



JENS LEKMAN

Sweden's ironic answer to Barry Manilow explains his general ambivalence to local specialities and what, if anything excites him about the family dinner. Interview by Deirdre Corley. Photograph by Gustav Karlsson Frost

"Just to make one thing clear, Scandinavian food in Scandinavia is like the color green in Greenland." Whatever it is the Swedes are eating these days, indie-pop darling Jens Lekman isn't too keen on talking about it. When asked what his favourite Scandinavian candy is, he replies, "There's no such thing. We didn't discover sugar until the late 1900s." That's a little-known fact. If it's not candy he's into, then perhaps he has a favourite regional dish from his native Gothenburg. "Not at all." Fine, what did he grow up eating then? "Spaghetti, I guess." Should have found a fatter pop star to interview.

The tight-lipped Lekman did go so far as to admit to a non-consumptive encounter with the notoriously smelly fermented herring dish *surströmming*. "I once got out of a maths test by strategically placing an opened can in the school's ventilation system." Seems he has a use for food after all. Jens also finds virtue in the people-watching aspects of the dining experience—apparently it's just the eating thing he's not down with. "I like the café at the central station, mainly because you can sit by the window and watch the stressed commuters as they run, fall over, miss their trains, start fights, break up, make up and make out. I can sit there for hours. As for food and drinks, I don't know much about that," he offers when asked

to recommend a restaurant in Gothenburg.

What Lekman does know a lot about is composing quirky, clever indie-pop ballads. His funny, first-person lyrics sound a bit like they were written by the impossible love child of Stephin Merrit and Morrissey, while his instrumentation is often augmented by a diverse collection of samples, ranging from old calypso recordings to '60s "baroque pop" act The Left Banke to '80s indie pioneers Beat Happening—adding up to a sound that is at once hard to pin down and totally distinctive.

A frequent habit of dropping unexpected pop culture references (Warren G. comes to mind) and an affinity for bizarrely amusing, hyper-literal metaphors (in "Sky Phenomenon" he sings about the northern lights, making the observation, "It's like someone spilled a beer, all over the atmosphere") had him pegged early on by music writers as a sort of deadpan comedy act, though he claims this isn't the case. "When I released my first recordings, I was unaware of what some people would refer to as irony in my songs. I was labeled deadpan but I never understood what they meant. I wasn't trying to be funny at all." Could be, but it's hard to believe that someone who actually titled one of his songs "A Man Walks Into a Bar" is completely devoid of comedic ambitions. Furthering this point,

Lekman elaborates, "I became quite obsessed with M*A*S*H for some time; I saw all the seasons in a few months and the last episode made me cry. There's hardly one single joke in there, just a very dignified good-bye to each character. That's how I try to write songs. I make sure you get to know the characters; we have a few laughs, but I always try to wrap it up in a dignified way."

With the blaring exception of his devotion to deformed teenager Rocky Dennis (Lekman made him the subject of an entire EP, leading to some confusion in the Swedish press over whether Jens Lekman's name was actually Rocky Dennis), Lekman writes songs about characters drawn from his own life. When asked about the implications of blurring the line between his life and his music, he explains that his real life isn't all just making out and breaking up, as his songs might suggest. "I've felt that it would be wrong of me to pretend like I live a normal life. I do of course get my heart tangled up in a sweet mess, just like everyone else, but a very big portion of my life revolves around my music. I decided to be honest and at least incorporate a fragment of this in a new song called 'A Postcard to Nina.' During a very awkward family dinner, my friend's dad puts on my debut album. It's just a tiny detail, but a detail I felt was necessary."