



Ben Lee
Quarter Century Classix

“Sonic Youth were my Grateful Dead,” declares Ben Lee. “J Mascis was my Jimmy Page. ‘Web in Front’ by Archers of Loaf was ‘Be My Baby.’”

When he recorded an album of songs by these and other indie rock favorites, the Sydney-born/Los Angeles-based singer-songwriter approached it both as a fan who long ago memorized every lyric and as an artist who was an active participant in that scene, who saw these bands up close, who even opened for a few of them. As a result, *Quarter Century Classix* carries a lot more weight than your typical covers album. It’s an overview of a particularly vibrant era in indie rock, but it’s also an endeavor of personal archaeology. Lee burrows deep into these classix not only to see what makes them tick, but also to see how they make him tick.

The project started out of boredom and necessity. In January 2019, while touring with his duo Radnor & Lee (featuring the actor Josh Radnor of *How I Met Your Mother* fame), he found himself snowed in, trapped by the polar vortex in a lonely Chicago hotel room. Nothing to do, nowhere to go. To pass the time, Lee thought about his first trip to the city twenty-five years earlier: What was indie rock like at that time? What was he like? “Chicago plays such a key role in my music history, because that’s where I went to make my first solo record, *Grandpaw Would*, with Brad Wood (which was released via The Beastie Boys’ Grand Royal label). I met incredible artists like Liz Phair and Rebecca Gates and all these people who were so important to me at the time.” Lee was 15 years old, but already a seasoned music veteran in his native Australia, where he had been fronting the alt-rock band Noise Addict (whos first ever show at 14 years old was supporting Sonic Youth. The band would go on to support Fugazi, Pavement, Sebadoh, and more as well).

Among his fondest memories of that first trip to Chicago was spending hours and hours at the city’s record stores. “Records were so expensive by the time they got imported to Australia, so I spent a lot of time flipping through the crates. I remember buying the first Fugazi record on that trip, a Superchunk singles compilation, *Sebadoh Vs. Helmet*. It was a time when being a fan of music was the most dominant thing in my life, which is what happens when you’re that age.”

In 2019, the grown-up Ben Lee started working out the chords to “Web in Front” by the Archers of Loaf—another prized piece of vinyl he picked up during that first trip. “I started thinking about how incredible the songwriting was. Because the production could be a little aggressive or chaotic—*lo-fi*, for lack of a better term—the songs didn’t always get recognized in terms of pop

craftsmanship. Also, a lot of indie rock songs from that era are quite opaque lyrically. They're not very literal, so maybe that complexity is part of them being underrated. Part of what makes them exciting is that you don't know what they're fully about, but you can feel the intensity of the yearning and the desire and the resistance in the songs."

Using a small recording set-up he carries with him on the road, Lee recorded his own version of "Web in Front," slowing it down a bit and doing his best to foreground Eric Bachmann's cagey songwriting, which he describes as "a very refined pop sensibility mixed with dada lyrics that are still really emotional and vulnerable." As he sings about having a magnet in his head and wanting to be your spine, Lee sounds like he's thinking out a riddle or piecing together a mystery. He knows the song is not a statement, but a question. After that song, he recorded another. And then another. And then more. Fugazi's "Blueprint" followed by Guided by Voices' "Goldheart Mountain Top Queen Directory" followed by the Beat Happening's "Godsend." Soon, something resembling a record emerged from Lee's reminiscences, an album with a shape and a thesis: *Quarter Century Classix*.

Once the temperatures rose and the streets were cleared, he took those hotel-room recordings back to Los Angeles and gathered a small crew of friends to flesh them out. With a small backing band that includes harpist Mary Lattimore and guitarist William Tyler, Lee adds a shaky grandeur to Pavement's "In the Mouth a Desert" and finds a shimmering longing in "Divine Hammer," sussing out the spiritual need in the Breeders' sexual anthem. Mike Watt, Joey Waronker, Petra Haden, and Maria Taylor all showed up to lend a hand as well. "Part of what I've taken from indie rock is the freedom to capture a time and place. Who's around when you're making a record? That's your family. That's your community."

But Lee's main collaborator—the Lou to his J, the Guy to his Ian, the Kim to his Thurston — was Julianna Barwick, the innovative electronic artist who plays keyboards and provides harmony vocals on some of the album's most memorable moments. "We have an interesting relationship," he says, "because I actually met her when she babysat my daughter, a few years before she was making music professionally. At the time I had no idea she was this incredible musical genius. When we sang together on this record, it was such an ecstatic feeling."

Says Barwick, "Ben means so much to me in different ways. My high school self knew every word to every album he put out, and now we've been friends for years. When we got together at his home studio, we had such an effortless vibe. We instantly got that music-making telepathy thing going. The songs seemed to work out almost magically, with a lot of first takes, and he was able to make these songs new and fresh without having to totally reinvent them."

While Ben and his collaborators were experiencing the joy of working very much in the present tense, at heart *Quarter Century Classix* is closer to a musical memoir: a mixtape as statement of self, a means of connecting with his younger self. "Within the course of these 13 songs, I discovered that the entire template for what I would explore musically was laid out at that time in my life." Of course, these songs mean very different things to the forty-something husband

and father than they did to the teenage kid. All those years have given him a new perspective on these bands and their music. “Speeding Motorcycle” took on immense new significance after Lee played a handful of shows with Daniel Johnston in 2017; getting some first-hand experience of the troubled mind of an outsider-art hero behind one of your favorite songs will do that.

Recording and releasing *Quarter Century Classix* doesn’t mean he’s done with these songs, or that he’s finally figured them out—or that he’s figured himself out. Rather, Lee understands that these songs will be playing in his brain for years to come, that he’ll be trying to puzzle them out for the next quarter century and beyond. “These songs truly touched me in the most profound way, but their narratives continue to unfold over the years for me.”