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La Classe de 2019

Many of our favourite new sounds are emanating from just across The Channel.

JEREMY ALLEN guides you through the record labels and bands challenging stereotypes of French music, alongside an in-depth look at eight *Shindig!*-approved artists guaranteed to blow the doors off the discotheque

Not so long ago, Brits would countenance any French music they heard like being served up a course of *langue de boeuf*. English has been pop's *lingua franca* for generations, and as a country established as one of just four net exporters of music globally, Britons have arrogantly dismissed language in different tongues for the best part of 60 years, save for the odd "novelty" hit. The great egalitarian power of the internet which knows no borders is quickly making such attitudes look antediluvian and embarrassing.

French music once had a reputation among Anglo Saxons, rightly or wrongly (wrongly mostly) of being a procession of tired old chansonniers wafting in on a warm gust, rekindling tipsy memories of calvados and camembert and maybe a quick fumble on a Normandy beach if you were lucky. This cultural apartheid softened in the mid-90s, with the inchoate days of French filter disco (which would come to be known as the French touch) and visits to the charts from artists who were credible and, in most cases, incredible: Étienne Daho, Air, Daft Punk, Cassius and Anglo-French pioneers Stereolab.

Since then there have been wonderful pop mavericks like Arnaud Fleurent-Didier and Sebastien Tellier to enjoy, and in 2016 we saw the full breakthrough of



Christine & The Queens. The French music scene is thriving right now, but here's an unpopular opinion: French popular music has always been vibrant and diverse, thrilling and teeming with ideas. It's not the French who've changed, it's us.

Howlin' Banana

Located in Saint Denis, Howlin' Banana Records has been uncovering and exporting the finest French sonic adventures in garage and psych for the best part of a decade. It was set up by Tom Picton, a one-man A&R, PR and MD back in 2011, and asked why he chose the edgy northern banlieue of Paris (colloquially known as *the 93*), he simply answers, "Because I live there."

Past successes on the label include the transcendent *Gloria In Excelsis* album

from 2016, which is a gorgeous coming together of early '60s girl group soulfulness, late '60s Velvet Underground instrumentation and John Bonham-style drumming. And last year the label introduced **Brace! Brace!** to the world, a bright and brilliant indie pop four-piece with the finest line in scuzzy bass since the pomp of slacker-rock.

"Paris has tonnes of great bands right now," says Tom, "though it always has really. I'd especially advise checking out the emerging indie-pop scene there with bands like: **EggS** (their debut EP is one of our latest releases), **En Attendant Ana**, **Bootchy Temple** and **Special Friend**."

Tom says the garage scene in Paris has quietened down, at least for now. "It's not as vibrant as it was around 2013-14, which was a new golden age for French garage-rock. There are still some great bands around, like **Kaviar Special**, **Johnny Mafia** and **Slift**, but they all started years ago. This hasn't stopped France from steaming ahead with great new bands though, with the cursor moving to other styles: indie pop, '90s-inspired slacker-rock, post-punk and French pop, among others."

Born Bad

Down an elegant side street just off the Boulevard Richard Lenoir in the 11eme arrondissement of Paris is the Bad Brains record shop, a dimly lit cavern and vinyl junkie's dream stocking punk, post-punk, '60s garage, psychedelia and cold wave. It's



Glamour and theatricality. Fishbach (this pic); below, L-R: Gloria, La Femme, Orval Carlos Sibelius

PHOTO BY YANN MORISON



been there since 1999, and out of that shop sprang a label just as influential and well-loved. Born Bad – the record imprint – has been taking cult acts and spreading that love far and wide since 2007, in a similar way that Rough Trade and Beggars Banquet did during the '80s.

