



## Crash Test Dummies “Oooh La La”

### *Biography*

There is no mistaking Brad Roberts' voice. He may look like an average guy, now in his mid-40s, but then he opens his mouth and his majestic baritone voice immediately conjures fond memories of such Crash Test Dummies hits at “Mmm, Mmm, Mmm, Mmm” and “Superman.” Perhaps best remembered for the acerbic folk rock sound of 1991's *The Ghosts That Haunt Me* and 1993's *God Shuffled His Feet*, there have nonetheless been enough hits for the band over the years to merit a couple of greatest hits packages. Through it all, the band with Roberts at the helm has touched on funk and soul, folk, electronic music and even Christmas tunes. Yet it is Roberts' voice and offbeat lyrical sensibility that have been this beloved band's calling cards since their founding twenty years ago.

Due for release in May 2010, *Oooh La La* is again something of a different animal for the Crash Test Dummies. This time Roberts collaborates with producer/engineer Stewart Lerman, whose many credits include such divergent talents as Antony and the Johnsons and The Roches, as well as filmmakers like Wes Anderson and Martin Scorsese. While longtime CTD member Ellen Reid added back-up vocals and a lead on the closing acoustic ballad “Put a Face,” this album is fundamentally the work of these two creative men.

“I met Stewart and he wanted to just write music for the sake of writing music,” Roberts explains, breaking a five-year writing hiatus to work with Lerman. “I think the music is better than it could have ever been because we were writing it for ourselves – we weren't aiming at a demographic anyhow – but this couldn't be a clearer case of us being little boys.”

“Little boys” is actually an appropriate term to explain how this album came together—Roberts and Lerman became infatuated with '70s-era musical toys, particularly one called the Optigan, and used them to compose much of the music for *Oooh La La*. Manufactured by Mattel, the Optigan (an acronym for optical organ) looks like a small electric organ but it projects the sound of other instruments using celluloid discs. Somewhat like an accordion, there are buttons on the left side that trigger chords and piano keys on the right that trigger single notes. The discs, with names like “Nashville,” “Swing It!” and “Guitar Boogie,” rotate to produce different arrays of sounds. The process is eerily similar to the digital sampling that is so common today, but the antiquated analog system produces quite a different effect.

“Because we wrote using these discs, we were inspired to do things that we wouldn't have done,” Roberts points out. “I don't write big band style, but all of a sudden I had this big band [on disc], so I'm writing in a genre that I normally wouldn't be writing in. I can't say enough about how great it is to write on these toys.”

With a little help from a few friends, the guys laid down a collection of beautifully crafted instrumental parts on top of the original toy tracks to create a fully realized production. Listening to the completed tracks you probably wouldn't even realize that these tunes were started on toy instruments, but those unusual origins are still lurking. It won't only be longtime CTD fans who will get a kick out of such sonic touches as the '50s doo-wop feel of “Paralyzed” (inspired by another toy called the Omnichord), the manic country feel of “What I'm Famous For” and the big band swing of “Now You See Her.”



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Even aside from the toys, there is a distinctly different vibe afoot with this record. "Songbird" opens the album with a somewhat haunting but still undeniably beautiful acoustic melody and uplifting arrangement. Then there's the third song "And It's Beautiful," which is a full-blown love song. "Happy songs are hard to write, especially love songs," Roberts says. "This is territory I couldn't have touched as a younger man without making myself sick." Yet this is still the unique (some might say warped) perspective of Brad Roberts and the Crash Test Dummies, nowhere more in evidence than with a few of the darker songs on this disk. "You Said You'd Meet Me (In California)" can't help but make you think of a carnival side show. The Tin Pan Alley-inspired "Not Today Baby" is actually a Frank Sinatra reference. Legend has it that one day Sinatra walked into a studio full of engineers, staff and musicians at the ready, turned around and walked right out with a simple, insouciant "Not today, baby." The reference was irresistible to Roberts and Lerman, as they recorded their tracks in Frank's hometown of Hoboken.

Roberts has come a long way from 2004's dark *Songs of the Unforgiven*, as a listener will pretty easily hear in "Now You See Her," a song that Roberts proudly calls "Light and cheeky." A happily married man who blogs at [www.crashtestdummies.com](http://www.crashtestdummies.com) about, among other things, the wonders of his wife, Roberts just seems happier and more balanced than he has been in the past. The image of a happy artist may be antithetical to the "great art demands suffering" mentality, but in the case of Brad Roberts it's a welcome change of pace that has left him invigorated.

Roberts has been so revitalized by the making of the new record that the band will tour this summer for the first time since 2004. Crash Test Dummies will perform as an acoustic trio with Ellen and Brad singing and old friend and tour partner Stuart Cameron playing acoustic guitar, much in the spirit of album closer "Put a Face." Rather than try to recreate music that was created with some rather cranky toy instruments never meant for the rigors of a tour, Roberts has opted to present these songs in a straightforward, stripped-down manner. It's a curveball, but the test of a great song is its ability to work in different formats, and these songs, along with classic CTD hits, undoubtedly pass this test.

"I think that when you are dealing with popular music, unless you have a strong melody, sympathetic chords, and a good set of lyrics you ain't got nothing," Roberts points out. Fore-shadowing the highly entertaining shows for which he is so well known, Roberts adds "I want to have a little room to digress into an anecdote while Stuart strums the guitar, if that's what I feel like doing."