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# MAGNET

REAL MUSIC ALTERNATIVES

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MAGNET OPENS THE BOOK ON COLLEGE ROCK - THE SMART ALTERNATIVE ON THE '80S SCENE - TO PROFILE SIX BANDS THAT JANGLED ARTFULLY: MIRACLE LEGION, LOVE TRACTOR, GUADALCANAL DIARY, DEL FUEGOS, CONNELLS AND VULGAR BOATMEN.

**Cutting**

**and Dogs**

When discussion turns to the decade before last, you hear a lot about "the big '80s": the big movies with big-muscled stars escaping from big explosions; the big arena bands with the big hair playing big solos. But if you lived through the '80s—say, as a teenager or a twentysomething—and you thought smaller, you might remember things (music, for example) being more understated and less overblown. Maybe it sounded a bit smarter.

Before a certain type of sub-mainstream music was dubbed "indie rock," people called it "alternative." And before that, there was another name for it: "college rock." Though the term can signify any type of music played in a late-night, dorm-room haze (from P-Funk to U2), college rock in America is most synonymous with R.E.M. What Nirvana was to '90s alternative (leader of the pack, maker of the mold), R.E.M. was to '80s college rock.

Though it's tempting to think of past eras as quaint, simpler times—*Happy Days* proves the rule—the '80s actually were an age of innocence in some respects. Faced with programming 24 hours of music videos and a limited playlist (many of the artists popular in the early '80s simply didn't make videos), MTV was desperate for content. In 1983, the channel asked Miles Copeland, president of I.R.S. Records (home to R.E.M., the Cramps and, early on, the Police), to produce a specialty program to showcase new wave and punk. On the last

At the same time, college radio was experiencing its adolescence and its golden age. In order to connect with the underground music scene in the '80s (Hüsker Dü, X, Replacements, etc.), says Zarembo, "you had to be on the grapevine, you had to read fanzines and you had to listen to your local, low-wattage college radio station." With virtually no competition—no Internet, no commercial alt-rock FM stations—and minimal pressure from the music industry, a college-radio DJ could be king of a small-yet-hip hill. This remained the status quo until record labels saw the dollar signs behind R.E.M., U2 and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

"A very significant thing was when the labels started pressuring college kids and being weasely about getting stuff played on college radio," says Jeff Clark, who worked at Georgia State University's station, WRAS, from '86 to '92. "That's when it really changed."

In addition to TV and radio, college rock's powerful third act was its live one. DIY bands such as Black Flag and the Dream Syndicate spent the early '80s carving out North American tour routes; club bookers who'd come out of the punk scene helped form an effective infrastructure. "Every city had its club," says Zarembo. "And you could string those clubs together and always get from New York to Hollywood and back again one way or the other."

Many of the bands that frequented the country's

obsured by alternative rock, even if they were, as Clark rightly observes, "kind of like the b-movie stars" to R.E.M.'s genuine celebrity. Maybe they only left behind a lot of old cassette tapes that are now hard to find on CD. Or maybe their acoustic/electric studies of Americana are a missing link in the evolution of alt-country. They came, they jangled a little, then they faded away. These are the lost heroes of college rock.

## Love Tractor

In the late '70s/early '80s, the University of Georgia town of Athens was populated by typical Southern college-age denizens: redneck fraternity guys, football-crazed jocks and belles looking to earn their MRS degrees. But the tightness of Athens' freaks-and-geeks art-school scene—and the musical talent it harbored during its heyday, starting with the B-52's and culminating with R.E.M.—made it unique.

"Athens was devoid of anything except the most rudimentary mainstream culture, so we all gravitated to each other and created our own subculture of parties and clubs," says Love Tractor guitarist/keyboardist Mark Cline. "We shared houses, girlfriends, boyfriends, money, food. It was extremely incestuous. We'd go to any party. We would crash a birthday party at an old folks' home if we knew there would be booze."

