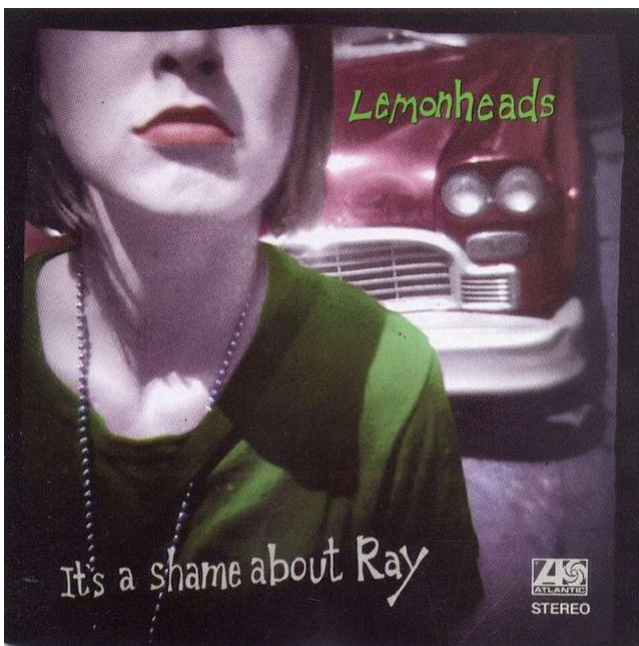


20 Years On: The Lemonheads' *It's A Shame About Ray*

As Evan Dando and company prepare to tour their much-loved fifth album, John Freeman looks back at how parental divorce and an Ecstasy-fuelled trip to Australia created The Lemonheads' finest moment



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To visit Agra, in northern India, is to wage open warfare on the senses. The city of Uttar Pradesh boasts three UNESCO World Heritage sites (the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and the ghost town of Fatehpur Sikri) but appears to also consist of a million people living in an open sewer. A recent visit created two death-bed memories: the indescribable majesty of the Taj at dawn and the sheer terror of a careering rickshaw ride with the distinct possibility of being unceremoniously dumped into a roadside cesspit. The driver described Agra as “three diamonds in a turd.” He wasn’t wrong.

If Agra is a hardcore example of finding unexpected beauty in a sea of shit, The Lemonheads' fifth album *It's A Shame About Ray* was a career-high jewel amidst their previous back catalogue. Up until that point, much of their music appeared to be grunge-lite pop or half-assed skinny punk, which seemed destined to flail around in the jet stream of other, more 'noble' bands. Then, in June 1992, The Lemonheads released one of the finest albums of the Nineties. *It's A Shame About Ray* contained 12 tracks (the crappy 'Mrs Robinson' cover version was a marketing afterthought) and clocked in at 29 minutes and 46 seconds. That's nigh on half-an-hour of utterly blissful guitar-pop perfection.

It's almost unnerving when a band unexpectedly hits an artistic high-point. Back then, there was a level of mistrust amongst Lemonheads non-believers. Their talismanic singer Evan Dando was too good-looking, partied too hard and hadn't, as yet, delivered an album of any cohesion.

Indeed Dando has spent his career garnering both a slug of adulation and a fair amount of resentment. 'Evan Dildo, the slacker-jawed himbo' was a summary collection of put-downs. Maybe he was just too beautiful for his own good, or the urban myth that he was the heir to a fortune cast him as a chancing rich boy. Maybe his drug use seemed merely a recreational lifestyle choice set against the desperate – and somehow more virtuous – self-abuse indulged in by his musical peers. Whatever it was, and still is to a certain extent, Evan Dando appeared to stir a passive annoyance in a public who perceived that he was wasting his undoubted talent.

Fortunately, most neat reductionist theories are blown apart by a few facts. Evan Dando is an extremely bright guy, and one who was deeply affected by his parents' divorce when he was 11 years old. His life had been turned upside down by the breakdown of a relationship which seemed perfect on the outside but was fundamentally doomed. Like his father before him, Dando would project a certain image in public as he battled with depression. And, just as his dad made a significant break, it would take a tour of Australia in 1991 and a collection of colourful characters to spark Evan Dando into creating The Lemonheads' masterpiece.

There are several great tracks on *It's A Shame About Ray* but one of the highlights is 'Confetti'; a disarmingly upbeat song about Dando's parents' separation. It is one of those magically deceptive songs; utterly hummable and jarringly poignant. When Dando sang, "He kinda shoulda sorta woulda loved her if he could've/ He'd rather be alone than pretend/

She just wanted him to love her but he didn't," the rawness of the divorce still weighed heavily a dozen or so years after the event.

Evan Dando was a Summer of Love child, born in 1967, who spent his childhood in the rural suburb of Essex, north of Boston. His parents looked like film stars – his mother was an artistic fashion model and his father a hip, long-haired real estate attorney. Their relationship seemed idyllic and when they divorced, Evan – the youngest child – was devastated. "My parents were like the perfect couple," he said in 1992. "I felt abandoned. I stayed with my mum and sister, but while they talked about it, I was considered a little boy who wouldn't understand such things."