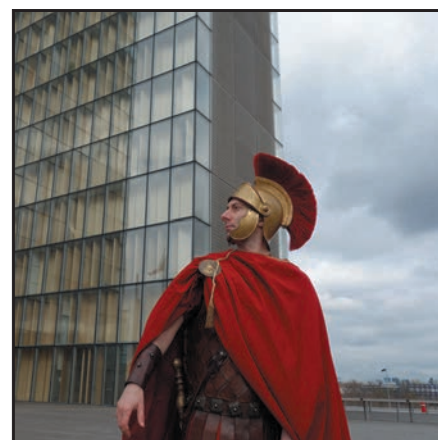
A coup for Born Bad was the signing of **La Femme**. Their 2016 album *Mystère* is a playful, kaleidoscopic musical adventure bursting with wonderfully smart, motorik-inflected tunes. While they might be based in Paris and originally from Biarritz, the beating heart of La Femme is German, as their titular debut *Psycho Tropical Berlin* suggested. There's a lyrical depth and wit to La Femme that may not be immediately apparent if your first language isn't French, while they have a chameleonic gift for assuming

various styles, from surf-rock to hip-hop, without it ever being an uncomfortable look. A new eight-minute track called 'L'Hawaïenne' is a Lynchian work of creeping exotica with steel guitars, plenty of echo and a spoken word narrative which, even to their most open-minded fans, may cause some consternation. La Femme are great on record, and they're even better live: a full technicolor *liaison dangereuse*; sassy, sexy and full of surprises, especially of the visually eye-popping variety.

Elsewhere on the label is **Orval Carlos Sibelius**, the alter-ego of Axel Monneau (licenced from his own imprint Clapping Music). Alex turned into Sibelius after he went travelling in Mali following the break-up of a relationship, and returned a psychedelic headcase with a dead composer's moniker. Born Bad gives a voice to loud garage-rock bands in communes and cities all over France: **Cannibale** from L'Aigle and **JC Satan** from Bordeaux, with Parisian noiseniks **Cheveu** and **Wall Of Death** keeping the capital's end up. But its not all unreconstructed noise: **Forever Pavot** – also from Paris – perform vertiginous baroque-pop influenced by cherished French composers such as François de Roubaix and Jean-Claude Vannier.

■ **Entreprise**

Also based in the 11^{eme} arrondissement is **Entreprise**, an exclusively Francophone sub-division of Third Side Records;



though the subsidiary is less than five years old it has taken the French music scene by storm. **Entreprise** breaks new bands, like the stunning emerging French-Algerian three-piece **Mauvais Oeil**, and it also brings together more established artists, like the recent collaboration between experimental composer **Chabrol** and *avant-garde* R&B chanteuse **Bonnie Banane** for a one-off single.

Perhaps the label's most exciting recent signing is **Pion**, self-described musical "archaeologists of the future", who are a streamlined version of the much talked about **Blind Digital Citizen**, a quintet who set dancefloors into a frenzy with their 2015 song 'Ravi'. Like Genesis, five old school friends became three, and while they don't really sound like Genesis, we all know the success that followed when Phil



“*Born Bad* gives a voice to loud garage-rock bands in communes and cities all over France: *Cannibale* from L’Aigle and *JC Satan* from Bordeaux, with Parisian noiseniks *Cheveu* and *Wall Of Death* keeping the capital’s end up”



Collins stepped out from behind the drum kit. Musically, Pion are throbbing post-punk electro with slabs of distorted sprechgesang, while lyrically they’re less Genesis and more *Book Of Revelation*. Pion are a bit too leftfield and French to break America at this moment in time, though they will provide the perfect accompaniment to the apocalypse. At times they emulate the face-melting springiness of Clinic, while at others they explore a cinematic terrain that evokes spaghetti westerns and ’70s Pink Floyd. Look out for their debut album *22:22* later this year.

Fishbach is another artist who you should fall in love with, bringing together all the best bits of Abba, Kate Bush and prog-rock, while keeping her songs concise and pop-like. Dieppian chanteuse Flora Fischbach brings a touch of glamour and a soupcon of theatricality to electronic rock chansons, with a whole lot of escapism (that’s surely the product of growing up on the northern coast where there’s nothing to do). There are many other fine artists in the *Entreprise* stable, but definitely check out **Grand Blanc**’s recent epic ‘Ailleurs’ (or “elsewhere”), a song with the cinematic resonance and sophisti-pop sheen of a *Bratpack* finale, inspired by being high (in several senses of the word) up a tower in Hong Kong watching the sun come up.

