

Sound collector

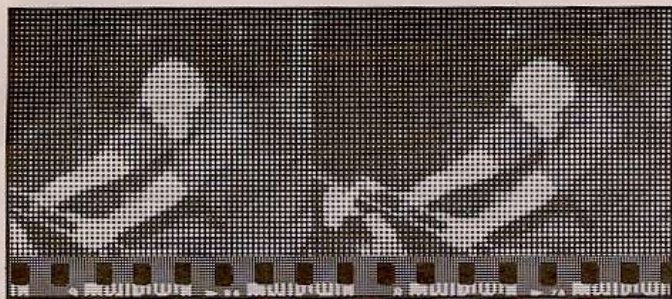
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Summer 2002 \$2.95



Wayne Gonzales

Lord High Fixers

The Beginning of the End, the End of the Beginning

In the Red
2002

Total Sound Group Direct Action Committee

Party Platform ... Our Schedule is Change!

Estrus
2002

By Bob Nickas

Relating a musical history with as many twists and turns as a roller coaster is a curious way to review a couple of records, but here goes ...

One of the longest running chapters in the story of punk, etc. comes out of Austin, Texas, and revolves around the question/challenge: What are you doing to participate? Look back to Austin in the early '80s and among a multitude of bands it's impossible to miss the Big Boys. The image of their rather hefty singer, known as Biscuit, poured into leotards, with a wrestler's mask, and a cape spread like bat wings, remains seared into my mind. When Touch and Go reissued all the Big Boys' stuff in '93, testimonials were in no short supply. Steve Albini called Tim Kerr the "alien guitar scientist," and the Butthole Surfers' King Coffey vividly recalled:

"Among other things, they were pioneers in blending funk with hardcore. At some of their bigger shows they would bring out full horn sections and play 'Hollywood Swinging' or 'The Horse' as well as any soul band on the planet (they even played with DC go-go greats Trouble Funk several times). In

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turn you would see the odd sight of hundreds of kids in mohawks and Black Flag t-shirts all dancing away to Kool and the Gang covers."

"We got soul," they sang, "let's take control." At their peak, when the Big Boys would play out, from the very first note half the audience would be right up on stage with them. As Kerr recalled, "There was no barrier between the band and the audience. So if you wanted to get up and sing that song 'cause it was your favorite song, well, get on up there." Amid the chaos at the end of a show, the Big Boys would shout, "Go start your own band!" Many, it seems, did just that.

In the wake of the Big Boys, Tim Kerr and bass player Chris Gates moved on to Poison 13, and deeper, darker Texas roots: the blues. In the voice of Mike Carroll they had an instrument that made songs like "First You Dream, And Then You Die" ring true, as if emotion kicked straight up from his lungs like gravel. Poison 13 made you realize that just about everything you heard in punk had first been put forward in the blues. And so they covered Richard Hell and Willie Dixon (had the "Blank Generation" descended from the "Seventh Son"?), Buffy Saint Marie and the Sonics (a little "Cordine" with a "Strychnine" chaser?). A Sub Pop compilation from '94, *Wine is Red, Poison is Blue*, accounts for most everything from '84/'85.

Who could have predicted what would follow? Kerr next turned up in a super-groove funk/rap big band called Bad Mutha Goose and the Brothers Grimm. Think Cameo, Funkadelic, and Sly, with a little Bootsy for good measure ... Three singers, loads of percussion, keyboards, samples, and the Hung-Low Horns. Between '86 and '91 they put out several 12" singles and a full-length CD, *Tower of Babel*. The back cover quotes Malcolm X, from a speech given at the Harvard Law School in 1964: "I believe in the brotherhood of all men, but I don't believe in wasting brotherhood on anyone who doesn't want to practice it with me." And they conclude with their own words: UNITE AND GROW, DIVIDE AND WITHER. DO SOMETHING!

The first appearance of The Monkey-

wrench was in '92. Tim Kerr had joined forces with some long-time Poison 13 fans; Mudhoney's Steve Turner and Mark Arm, Tom Price from the U-Men, and Martin Bland of Lubricated Goat. Their earliest recordings stand — and maybe whether they like it or not — as the definitive post-grunge statement. (Depending on your point-of-view, that might be post-grudge.) Behind an album cover that makes the record look like a classic from legendary jazz label, Blue Note (designer Art Chantry's nod to the great Reid Miles), there are songs to send a shiver down your spine, and ones that make the hair stand up on the back of your neck. World-weary and world-wise, they instill "Bottle Up & Go" with something like pure resignation, and rip through the ultimate punk anthem, Redd Kross's "Notes and Chords Mean Nothing to Me."

