

"It was like someone came into the studio and locked the door. There was no outside temptation. Nothing made it easy to fall into routine," says French singer Thomas Mars, describing the three months his band Phoenix spent recording in Germany last year. Walling themselves in an old East Berlin government radio station, they recorded in the kind of isolation that

has become harder to find after two enthusiastically received albums.

Surrounded by little more than the "communist ghosts" of the station's empty rooms,

Phoenix wrote, recorded, and mixed the songs on their album *It's Never Been Like That*, often arriving in the studio with only an idea and leaving with a finished song. Mars says the same energy that pushed them forward in the studio is tugging him away from New York (where he's visiting his girlfriend) and back to Versailles for rehearsals.

"We're impatient because the new album is much easier to play live. We don't have to..." His conversational English is not as good as it is on record, and he often stops to rethink his words. "This time it's very straightforward," he continues. "We can really focus on the songs, the emotions. We don't have to hide behind our production."

Here 'production' means the lush layers that made their debut, *United*, and its follow-up, *Alphabetical*, sound so glossy, and so, well, French then, that Phoenix once played back-up for fellow

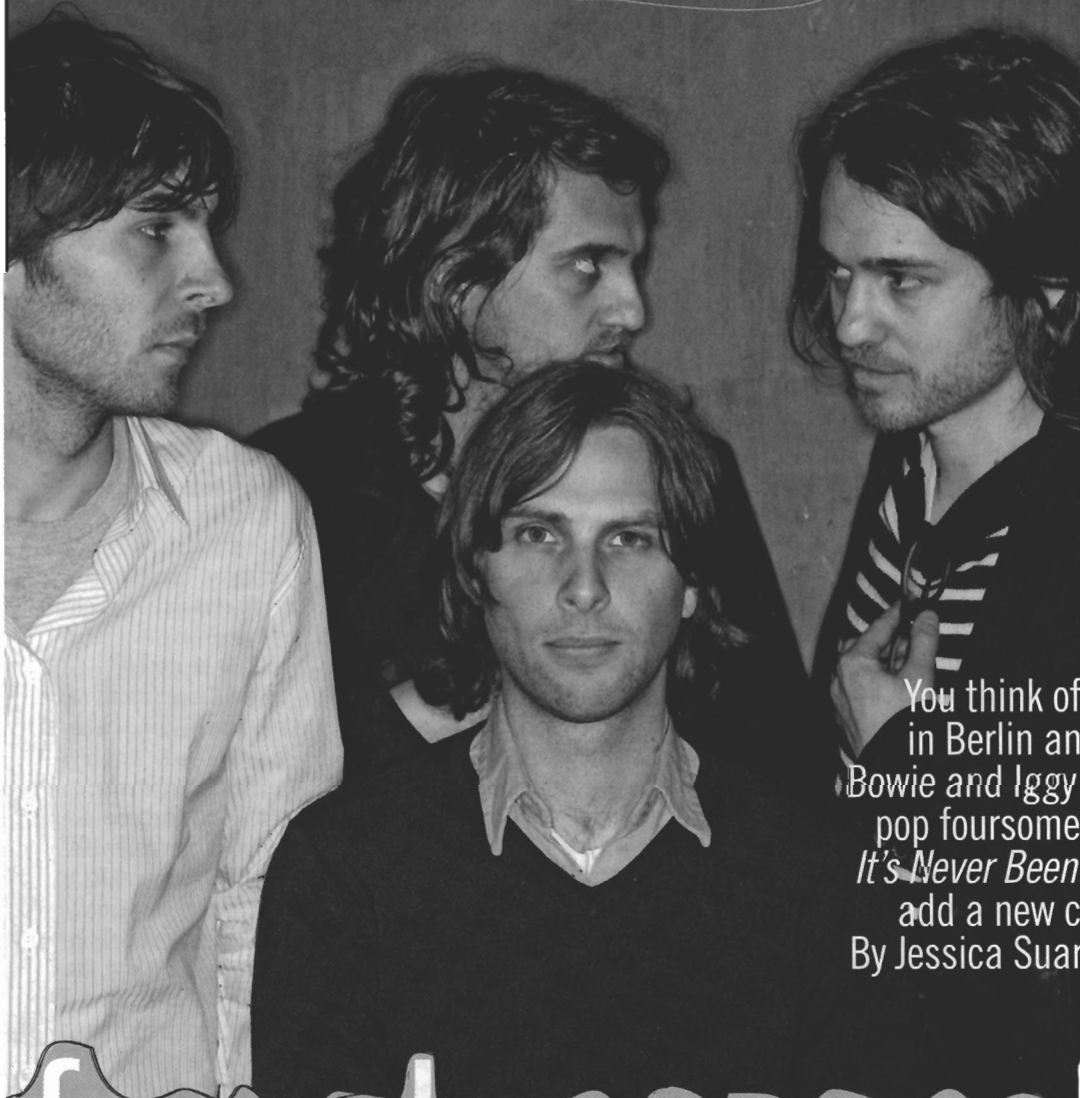
Frenchmen Air, nor that long-time fan (and Mars' current girlfriend) Sofia Coppola used their ebullient power pop single "Too Young" for the karaoke party scene in *Lost In Translation*. Mars hopes *It's Never Been Like That* is an album full of those kinds of moments.

"Everything is twice as fast," he explains. "The last album was really pol-

ished, and now we wanted to do something that was very raw, very alive." The band members listened to Plastic Ono Band and T. Rex records for inspiration. "It was unleashed, more than something over-thought. In that way, the songs are more brutal," he adds.

The brutality also crosses over into the album's lyrics. Opening track "Napoleon Says" slings cold accusations over its chiming guitars and driving snare beat. "You know your French well! You want to be European," he sings. Mars is reluctant to explain these lines, and it's not because he can't find the words. "It's important that there's always this blurry quality where you don't know if you're talking with sincerity or mocking the person," he says. Mars likes to leave it up to the listener to decide, but reveals a little: "Napoleon is fascinating because he's the ultimate traitor. For him there is no place for things other than victory or defeat. Transposed to a love context..." Mars stops, as if waiting for the right words. "I'm not sure I've been clear," he apologizes, or maybe just observes. It's hard to tell.

You think of albums recorded in Berlin and you think David Bowie and Iggy Pop, right? Gallic pop foursome Phoenix's latest, *It's Never Been Like That*, should add a new classic to the list. By Jessica Suarez. Photographed by Fred Rambaud



french connection