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all songs taken from albums released this autumn on
Shinkansen, except the Trembling Blue Stars tracks
which were recorded in 1997 but never released.

A Miracle on Commercial Street

Scene: *Spitalfields Market, December 11th, 3pm.* Through the white-webbed windows of the Spitz bar, bright flakes of snow can be seen flurrying and flummoxing about the freshly frosted streets like fallout from an explosion in a fish-finger factory, while small sooty urchins scurry cheerily hither and merrily thither clad only in raggedy raincoats, moth-eaten mufflers and neatly ironed Belle & Sebastian T-shirts, almost as if there weren't chimneys needing cleaning. Back on our side of the glass, a jaded former pop-kid, still numb to his quivering core after going to both nights of the recent Gentle Waves showcase in order to win a bet, slumps in a chair and gazes with contempt at the small polythene package a fat and absurdly jolly old man with a fluffy white beard and garb as crimson as his cheeks has just handed him – some sort of reward, a moment's eavesdropping soon reveals, for him having agreed to sit on the old fellow's knee for five minutes when they'd earlier met by chance in the downstairs toilets.

What the hell is this? I thought you said you were going to buy me a drink? And where's that reindeer you said I could stroke?

Ho ho ho, all in good time, young fellow, all in good time. First, a special festive gift that'll do you far more good than any cheap alcoholic fix or quick velvety fondle: a CD containing five shiny pop-songs which are – like the sight of snowflakes melting on the upturned lips of a loved-one, or of familiar handwriting smudged across an airmail envelope, or of TV footage of large groups of penguins falling over – guaranteed to pluck you promptly from your torpid pit of self-pity and plant you pertly on the sun-dappled peaks of purposefulness; in short, five songs to make you think that life is, perhaps, worth another shot after all.

Five songs? It implies six on the cover.

Yes, but the first one's just an instrumental, and no-one counts instrumentals. Look, let me talk you through it:

PACIFIC RADIO: Pop Heart

Pacific Radio is basically a pseudonym for north London curiosity Rob Crutchley, who's also previously recorded under the name Monograph. And here's how it works: wait for that first molten rush of guitars to explode over you and then begin declaiming above the roar *I might not be sixteen any more, I might live 25 minutes' walk from the nearest tube-station and I might, through no fault of my own, support Barnet FC, but deep inside me something still burns with a furious incandescent rage* – because then you'll know how it feels to have a true Pop Heart. Or to have had

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a really hot curry – it's often only the flock wallpaper and poppadom crumbs that gives it away. This track is taken – if you're interested – from their debut mini-album. If you're *not* interested, then it's taken from *Cross Channel Ferry*, a mailorder-only double-CD on which the former Roxy Music lounge-lizard puts his own languorous spin on the hits of Daft Punk and Air. As advertised in post-offices.

CODY: *Ghost Shakers*

It's often said that what makes Cody different from other Oxford bands is the fact they're not from Oxford. But I think what really sets them apart is their ability to conjure – as effortlessly as a skilled magician conjures a rabbit out of a hat, say, or a rabbit conjures a rabbit out of another rabbit – the sort of glistening electronic grooves and wide-eyed wide-screen panoramas that would – if stumbled upon unattended in a cardboard box in a rainy field outside Abingdon – cause a band such as Supergrass to simply gibber and point, wild with confusion, like giant apes who'd just found a small glass snowstorm paperweight in the back of the jungle and turned it upside-down. My favourite track on *Stillpoint Primer* (their debut album) is *Sleepy Park Royal*: heard heading west out of London in the small hours on an empty motorway, preferably the M40, and preferably in a car or other similar vehicle, it sounds like liquid moonlight – but *Ghost Shakers* is on this CD because it's shorter.

FOSCA: *The Millionaire Of Your Own Hair*

Starring Dickon from the greatly lamented and hugely divisive Orlando on words and guitars, Rachel on keyboards and vocals, Sheila on cello and Alex (formerly of Brighter) on lurking around at the back twiddling things and looking shifty, Fosca straddled this summer

with their first two releases on Shinkansen: *The Agony Without The Ecstasy* and *On Earth To Make The Numbers Up*, from which this track is taken. And already the plaudits are piling up like dead dogs on a towpath: they're feted like heroes in France, worshipped like gods in Greece, toasted like crumpets in Sweden and hunted like bears across the Central Russian Uplands; they raise hopes of a better time to come in small redneck towns across the Midwest where synthesisers are still banned, and raise eyebrows in cheap steamy cafes around Archway station whenever Dickon tries to cross the road outside in daylight. They are, in a word, important.

TOMPOT BLENNY: *Found Under Blankets*

Tompot Blenny claim to be based in Nottingham, though most other inhabitants of the UK's former doily-capital will eye you disbelievingly when you tell them this, inform you that, well, *they've* never heard of them, and then ask you if it's true that people in London have wings and keep miniature hairless monkeys as servants. *Found Under Blankets* is the title-track of the band's debut album, finally released this autumn, four years after their last single – an embarrassing repetitive strain injury and related persistent twitch having forced them into temporary retirement from the contemporary music-scene during the so-called "lost" years in between.