

Galaxie 500 2004 Interview by James McNew

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Thank You

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Galaxie 500 is Damon Krukowski, Dean Wareham, Naomi Yang.

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photo by Madore



photo by Sergio Lidor

The only time I've ever been kicked out of a club was in 1990 at a Galaxie 500 show in Providence, RI, at the prestigious Club Babyhead. I was waiting around at the end of the night to say good night to the band before they drove home in their respective cars (Dean drove a blue Dodge Swinger Special, exactly like the one which was my very first, beloved car). We had all gone out to dinner earlier that evening, at a very tasty joint in Federal Hill, and had a nice time. I had just moved from Virginia up to Providence after quitting school. I was 22 and living in a dream playing in my favorite band, Christmas, even though it meant working a straight job that required me to get up at 5 a.m.. It was hard for me to stay awake late enough to see the show, especially after that dinner. Maybe I was a little cranky. I'm not saying me getting kicked out wasn't entirely my fault, not by a long shot. I had met the band about two years before that, at the old 9:30 Club in Washington, DC, where they were opening for the Throwing Muses. My friend John and I drove up with the agenda of interviewing them for my fanzine, *And Suddenly*. It turned out to be a really fun interview, especially since we didn't know what we were doing, and for some reason the band thought it was great, which confused me. We kept in touch, mostly through things called "postcards," which were like paper versions of email. The next time I saw them was that night in Providence, and they were so good. About halfway through their set, amid my exhaustion, it struck me that we were friends, and I just thought that was really great, these people I met because I loved the music they made together turned out to be so nice and smart and sweet.

Anyways, that's the story of the only time I was ever kicked out of a club.

When they asked me to do this interview for this DVD that you are currently watching, I thought they were nuts. I mean sure, the people would get to see just how my journalistic skills have blossomed over the years, and that's a wonderful service the band would be doing for everyone, but why not a proper running audio commentary by, say, a writer, or the band? I dunno. What am I, a mind reader?

James McNew
Brooklyn, New York 2004



THE MIDDLE EAST

James McNew: Jesus Christ, this looks really unprofessional, and the sound is awful. I can't hear the bass at all. Is the whole DVD going to be like this? Don't you think this gives an unfair impression of the Middle East club circa 1988?

Damon Krukowski: Oh fine, and I suppose all the old videos buried in your closet are in surround sound! This was an unlabeled tape we found, I had no memory it even existed. Naomi and I put it in the machine and looked at each other: It can't be... We remembered the show—it was pretty much the first time we played in front of an interested audience—but I still can't believe there's a recording of it. It's embarrassing in every respect. How could we not release it on DVD?

Dean Wareham: I remember being very frightened at this show, and I think it shows. It was a big event for us, playing this Saturday afternoon gig, opening for Beat Happening. And the truth is we were just learning how to be a band, I don't think I had developed my guitar sound yet (no fuzz or delay pedals), and my vocal stylings were not very styling.

Naomi Yang: I think this is an accurate impression of the Middle East circa 1988! It hadn't turned into a full-time rock club yet—it was still a belly-dancing room at night; that's why this show is in the afternoon.

Dean's and Naomi's hair stayed pretty much the same length through the history of the group, but Damon's got shorter. Discuss.

Damon: When I cut it short, I sent Rough Trade in London a mock press release about my "new look." The publicist dutifully reported back that she had sent it to all the weeklies, but no one was really interested. Remember this was The Smiths' label. They had a different working definition of irony.

How much time did you spend in the UK?

Dean: We toured England three times, we were probably more popular in Newcastle than we were in Boston. We played London about seven times, first at the ICA, then a secret gig at a pub in Tulse Hill (where I remember signing a copy of *Today* for Tim Gane and Laetitia Sadier), the Powerhaus in Islington, Subterranea (twice), the Falcon, and the ULU, which was the biggest audience we ever drew for our own headlining show.

Are you recording your set with that boombox?

Damon: I'm going to go look for that tape in the closet.