**"THERE WAS A LOT OF ART DAMAGE HAPPENING IN THE EARLY '80S. EVERYONE WAS TRYING TO BE AS OUTRAGEOUS AND CLEVER AS POSSIBLE."  
—PETER ZAREMBA, FLESHTONES**

Sunday of each month from 1983-87, all underground-rock eyes were glued to *The Cutting Edge*, hosted by Peter Zarembo, singer/keyboardist for the Fleshtones (who were, naturally, part of the I.R.S. roster).

"When the show started, there was no name for it," says Zarembo. "There was a wide array of bands. You'd have something like the Go-Go's and R.E.M. or something like Love Tractor or country-leaning bands like True Believers. Then the Minutemen were on the show all the time, or the Gun Club. It was like, 'Hey, what's all this stuff?'"

Unlike its successor *120 Minutes*, music videos weren't necessarily the focus of *The Cutting Edge*; in addition to numerous live performances (R.E.M. was a frequent guest), Zarembo would show up at a band's hotel room or at soundcheck to film segments. Some shows had scene-report themes such as Austin roots rock or North Carolina jangle rock, which centered on Mitch Easter and his band, Let's Active. "I remember going to (Let's Active drummer) Sara Romweber's mom's house to make pecan pies," laughs Zarembo. "I don't even think that was a segment—we were just hanging out making pies."

dank venues and made names for themselves at college radio and on *The Cutting Edge* followed in R.E.M.'s footsteps. They weren't too loud—they chimed and jangled, picking out minor chords instead of slamming power chords. They wrote obtuse lyrics about the America around them instead of their own inner pain. This kind of college-rock aesthetic would soon be annihilated.

"All decades end before they really end, you know?" says Zarembo. "There was a lot of art damage happening in the early '80s. Everyone was trying to be as outrageous and clever as possible. As the '80s went on, people gave up on that little by little. By 1988, something else was already happening. Whatever it was—Nirvana, or even more odious things like Pearl Jam—harkened back to the sludge rock of 1971. By the last year of *The Cutting Edge*, it was really different. Shoegazing was coming in—the flipping of the hair to the beat. It was Jesus And Mary Chain. Or one of those bands with 'Jesus' in the name. Jesus Lizard? Jesus Junkie? Some band with a lot of tattoos and black leather and dyed-black hair. Not that there's anything wrong with that."

But MAGNET remembers those bands that were

Cline and guitarist Michael Richmond formed Love Tractor in 1980 after bonding over similar musical tastes; Cline was also impressed by Richmond's apparent toughness. "Outside the 40 Watt Club, I saw Mike get into a fistfight with some guy, and I thought, 'He can play guitar and kick ass—what a perfect band-mate,'" laughs Cline. "I was such a little sissy that I liked the idea of hanging around some tough guy who would keep the rednecks from kicking my ass."

Multi-instrumentalist Armistead Wellford (introduced to Cline by mutual friend Michael Stipe) and Kit Swartz (one of a succession of drummers that initially included R.E.M.'s Bill Berry) filled out the lineup that recorded Love Tractor's self-titled, all-instrumental debut in 1981. Though the lack of vocals separated Love Tractor from other Athens bands, critics pegged the quartet—unfairly, as far as it was concerned—as a Raybeats/Ventures-esque surf combo. "We had created a dual-guitar sound that was, to our ears, symphonic and fully illustrative," says Cline. "The two guitars 'sang.' It was obvious to all of us that vocals weren't needed."

It wasn't until 1987's classic *This Ain't No Outer-space Ship* that Love Tractor added vocals and evolved



into a more conventional, though hardly less interesting, pop outfit. None of Love Tractor's oft-groovy, party-ready charm was lost in the transition; full of Richmond's bizarrely evocative wordplay and catchy melodic interaction, it's a breezy delight.