■ **Cracki**

The beginnings of the Parisian label Cracki involved four friends putting on events in unlikely places like forests and abandoned railway stations around 2009. The label emerged in 2011 with no other agenda than to find and release the most interesting music in existence. As a result, Cracki creaks at the sides with a sizable international roster, and it’s fair to say it can be regarded as the coolest underground label in Paris right now.

Lomboy takes that internationalism to extremes by living, and collaborating with artists, in Paris and Tokyo. The mysterious Tanja Frita flits between the two cities both physically and metaphorically, merging the eroticism of French chanson with 21st century electronic bleeps and glitches. The delivery on the excellent single ‘*Loverboy*’ is replicantesque, its unnerving smoothness only making the surreality more pronounced. It may come as a surprise to learn Frita is in fact Australian, though her cool, ambient soundscapes fully embrace French culture, and the embrace has been reciprocated by French fans.

At the other end of the scale is **Renart**, a Loire Valley born academic inspired by heraldic stories such as the *Chanson de Roland*, an epic poem based on the 1778 Battle Of Roncevaux Pass, which his mum would read him when he was still in short trousers. Frédéric Destres brings together futuristic space fantasies with medieval folklore on eight-minute



Opposite, top to bottom:
Pion, Lomboy, Sebastien
Tellier; Benjamin Schoos
(this pic); Buvette (below)

PHOTOS BY SCHYNS SOFAM, CHARLES NÈGRE

soundscapes that function as stories without words. Other artists on the label worth checking out include **Agar Agar**, **Caandides** and **Isaac Delusion**, to name but three.

■ **Pan European Recording**

Twelve years in and going strong, Pan European Recording delivers some of the most mind-expanding electronica around. The label has celebrated all of its milestones at Point Éphémère in the 10ème, a Parisian artist enclave and concert venue situated on the canal with perhaps the worst toilets in Europe. It boasts a recording studio on the premises which many of PER's artists use, and the venue exhibits the work of affiliated artists, a lot of them struggling to make ends meet, a rarity in central Paris nowadays.

Breaking out and breaking the mold is **Flavien Berger**, a maverick musician who trained himself to play with software on his PlayStation. A decade or so of messing about ensued, until he finally plucked up the courage to reveal his music to his friends, who encouraged him to pursue realising his singular and peculiar vision. Berger has soundtracked a number of films, duetted with Etienne Daho, and his second disc – last year's *Contre-Temps* – is a double album that feels like a self-contained universe of pure enchantment.

Another long-haired maverick on the label is **Buvette**, whose name incidentally means pumphouse in French. 'Buvette' is



the word Cedric Streuli apparently hates the most, which may indicate a certain contrariness or acute sense of irony. Streuli releases his anticipated fourth album later this year, but in the meantime there's the *Life* EP to get stuck into, a catchy offering full of analogue synths, indelible tunes and even some steel drums. For more avant garde offerings, give **Maud Geffray** a whirl, and you also really should listen to **Acid Arab's** dancetastic remix of **Judah Warsky's** meditative 'Think Of Me'.

■ **Record Makers**

It doesn't seem that long ago that Record Makers was celebrating its 10th birthday

party, and yet somehow it will be celebrating its 20th next year. Set up by Stéphane Elfassi and Marc Teissier du Cros at the turn of the century, maestros on board have included **Kavinsky**, **Turzi** and cosmic duo **Acid Washed**.