What ever happened to "Buzz in My Head"? What a great song. How come "Crazy" isn't on here? What originals did you do live, but not record?

Dean: I don't think we ever played "Crazy" live. "Buzz in My Head" we had all completely forgotten about 'til we saw this tape. It has sort of a "JoJo" flavor to it (Jonathan Richman).

Damon: I think we eventually made use of most of all the originals, but some morphed over time. "I Can't Believe It's Me" turned into "Pictures."

What was the approximate ratio of strangers who just automatically compared you to The Velvet Underground, versus the number who detected your love for Jonathan Richman?

Damon: We heard Jonathan Richman was such a big Velvet Underground fan, he used to follow them around. So I guess we were tangled in a web of influence. The Modern Lovers were far and away our favorite band from Boston.

Naomi: Soon after *Today* was released we all went to see Jonathan Richman play in Cambridge and brought him a copy. We made our way backstage and gave it to him and he replied by clicking his heels, saluting us, and saying "Thank you, PT-109" (PT-109 was the boat that John F. Kennedy was on in World War II). We never understood why Jonathan Richman said that; I guess his association was just to another vehicle with a number?



photos by Marjorie



What other covers did you do that never made it to records, or to gigs, even?

Dean: "Girl, You'll Be A Woman Soon" by Neil Diamond. Never recorded, but we may have done it live. "Submission" by the Sex Pistols, which we only performed for a Peel Session. "I Can See Clearly Now" by Johnny Nash, this was Naomi's suggestion I think, and one of the first songs we ever learned to play.

Damon: Didn't we also used to play "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," back at the beginning? In the "Tugboat" video, we're playing Flipper's "Sex Bomb". You can see Dean mouth the words at one point.

Naomi: We also covered "Moonshot" by Buffy Sainte-Marie. I don't think we ever played it live but we recorded it for a Peel Session. It had been my favorite song in fourth grade.

Did you ever have to (were forced to) use other bands' gear during early gigging days?

Naomi: We always had our own equipment—although I do remember that the first bass amp I bought was a Peavey because we saw Yo La Tengo play at CBGBs the summer of 1987, and the bass player had a Peavey so I figured it was a good amp. (Of course, this was before you were the bass player James. . .) I must admit, though, that both my bass sound and stage look were much improved when I found my Ampeg B-18 Portaflex!

Dean: No, but your pal Ira Kaplan borrowed my amplifier at Bunratty's one night. And we did a number of shows with B.A.L.L., where they would use our equipment.

Naomi: One time Kramer was playing a show with the magician Penn Jillette and Penn borrowed my bass. I asked him to please be careful with it. Penn then proceeded to get on stage and totally abuse my bass: pounding on it, bending the neck, scratching the finish. When he handed it back to me it was in perfect shape. That's what you get for asking a sleight of hand artist to be careful with your equipment.

Did you have so little gear because you didn't want to carry anything? What else would you have brought with you?

Dean: A smoke machine.

Damon: It seemed like a lot of gear to me—I lugged my drums everywhere, even overseas. You can see my succession of Gretsch kits on these videos, I kept trading down to smaller ones. The only time I'm playing rented equipment is at one of the San Francisco shows—I had read an interview with Max Roach where he said he makes it a point to play any kit provided. . . But I quickly learned: not only am I not Max Roach, but if I were, I bet the clubs would have rented me a better drumkit!



photo by Sergio Huidob

COMMONWEALTH SCHOOL

James: OK, I can see a lot of style emerging. The kick drum head! The Portaflex amp! The basketball hoop! How much playing out/recording had you done between the Middle East stuff and this? Everybody's playing (and especially Dean's singing and amp hoisting) seems a zillion times more confident and together with each other.

Naomi: There is a huge difference. We don't look in shock to be on stage. About a year had passed since that Middle East show; a year when we pretty much had a show every week, sometimes two a week. I found my old calendar the other day and was surprised to see how much we had played out.