The Monkeywrench periodically resurface for concerts, and two years ago released an album of new material, *Electric Children*, on Estrus.

Getting back to punk-meets-the-blues basics, Kerr began playing in a band that featured the larger-than-life howl — filtered through the vocals and harp — of Walter Daniels. Jack O'Fire only performed covers, which they called the lessons of the original teachers: Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Blind Willie McTell to name a few. But thanks to that harp and Kerr's slide guitar, even songs by the Minutemen ("Joe McCarthy's Ghost") Frank Zappa ("Trouble Every Day"), and Wire ("12XU") were immersed in the blues. (White Stripes biographers take note ...) Imagine hearing Dean Gunderson play that unmistakable cascade of notes that starts Joy Division's "No Love Lost" — on his stand up bass! One of their very best moments is a beautiful take on Marvin Gaye's "Trouble Man," complete with vibes. Harder-core garage rock fans may have been shocked, but it was a hint of things to come.

After a long absence from Austin and the music scene, Mike Carroll resurfaced and recorded a few songs with the band. The timing of his reunion with Tim Kerr and the demise of Jack O'Fire set the stage for the Lord High Fixers, perhaps one of the most kinetic live bands in recent memory. Guitars would be sent airborne from one side of the stage to the other, or handed straight off into the crowd, the drum kit would start out in one spot and end up almost everywhere but there. And this wasn't during an encore; this was the first song of the set! What with injuries sustained by band and equipment alike, encores were nearly impossible. They didn't believe in them anyway. Who was it who said that at a basketball game the winning team never comes back out to throw a few more hoops?

With the Lord High Fixers, the story seemed to have come full circle, encompassing all the bands that led up until then. One-off projects like the King Sound Quartet, which included Mick Collins of Gories and Dirt-bombs fame, took on Sun Ra's "Space is the Place"; while the Now Time Delegation, with Bellrays' singer Lisa Kekaula, was a full-tilt revival meeting of mod, gospel, and R&B.

As thrilling and chaotic as the Fixers' live shows were, studio recordings became increasingly composed, in which songs would be set off like explosions, with spoken word intros as the fuse to light each charge. On the record, *Is Your Club A Secret Weapon?* there were samples from Jack Kerouac and *Quadrophenia*, Eldridge Cleaver and Gil Scott-Heron. Gears shift from jazz to freakbeat, from a pure rush of psychedelia to an elegiac piano solo. "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" leads in to an anarchic version of Alice Cooper's "Eighteen," and it seems like a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

The band's final release, *The End of the Beginning, the Beginning of the End*, carries on this idea of sound collage, as if you were dialing around the radio from one great station to the next. There's always an element of surprise but within a continuous flow. There are appearances by Ken Vandermark ("The New Spiritual" is gorgeous — and that's a word I rarely call upon) and Alvin Dedaux, from Bad Mutha Goose; spoken intros from Angela Davis and Woody Guthrie; Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready" played as a trombone solo; a reading of Phil Ochs' "I'm Gonna Say It Now" by Mike Carroll that's been given a subtle but stark transformation; as if the great folkie protest anthem had been spoken by Darby Crash.

Total Sound Group Direct Action Committee is the latest chapter in the story, and the name, quite literally, says it all. The ideas of participation and political energy, of fun as a means to change, and that you go all the way — or what's the point? — have been there from the start. But when you look at the story from the present going back in time, you can see that there's a thread which stretches straight through, maybe a little frayed in spots, but there it is. No sooner has the needle hit the groove and they rush forward to testify once more: whistles blowing, cymbals crashing, the organ swirling, the horns rise up and blow as they declare, "This is what it's all about." You can't help but wonder: if they sound this alive in the studio, what happens on stage? Well, after a recent show with a particularly high level of audience involvement, one person commented: "That was more of an event than a band." Another was heard to ask, "Did any of you guys actually play your own instruments?" At an Easter Sunday show with Fugazi, someone bounded out on stage in a big bunny outfit for the last song, and the band just kept on playing. I guess when they say Party Platform, they mean business. □