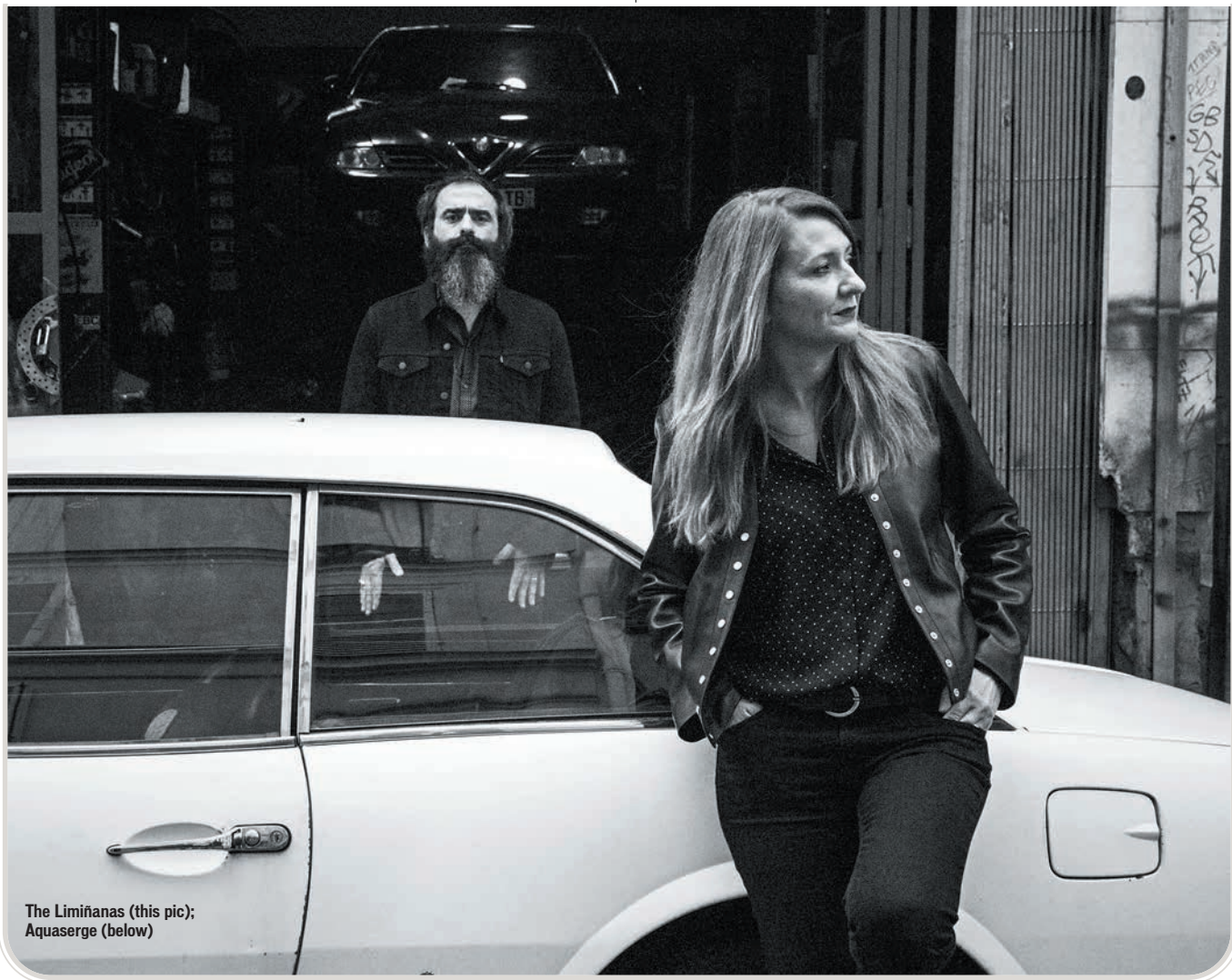
And then there's **Sebastien Tellier**, by far the most established artist in this article, but his next move is always so potentially fascinating and *outré* that he's worth including just for anyone who's been living under a rock the last 15 years or so. Tellier has represented France at Eurovision, often collaborates with Afrobeat legend Tony Allen, has written a concept album about a sex-mad religious cult, and most recently wrote and produced an album as *svengali* to Dita Von Teese's *poupée de son*. Tellier is guilty of moments of fakery and dilettantism sometimes, but he also wrote 'La Ritournelle' and you didn't. Never let it be said that Tellier hasn't written anything quite as majestic as 'La Ritournelle' since it was released in 2004, because who has?

Other artists worth checking out on the label include California-based French electronic duo **Scratch Massive**, and sometime France-based California disco artist **Cola Boyy**.

■ **Freaksville**

"Belgian pop doesn't really exist," says Liège-born crooner and Freaksville label boss, **Benjamin Schoos**. "I prefer to talk about Euro-Pop than Be-Pop."