Dean: By this time we had recorded *Today* and half of *On Fire*. And we had done a short and comical tour of the US, excluding the West Coast. Also, we had just played the night before at the Rat, a special show for

Bob Biggs of Slash Records, who we found very charming.

Damon: My memory of that meeting is from breakfast the next day. He asked us what we wanted: new cars? Our faces on billboards? No one answered. And then he said, oh I know—you do it for the music, don't you? I think he sensed a bargain.

Is Damon wearing Chuck Taylor high tops because of the basketball hoop? Were you guys shooting around before the set?

Damon: Endorsement deal.

This to me is Naomi's best haircut. Who did it?

Naomi: Odile Gilbert cut my hair. She's a French stylist who was living in New York at the time and the reason why, no matter what other fashion errors I may have made in those years, my hair always looked great. She later moved back to Paris to concentrate on doing hair for the runway shows—incredible things like wigs made out of feathers—there's actually a photo book out now of her work.

That's a really, really good answer.

Naomi: You thought it was a simple question!

Is this just the sound of a room mic?? Where the hell is this show, anyway?

Damon: We were invited to play a private high school in Boston by a student with precocious musical taste, Jacob Kreilkamp. I think it must have been mandatory attendance, cause the teachers were all there too. The sound is from the camera, same as the Middle East show. There are no mics on the amps or drums—it sounds just like we used to in our practice space.

This sounds totally ferocious. You sound like a really good rock and roll band. Did you ever think about making a record that sounded something like this, rather than utilizing Kramer's velvety touch?

Dean: Well, we did release a live album, *Copenhagen*, which was the final date of our last European tour.

Damon: I don't think we much rocked the Commonwealth School, but we were a louder band than our reputation led people to believe—and Kramer actually pushed us in that direction when he did our live sound, turning up the volume, using reverbs and delays to make a more psychedelic wash of noise in the room. But at first we never really tried to turn it up, only later when we had learned to play a bit better.

KENNEL 1

James: How long was it before Damon, and then Naomi, got vocal mics?

Damon: We had used backing vocals in the studio, so eventually I started adding some live. I never did solve the mic stand issue for singing from behind the drumkit, however—it was always in the way!

Naomi: I only ever used the vocal mic for singing one song per show—but I hated having it standing there not being used, so often I would just bring it out from the side of the stage when I needed it.

Did you talk to the crowd much? What are your most memorable on-stage interactions with your audiences?

Naomi: I think I hardly ever spoke to the audience from the stage—I certainly don't as documented in this DVD!

Dean: There was that guy who tried to get onstage and punch me in Chicago because he said I was a faggot. Possibly I was wearing my white jeans.

How long was this trip? Are we at the beginning or end here?

Dean: I'm not sure, but I remember going to the movies the next day, seeing the Humphrey Bogart film *In A Lonely Place*. There was a couple sitting in front of me talking about the Galaxie 500 show the night before. I remember this girl telling her date that her friends thought the show was boring, but she loved it.

Which did G500 visit first, the west coast or UK/Europe?