At its peak, Love Tractor was a college-radio staple, and the band was often featured on *The Cutting Edge*. "MTV was very helpful in getting our name out there," says Wellford. "But after they realized metal reaches a greater audience, it seemed like a delicate sound like ours was too much for the brain and senses."

In addition to MTV slowly jumping off the Love Tractor bandwagon, the group couldn't shake its geographical association with R.E.M. "I like the guys in R.E.M., but to this day we can't get a review without their name being mentioned," laments Richmond. "When they first came to fame, every band in America wanted to sound like them, and a zillion bands were copying R.E.M.'s sound. Half of them must have opened for us at one time or another. Unfortunately, critics and record buyers naturally assumed we were also students of R.E.M."

"We wanted to do a film of the hundreds of faces asking us if we knew R.E.M.," says Wellford, now an artist and carriage horse handler in Richmond, Va. "We were our own entity, not a product of R.E.M. We considered them our brothers and loved them like family, but the overshadowing took an exhausting toll."

While Love Tractor was operating on all cylinders creatively, industry demands and incessant touring—Cline estimates the band played an average of 200

shows a year at its peak—brought it to its collective knees. "I suffered what must have been a nervous breakdown toward the end of it all," says Richmond, now a librarian and art historian in Athens. "I really believe that kind of earth-shattering experience is good for a person—as long as you do recover. If you end up like Syd Barrett, maybe it's not so good."

"We were just a weird, funky little art band, not the next big thing," says Cline. "But we were pressured to be that by those we surrounded ourselves with."

Love Tractor quit the road in 1988, but the band never broke up, although it didn't release another record until 2001's *The Sky At Night*. (*This Ain't No Outerspace Ship* was reissued in 2000 with two bonus tracks.) *The Sky At Night* isn't a return to form as much as a continuation of an artistic trek. "There will be more records when the music is ready," says Cline. "Everyone has been writing, but we're under no pressure from the industry to release on its schedule, so we can do so when we believe we have an album that's worth sharing. It's not a great way to build and sustain an audience, but why put out dreck? There's plenty of that already."