Schoos set Freaksville up in Belgium in



The Limiñanas (this pic);
Aquaserge (below)

“As well as being an internationally successful chanteur, **Schoos** runs a radio station, is a cartoonist, writer, actor and looks after the talented stable at *Freaksville* among other pursuits”

2006 because he wanted to hear the musical town that was bustling around his head. 13 years later, and what started as a tiny label in the industrial backwater of Seraing, now has an office in Brussels and Paris, authenticating geographically the claims that this label makes skewed French pop. Artists who've recorded as part of the *Freaksville* stable over the years include the brilliant psychedelic space-rock outfit **Aquaserge**, transsexual Parisian pop icon **Marie France**, '80s Belgian pop superstar **Lio**, veteran scribe of many a throwaway pop gem, **Jacques Duvall**, and **April March**, a US singer who repackaged the works of French artists like France Gall for an American audience, kind of in the same way Johnny Hallyday repackaged American rock 'n' roll for the French in the '60s.

And then there's Benjamin himself who, on *China Man vs Chinagirl*, drew upon the talents of a number of acclaimed musicians: The Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde, Ride's Mark Gardener and most memorably Stereolab's Lætitia



Sadier on the 6 Music-listed 'Je ne voir que vous'. **Emmanuelle** actress Sylvia Kristel was also meant to collaborate, but sadly died of cancer before their track was completed. As well as being an internationally successful chanteur, Schoos runs a radio station, is a cartoonist, writer, actor and looks after the talented stable at *Freaksville* among

other pursuits. He's like a Belgian Boris Vian, the polymath mentor of Serge Gainsbourg, or for a more up-to-date reference, a man-about-town like Bertrand Burgalat, who you can read about elsewhere in this magazine. How does he get so much done? "Hard work!" says Schoos. "Get up early and sleep only a few hours except on Sundays. But I also have great people I work with."

■ **Because Music**

Because was established in 2005 by Emmanuel de Buretel, and it has grown into some kind of a monster, its tentacles as far-reaching as London where there's also an office, and LA's Staples Center, where the mighty second wave French touch giants **Justice** won a Grammy in February for best dance album. Established acts of note on the label include **Charlotte Gainsbourg**, the sorely missed **Les Rita Mitsouko**, and **Nicolas Godin** of Air, whose *Contrepoint* album from 2015 did wild things with Bach (in a similar way to how Charlotte's father manipulated Chopin). Because is also now the established home of hairy Perpignan psyche-rockers **The Limiñanas**, a duo who quit their day jobs in the early part of the decade and who've never looked back, collaborating with everyone from Peter Hook to Anton Newcombe, Etienne Daho to Emmanuelle Seigner.

“Nobody was quite ready for the cranium-scorching *Bon Voyage*, a phantasmagorical soup of psychedelia, jazz, beatbox, krautrock, Turkish folk and the guitar lick from Gainsbourg’s ‘Ford Mustang’”

Melody’s Echo Chamber
(this pic); L’Impératrice,
Feu! Chatterton (below)

And Introducing The Magnificent Eight

■ Melody’s Echo Chamber

Melody Prochet’s Broadcast-influenced, Kevin Parker-produced 2012 debut album won plenty of plaudits, but nobody was quite ready for the cranium-scorching *Bon Voyage* last year, a phantasmagorical soup of psychedelia and cool, disparate influences: jazz, beatbox, krautrock, Turkish folk and the guitar lick from Gainsbourg’s ‘Ford Mustang’, to name but a few. The road travelled between albums was treacherous and full of metaphorical monsters to slay, making the release of the follow-up an achievement in itself. Happily, Melody is now taking time out to be a mother, meaning Melody’s Echo Chamber #3 may be some time away. Thankfully these are tracks to get lost in, to pass the time until the next cosmic offering.

■ L’Impératrice

L’Impératrice, meaning “the empress”, are a band for people who think Cerrone’s ‘Supernature’ is the high watermark of civilisation (they may have a point). Microclima’s star signings are a six-headed space-disco outfit who started out in 2012 when music journalist Charles de Boisseguin left *Les Inrocks*, firstly to start a solo project, accumulating personnel along the way. A certain feminine *je ne sais quoi* apparently emerged in the music, which was consolidated by the addition of singer Flore Benguigui in 2015. L’Impératrice are



popular in their native Paris, and they recently sold out Village Underground in London too, with the capital’s French community turning out in force.