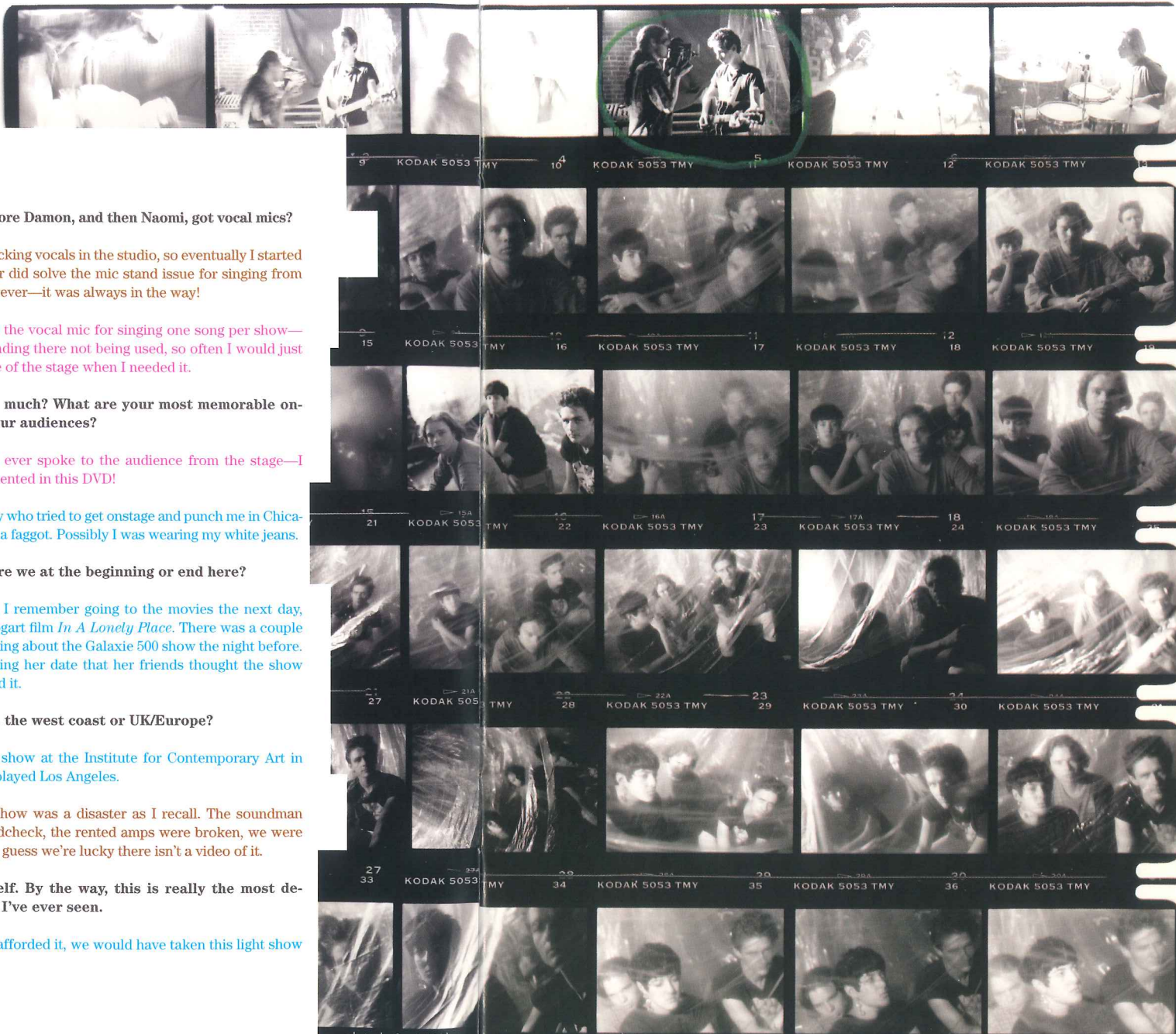
Dean: I think we did a show at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London before we ever played Los Angeles.

Damon: That first UK show was a disaster as I recall. The soundman didn't show up for soundcheck, the rented amps were broken, we were jet lagged and terrified. I guess we're lucky there isn't a video of it.

I'm putting that out myself. By the way, this is really the most depressing liquid light show I've ever seen.

Dean: If we could have afforded it, we would have taken this light show all over the world.

photos by Sergio Huidor
and Naomi Yang





LINGERIE

James: Best. Graphics. Ever.

Naomi: We felt they really had to be included on the DVD.

Damon: I believe Video Bob went on to direct *The Robin Byrd Show*.

Dean: This director really knew what he was doing. I remember everything else at Club Lingerie being quite rude to us.

This is a popular outfit for Dean—it's a good look, don't get me wrong. Was it the same every night on this tour? Because that's a very practical wardrobe plan for touring.