'Confetti' is his take on what happened; "That song is about the way people go along with a relationship without really caring about it, just to keep the other person happy," he would later say.

Dando reacted to his parent's divorce in typical teenage fashion: he got angry. He became, in his words, "a teenage delinquent" and formed a punk band which "helped a lot to bash out [my frustration]". By then he was attending the prestigious Commonwealth School in Boston, which was renowned for its liberal and progressive philosophy. Dando the 'himbo' would be all over Hegelian dialectic and Kafka by his tenth grade. At the age of 14 he had met school friends Ben Deily and Jesse Peretz – who would become first Lemonheads line-up – and was exploring music by post-punk band Minor Threat and becoming interested in the cult of Charles Manson.

Dando then attended Skidmore College in New York State, lasting one semester ("I spent all my money on drugs. I ended up saying 'fuck this' and drove away in a snowstorm"), before heading back to Boston to form a band. Legend has it that The Whelps first gig was supporting an early version of Pixies. Dando would quickly change the band name after seeing a candy bar that was 'sweet on the inside and sour on the outside'.

By 1991, The Lemonheads had released four albums. While 1989's *Lick* contained a stunning version of Suzanne Vega's 'Luka' and the following year's *Lovey* included the excellent 'Stove', the band seemed destined to merely swim along with the indie shoal. They had gone through numerous line-up changes as the misunderstood Dando struggled with fame, drugs and an image which did him few favours.

In July, The Lemonheads briefly toured Australia, but it would be long enough for Evan to meet the characters who would inspire and populate *It's A Shame About Ray*. These would include future songwriting partner Tom Morgan and future Lemonheads bassist Nic Dalton. After the tour, Dando returned to Oz in October 1991 and spent the summer surfing and partying on ecstasy.

Morgan became central to The Lemonheads' resurgence. The frontman of Sydney band Smudge would co-write the title track for <It's A Shame About Ray> and was pivotal in integrating Dando into the local scene. Dando would describe his time in Australia as "one big Valium" and his improved outlook enabled him to write the album in its entirety.

It's A Shame About Ray is stuffed with colourful personalities, based on the people Dando met in Oz. The pogo-punk of 'Alison's Started To Happen' was inspired by Alison Galloway, the drummer with Smudge and initially written about a time she was on ecstasy before being turned into a love song. Tom Morgan's roommate Nicole was featured on the lovely 'My Drug Buddy', a song about scoring speed on King Street in the Sydney suburb of Newtown. "If I write songs about people it is because people leave their imprint on me and I'm just trying to describe that imprint," Dando was quoted as saying.

But, on returning to America, Dando quickly sank back into depression, even though his life seemed fabulous – he was buddies with A-listers such as Johnny Depp and had his pick of some of the world's most beautiful women. In March 1992 recording of the new album started in Los Angeles with the Robb Brothers at the helm. With Dando armed with a stack of killer tunes, they were keen to add acoustic guitars to soften the band's sound and allow them to finally unlock their slow-burning potential.

Put simply, *It's A Shame About Ray* is joyous. Even after 19 years, it slaps a smile on the face of the listener. From the opener 'Rockin' Stroll' to the closing 'Frank Mills' (a delightfully simple cover version of a song from the *Hair* musical), the album discharges gorgeously seductive mini-slices of rock, folk and pop. The title track – about a man in Melbourne who everyone just knew as 'Ray' – is exquisite in its structure, while 'Bit Part', with Juliana Hatfield shouting the opening lines, is an aural opioid laced with catchiness.

For 30 minutes, *It's A Shame About Ray* can make all seem well in the world.

The album gave The Lemonheads their breakthrough moment. When it was released in June 1992, the world was hungry for alternative rock bands in the wake of Nirvana's epoch-shifting success. The Lemonheads' record label Atlantic wanted their pound of flesh and negotiated that the band re-record the Simon and Garfunkel track 'Mrs Robinson', to feature in the 25th anniversary release of *The Graduate*. The band cut the track in two hours in Germany and the record label tacked it to a re-released version of *It's A Shame About Ray*. The single became a minor worldwide hit. Paul Simon hates the version. I agree with him.

The Lemonheads would follow *It's A Shame About Ray*, with *Come on Feel The Lemonheads* in 1993. The album was a solid effort containing several songs co-written by Dando and Morgan, including the rather wonderful 'Big Gay Heart', but *Come On...* didn't have the charm or vivacity of ...*Ray*. As Dando struggled with a crack addiction which would destroy many a shambolic Lemonheads show, the band eventually went on an extended hiatus in 1998 before reforming seven years later.

A few years ago, a journalist friend of mine met up with Evan Dando in Belfast. The singer was in a confused state after a heavy night and asked the journalist as to which island of New Zealand they were currently on. While many have been addled after a big night out, few forget which continent they inhabit. But Evan Dando is a man of extremes and, when his musical stars aligned, *It's A Shame About Ray* was one of the best albums of its generation.