■ Feu! Chatterton

It’s appropriate that Feu! Chatterton (named after both fire and the fatalistic 18th century *poète maudit*, Thomas Chatterton) are part of the Barclay stable given the quintet’s musical links to the past. Eddie Barclay’s label in its heyday was home to Brel, Aznavour, Bashung, Dalida and plenty of other giants of chanson, and the Parisian five-piece maintain this great lineage of *variété française* while somehow managing to be entirely contemporary all at the same time. And did we mention that they’re cool? It cannot be denied that Arthur Teboul is a frontman of great charisma and poetic vision, with fine threads and a handsome Peter Wyngarde moustache.

■ Juniore

Paris’ Juniore tap into the same elemental ’60s DNA that powers The Limiñanas and, to a lesser extent, La Femme. Band leader Anne Jean (daughter of Nobel Prize for Literature winner Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio) might describe her band’s music as *yé-yé noir*, but in full flow they sound like they’re having so much fun. Jean’s rich alto vox drips over a twangy surf-rock surface,



Le SuperHomard (this pic); above, L-R: Juniore, Bess Of Bedlam, Dead Horse One, Laure Briard

PHOTOS BY PATRICE VIBERT, FRANCK ALIX, NATALIE PETREVSKI

juxtaposing deliciously with an existential ennui; a contrast reminiscent of Françoise Hardy circa '62 (although Hardy didn't play surf-rock). What's more, the debut album *Magnifique* was released as a 10-inch last year, demonstrating a real commitment to bringing the past kicking and screaming into the future.

■ **Bess Of Bedlam**

Bess is actually Fanny: Fanny L'Héritier, and though she's a French folk musician, her influences (Shirley Collins, Vashti Bunyan) are principally English. The moniker too comes from London's Bethlem Royal – nicknamed Bedlam – a psychiatric hospital founded in the 14th century. "Bess may have been one of its patients," she writes on her bandcamp page. Fanny's first album, the intricate and gossamer *Folly Tales*, was released last summer by Another Record, and it's about to get the UK treatment courtesy of Outré Records, a Francophile Brit label doing our ears a great service by promoting groups like **Juniore** and **Grand Veymont** on these shores.

■ **Laure Briard**

The music of Laure Briard embodies a sundrenched melancholy that the French do better than anyone else: think the early works of Françoise Hardy or *Le Bonheur* by Agnès Varda. As you might have gathered, there's a '60s vibe to her work, whether drawing on the dreaminess of *yé-yé*, the etherealness of Vashti Bunyan or the pleasing bossa nova beats of Brazil – though it's not all retro, with modern influences creeping in from the likes of Broadcast and Stereolab. Briard is signed to the excellent maison Midnight Special, with other fine emerging acts worthy of your attention including **Cléa Vincent** and **Le Groupe Obscur**.

■ **Le SuperHomard**

Hailing from Avignon and named in homage to a scene from Georges Lautner's *Let's Not Get Angry* (presumably featuring a large lobster), Le SuperHomard record their music at night in an old instrument shop using mostly analogue equipment. They're a Provençal Joe Meek or an Ennio Morricone meeting the early Cardigans, if

that kind of wool-gathering description butters your biscuiterie. The music features a moody and cinematic *mise-en-scene* with a more catchy and carefree delivery upfront, made yet more accessible by the *paroles anglais*. They're signed to Elefant, the Spanish indie powerhouse, boasting a roster that includes Helen Love, Camera Obscura and The Primitives.

■ **Dead Horse One**

From Valence in the South-East of France, Dead Horse One peddle a far-out, swirling sound which straddles both heavy psych freak-outs and mid-90s shoegaze (it's unsurprising to learn their debut *Without Love We Perish* was produced by Mark Gardener of Ride). They've played the Liverpool Psych Fest and have released LPs on excellent French indies like Dead Bees Records, and latterly the affiliated Requiem Pour Un Twister/Croque Macadam, who straddle the worlds of French and American neo-psychedelia (check out Lucille Furs and Triptides for more of their class acts). 