Dean: My Spacemen 3 shirt does crop up in a few of these shows. And the white jeans too. You think you can get away with wearing the same outfit two nights in row on tour, because you're in a different city. But you don't count on the DVD.

I used to have that shirt of yours. Tannis Root makes the most awesome stuff. Would you guys go and sell those onstage after the shows were over?

Naomi: Of course we would sell our T-shirts after the show! I don't think we ever got to the point, except maybe at the very end of the band's career, where we had anyone else around to do that sort of thing. That T-shirt was designed by Shannon, Kramer's wife, who was a clothing designer.

Damon: You clearly haven't yet watched disc two. Actually later I became very anti-T-shirt, I had some kind of T-shirt crisis: "Is this why I'm in a band, to sell T-shirts?" But of course the answer is no; you join a band to give away T-shirts. It's a spiritual thing.

Dean: The shirts made the difference between going home with nothing and going home with a couple of hundred dollars.

You guys really liked that Kramer fellow, didn't you? Was he doing sound at these shows?

Naomi: When we could, we tried to bring Kramer along to do sound – it always sounded so much better.

Dean: He liked to come on the road and do sound, and join us on stage for the finale. And on one trip he was the tour manager as well, at least for a few days. We played at the Lorelei Festival in Germany – a beautiful outdoor location high up in the hills. We stuck around to watch the Ramones, then we drove to our hotel some twenty miles away. And then Kramer told us that he had forgotten to pick up our fee. Anyway, it was fun having him around.

Damon smiled at the beginning of "Ceremony" —that's the first smile I've seen in this whole thing, and one of the first times I've seen any of you even look at each other onstage. Do you remember this stuff as being fun?

Damon: Kramer hated "Ceremony." I think I'm laughing because we had forced him to choose between his hatred of the song and his love of being on stage . . .

Dean: It was great, though not always comfortable. We did our share of sleeping on people's floors, from London to Pittsburgh to Cincinnati. I think we splurged on a hotel room once on our first US tour, Damon and Naomi in one bed, Dave Rick and I in the other.

Naomi: I remember it as being a lot of fun: we got to travel, play music, have crazy adventures. It was all new to us, so we didn't have any expectations; everything that happened for the band was exciting.





PHOTO BY MICHAEL



KENNEL 2

James: Naomi's earrings are the most arresting pieces of live showmanship on this entire DVD. How many pairs would you bring out on tour with you? Did you have a flight case for them?

Naomi: No flight case for them, but double-faced tape was absolutely necessary to make sure they stayed on for the whole show! I thought I was very clever coming up with that idea, but later a friend of mine said, "oh, that's an old drag queen trick." The earrings did get kind of out-of-hand—but I always identified with the Edie Sedgwick quote about her long earrings, "I swish them the way other girls swish their hair."

Did Kramer ever suggest cover songs for you guys to do?

Damon: No, but he mocked us for getting the chords wrong to "Isn't It a Pity."

Dean: He suggested "Cheese and Onions" by the Rutles.

Damon: That was fun. We parodied ourselves in the studio with Kramer.

Had you pretty much abandoned the basketball hoop by now?

Dean: Again with the basketball hoop...

Damon: Do you realize what it costs to operate one of those in a union house?

UK TELEVISION

James: Damon, did you play guitar on the records? And if so, was it an Ovation acoustic?

Damon: I don't think I ever did play guitar on the records, just at home and in rehearsal to work out songs. In any case, I'm sure my own acoustic didn't make it on the albums. At the time I had only a "student grade" Yamaha from high school days, and we always borrowed Shannon Kramer's Gibson Hummingbird for overdubs. For this TV session, they couldn't accommodate drums so I asked for a guitar... I guess I should have specified one made out of wood.

So you pretty much stuck to your respective instruments in the studio?

Damon: Yes, we recorded all the basic tracks live—very quickly, too, often first take—and then our overdubs were pretty much restricted to lead guitar, percussion, vocals and backing vocals. Most of the wildcard instruments, like keyboard and flute, were played by Kramer.

