

# Do you get Calvin Johnson?

By Nicholas Bradley  
The Ubysey

VANCOUVER (CUP)  
- "Is that a potato?"

It is. In the band's dressing room, on the counter that runs below a row of mirrors lit up by bright make-up lights, there is, for no apparent reason, a potato. Calvin Johnson is very excited at this latest discovery. He pokes the said tuber, turns around for another quick photo, then wanders out of the room, mumbling something to no one in particular, his fuzzy grey hat crooked, the ear flaps sticking out from his head.

I've known Calvin Johnson now for three-quarters of an hour. And the potato has made him as excited as I've ever seen him. Forty-five minutes ago, this may have seemed strange - to see someone's face light up at the sight of a slightly shrivelled piece of food - but now, it's almost normal.

In some circles, Calvin Johnson is a celebrity. An icon. Olympia, Washington's closest thing to a rock and roll legend. He's in Vancouver with his band, Dub Narcotic

Sound System, to play Rock for Choice, an annual benefit concert held to raise funds for two local women's health clinics.

Three hours before Dub Narcotic is scheduled to go on stage, the band is lounging around the dark, cold dressing room in the basement of the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. Calvin Johnson, in his tight plaid pants, red hunting jacket, and cockeyed hat is farthest from the door, slouching down in a chair, a very large bag of peanut M&Ms next to him. A steady stream of other musicians, technicians, and concert organisers filters in and out of the room.

When I walk in, Calvin Johnson appears bored, and he looks as though he's about to get up to leave. I ask how much time he has for this interview. "We have all the time in the world," he answers in his distinct baritone drawl. He may well be serious. I'm pretty sure he's joking.

That's the sort of response a lot of people receive when they first approach Calvin Johnson. As the guitar player and one of the singers in the lo-fi trio Beat Happening, he was responsible for a cult following that, oddly enough, counted Kurt Cobain and Fugazi's Ian Mackaye among its members. The late Cobain, who once played in the Go-Team with Calvin Johnson, had the K Records logo tattooed on his

arm, so the legend goes. Beat Happening has been described as the least pretentious band ever. Their stripped-bare approach to song-writing relied at once on sugary tunes and tuneless monotony, with lyrics that ranged from bittersweet ("Cause no one in the whole world could ever understand") to sappy ("We're in love - let's kiss") to just weird ("I had sex on

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Christmas. I had sex three times today.")

You either get Beat Happening or you don't. Either way, Calvin Johnson became something of a legend.

Beat Happening released their last album in 1992, but haven't actually broken up. "It's hard to tell," Calvin says about the possibility of a new Beat Happening project. There is a long pause. "No idea." Another pause. This seems to be the pattern for a conversation with Calvin Johnson.

"I'm amenable," he says, but he doesn't know how his bandmates Heather Lewis and Bret Lunsford

feel. "It's really difficult to know." He stops, possibly to consider what he is about to say, perhaps not.

"That's always been the case, though. From the very beginning I never really knew what the hell was going on." He has made everyone in the room laugh, and looks proud for having done so. "People were always like 'So Beat Happening broke up?' I'm like 'We

did?' I didn't know that 'cause no one ever told me."

More laughter.

The Beat Happening back catalogue is being reissued on K, and when I ask Calvin about this, he

nods his head and mumbles "oh yeah" as if this is the first time he's heard about it. I ask about the timing of this project.

"Why now?"

"Why not?"

This is not a helpful answer. I'm left with nothing intelligent to say.

"I don't know."

"Ah, exactly."

This dialogue is snappy, as if we'd been rehearsing, the comedy duo we've just become. But Calvin, at least, appears to think something profound has been uttered. Then he explains that the licensing agreement K had with Seattle label Sub Pop ended, so K now had the

chance to release the Beat Happening records itself.

These records show the side of Calvin Johnson that threatens to burst out when he offers me some of his candy. Or maybe I'd like a piece of fruit if I'm hungry? It's organic. He just had a pear. At first, you think he's joking, like you're being had. But you're not. He just really wants you to have a piece of fruit if you're hungry.

These records, these songs.

"We were looking at your rabbits, we were feeding them some cabbage, you were telling me that you had a black and white cat. We were wearing our pajamas, we were eating some bananas."

He's not joking. Do you get it?

"We were walking along the street and I fell down and you said to me, you said 'Calvin, you're a guy with incredible blue eyes, but I've got to live my own life,'"

They didn't get it in Japan. "I don't think people really knew who we were or what we were doing there. It was mostly just puzzlement," Calvin says of the Beat Happening's 1983 trip.

"It just seemed like something that no one was doing." He clears his throat noisily. He admits that puzzlement is still a reaction that he often receives.

But any Beat Happening wistfulness

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