor or a musician. Every decision I've made in music has been to counteract that and I'm still going to be faced with it. Which I understand. I probably would say things too. I'm a total fucking snob. It's weird when you're in the situation because you're forced to look at your own judgments, which is good. At the end of the day the music is going to speak for itself. I doubt that anyone would listen to this record and think that I was trying to sell fucking pop songs. 🐸

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