Did you play in this setup often? Ever?

Damon: Maybe at some in-stores...? I always played drums whenever possible.

How often did you guys rehearse? Where?

Naomi: We rehearsed at the "Sound Museum" in Boston—a loft building with practice studios which overlooked the Southeast Expressway. We actually had a great view from there. I remember rehearsing several



times a week, at least in the beginning. When we first got together, the summer of 1987, and we were all in New York, I remember we rehearsed in a spare room in Dean's parents' house.

Damon: We rented space in that same building the band's entire career, at the corner of Albany and Wareham Street (!) in the South End. All four videos were shot there, too. The owner was a guy named Des, who used to sit outside our room shaking his head in disbelief that anyone gave a damn about our music. It was a useful reality check, I suppose.

More fashion: wearing your own band's T-shirt can be a sensitive issue. Discuss.

Dean: I think it's okay to wear your band's shirt on stage during your own show, but not for a trip to the supermarket.

Did you really believe food was better in the UK than it was in the USA? Was this your way of trying to make the front pages of the *NME* & *Melody Maker*? Wouldn't it have been less messy just to kill one of the Soup Dragons?

Dean: If you have the time to seek it out, maybe the food is better in the USA (though not in the Midwest). Damon and Naomi used to carry the book *Road Food, Good Food*, which had details for lots of good cheap restaurants, usually about 60 miles out of our way. But the highway and train food is better in England.

You, sir, have crossed a line.

Naomi: Getting to taste interesting food is one of the great things about touring. So when you are stuck with rotten highway food, whether in the US or the UK or anywhere else, it always seems like a lost opportunity!

Damon: That's the best line in there, Dean's about the fish and chips. We were trying so hard to have some attitude, and mostly failing.

That's sneaky, when the question is if other journalists compare you to Television, VU, New Edition, etc. Did you hate doing interviews?

Dean: I think we liked it at first. It all depends on the interviewer. I find if you are being interviewed by a fool, then he will find a way to make you seem foolish too.

Damon: I remember very long, intermittently funny days, sitting in a conference room at Rough Trade in London, with The Smiths' gold records



on the walls... The UK writers took it all very seriously, which was not a little ridiculous at times, but also rewarding—they were listening so intently to the records.

Wimpy??

Dean: That interviewer, Paul King, was himself a retired pop singer. What can you say to someone who politely calls your band “wimpy?”

What, was he in Venom or something? I'm getting the impression that people used that word to describe your music, not just this guy. Is that really true? Are you serious about this “having attitude” thing?

Damon: We had to face down our share of hostility, in the US clubs especially. We were playing quietly, for the time, and that provoked a lot of people in bars for some reason. Even at our first show in Boston, with virtually no one in the room, we were heckled—by another band on the



bill—“College Boys!” (This despite Naomi’s miniskirt). So the wimp thing had plagued us from the start.

VIDEOS

James: Did it feel weird to make videos? Were they shown on “120 Minutes”?

Dean: Sergio’s videos are beautiful. He created an alternate world on a very low budget. The only location used was our tiny practice space in Boston, which he would dress with sheets of mylar and foil.

Naomi: Making the videos was fun! Sergio Huidor, who directed all four of our videos, was in the art department with me at Harvard. We had taken painting classes together but Sergio was also studying filmmaking. We asked him to make a video for “Tugboat.” It was the dawn of MTV and the idea of a having a video was kind of outrageous, considering we



were just releasing our first record on a local label, but everything was so DIY anyway, it was sort of like, why not? Sergio took a very punk rock approach to making the “Tugboat” video: he used the school camera equipment, threw dust on the film, and then edited it using two VCRs. I remember it cost about \$150 to make, total. Later, when we were working with Rough Trade, Sergio made three more amazing videos for us, with slightly higher, but albeit still very minimal budgets.

Wasn't there an animal-related controversy about “When Will You Come Home”?

Damon: Sergio gravitated to violent imagery for all the videos, I think in part to undermine the band's pastoral reputation, but it's also always anchored somehow to the lyric. It was a brilliant leap. I still can't watch “When Will You Come Home” without flinching, however.

Dean: There was a bit of controversy. We were asked to re-cut the video because it contained disturbing images of animals that had been used in scientific experiments. But then MTV ran the original version anyway. It was confusing.

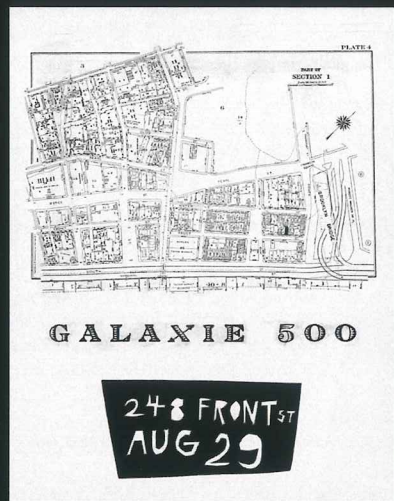
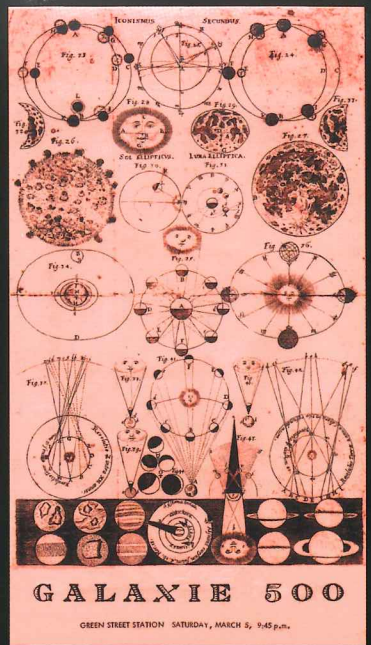
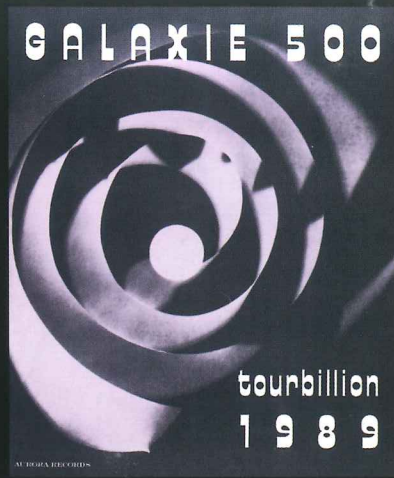
Finally, a gorilla suit. I don't see Naomi wearing any costumes, though. What's up with that?

Naomi: Sergio requested that we rent the gorilla suit and I must admit, I didn't think he was really going to use it up until the moment Dean climbed into it. Damon is in the clown suit—his choice. And I do have on a small costume—a pair of angel wings. This was definitely the late, decadent period of the band!

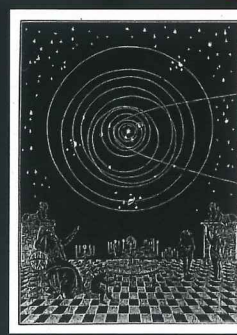
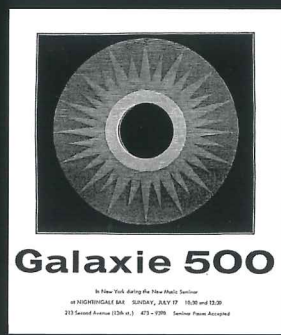
Come on now. It's me. That's not a costume. Didn't you feel left out?

Naomi: Actually, I was trying very hard to avoid being in a silly costume! I thought I had managed to get out of the situation rather neatly by just wearing the wings...

You're so busted.



artwork by Naomi Yang



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8:00 to 9:30 food will be provided
Music from 9:30 and on with
SALEM 66, the CAVEDOGS,
and BITCH MAGNET
GALAXIE 500 will play a set at 10:15
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Aurora Records 424-7227

ULU

James: Were your set lists different every night? Did you ever take requests?

Naomi: I think the set list would sort of settle into more or less an order as a tour went on. I can't remember ever taking a request—I don't think we were that flexible.

This is Dean's best look, for sure. Actually, everyone looks great. You're so photogenic, and so are your instruments. Were you ever asked to do any clothing ads or anything?

Naomi: This was before corporate America had discovered the underground—the people who made clothing ads were not at all interested in the likes of us! But I do think we always chose very elegant instruments.

Gee, listen to those people screaming at you. Would you mingle with the kids after your shows?

Dean: Most of the time we were forced to mingle with the kids, when we went back out on stage to pack up our equipment. But on this last European tour we had people who did that for us.

Damon: This was a very big show for us, and the atmosphere was intense—the London crowd, plus our record company and everyone else we worked with in the UK there, the press—and I remember that the tape deck in the house sound system had broken, so before we walked on stage there was silence in the room. This bootleg video showed up in the Camden Market shortly afterwards, but it was PAL and so we had never watched it before putting this DVD together. It was amazing to see the show from the audience's point of view... I remember it so clearly from behind the drumkit.

THE POINT

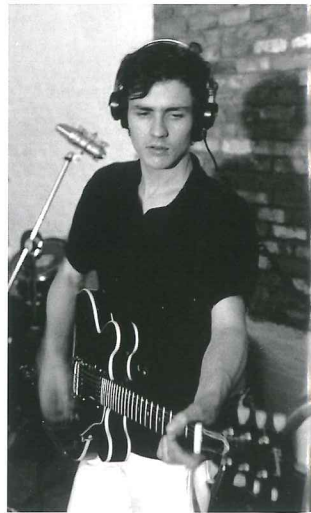
James: Holy fucking shit, you're playing at The Point.

Dean: It was convenient how there was a door right at the back of the stage, so you could get out of there quickly.

You guys sure are chatty. How come you didn't say a word to London, and you're hollering at Atlanta?



photo by Steve Double



Dean: Nervous in London, tipsy in Atlanta.

Naomi: I think it had been a very long drive the day of the Atlanta show, and, unlike the show in London, we were not at all nervous. We had stopped off at a toy store at some point, and had bought the bubbles and the fake money that you see us attempting to use... it's pretty funny how it doesn't work at all. So much for the big stage show.

Damon: I like how different these two shows are—each pretty much indicative of what it was like for us, touring overseas and in the US. Most US shows were like this, a few knowledgeable fans in the audience (one, Todd Ploharski, with a video camera in this case), but otherwise we're playing in a bar for people who are there to hang out regardless of the band. We seem eager to get off stage—it's a very short set—but we play with a kind of abandon, I think because we're just amusing ourselves really. The stage business still makes me laugh.

Just so you know, right after "Don't Let Our Youth Go To Waste" I totally heard a guy commenting on the Spacemen 3 shirt, and possibly the white jeans. It's amazing to see this show right after the swooning, reverent ULU audience. Do you remember being bummed out by this show, or were you having fun?

Dean: It looks like we were having fun, and this would be the first time we had ever played in Atlanta. I think we considered it quite successful.

Naomi: I don't remember being particularly bummed out after this show, but the "swooning" audiences were certainly not a nightly occurrence on tour, so it wasn't like we needed to have a noisy audience to keep our perspective—we had plenty of that.

How could Kramer not like "Ceremony"? What's not to like?

Naomi: Even though Kramer didn't like "Ceremony" or New Order he was happy to accept a ride from Peter Hook, in his Jaguar, back to the hotel after a Manchester show. We had to stay at the club and pack up our equipment!

Dean: He didn't like New Order, but I caught him buying a Jethro Tull record.

The video for "Pump It Up" at the end is excellent!

Damon: That's for the time capsule. Anywhere in the USA, 1990. ■