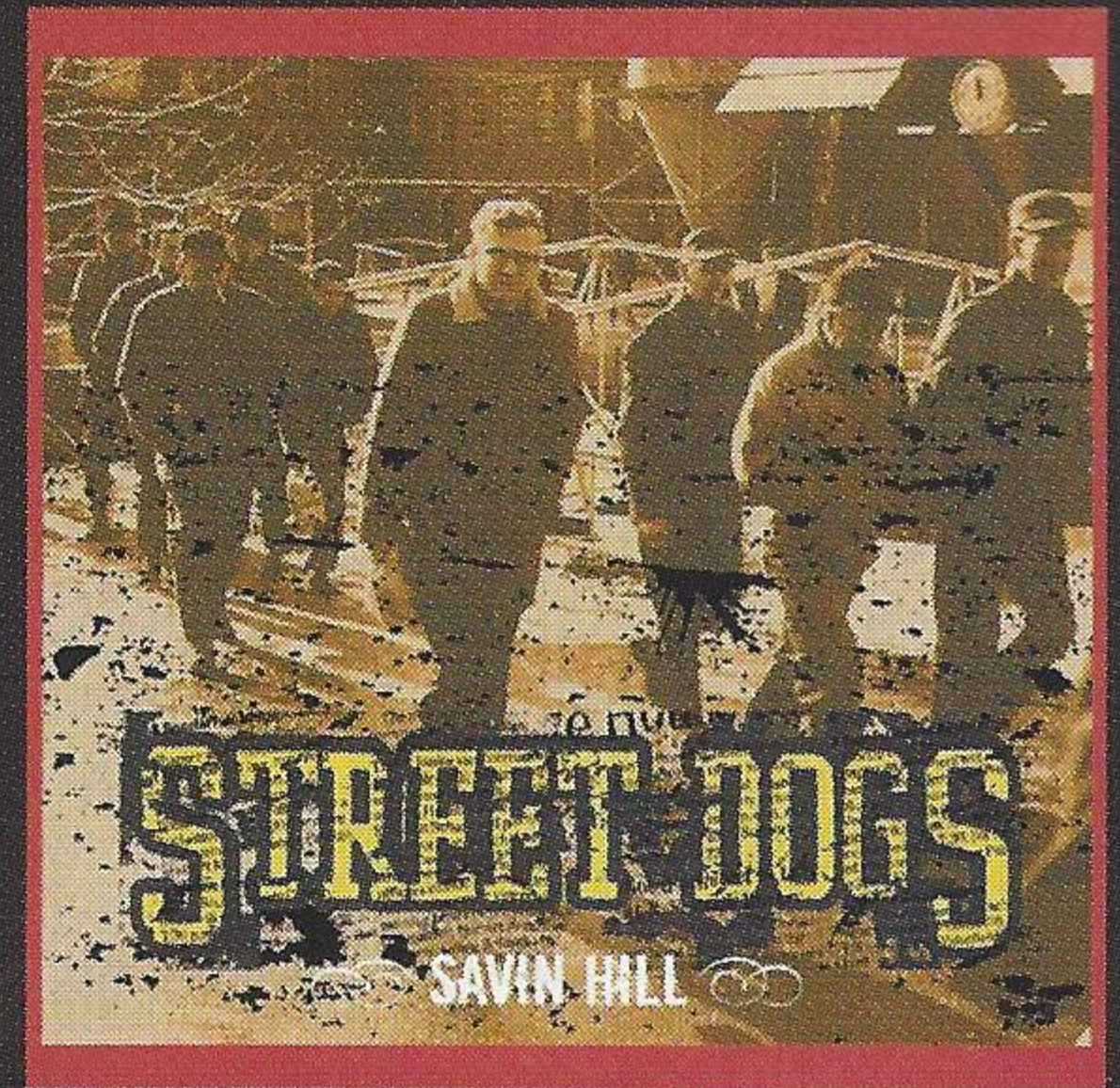
—Matt Hickey

## Del Fuegos

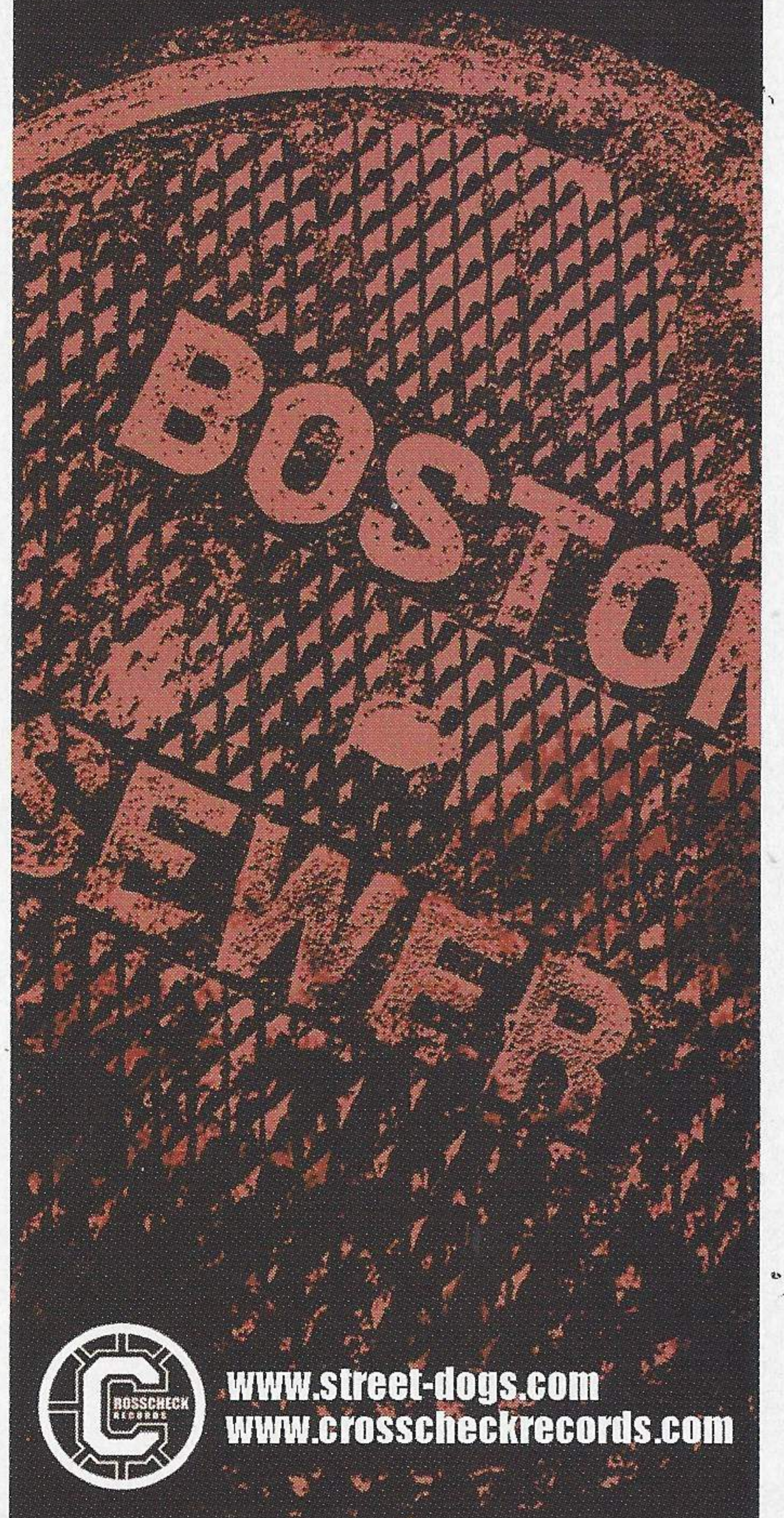
Unlike most freshmen, when Dan Zanes was dropped off by his family—who'd driven him from their Concord, N.H., home to Ohio's Oberlin College in 1981—he knew exactly why he was there. "I went to college to form a band," he says. Zanes immediately

# STREET DOGS

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Miller Brewing Company in 1986. "Every band known to man was doing something with good, charitable intentions, and there we were peddling beer," says Dan. "We looked like a bunch of idiots." That's exactly what the suits at Miller must've thought, watching their new hires open for the Kinks in L.A. that summer. "We were such clueless, misguided punks, we put 32-ounce cans of Budweiser on all the amps, thinking it was kind of funny," says Warren. "We didn't know how to be company men."

Warren and Giessmann left the band in 1987 on the heels of the Miller flap and *Stand Up*'s flop. Dan soldiered on, cutting the final Del Fuegos record, *Smoking In The Fields*, in 1989 with former members of the J. Geils Band. It was a return to form that sank without a trace. "That was when Nirvana came out," says Dan. "I felt like a dinosaur doing something so antiquated and unwanted."

Reconciled after years apart, the Zanes brothers have recently cut solo albums, with Dan churning out popular children's records. Warren, who pursued a career in academia and was recently appointed Vice President of Education at the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame And Museum, laughingly recalls letters the band received from a high-school Spanish class. "Their homework assignment was to explain that the Del Fuegos' name was grammatically incorrect because it

**"I LIKE THE GUYS IN R.E.M., BUT TO THIS DAY WE CAN'T GET A REVIEW WITHOUT THEIR NAME BEING MENTIONED."  
—MICHAEL RICHMOND, LOVE TRACTOR**

recruited roommate Tom Lloyd to play bass. A semester later, Zanes ditched the ivy-covered halls and headed to Boston to start the Del Fuegos, a searing, nasty, roadhouse-style combo that rekindled a spark the Rolling Stones let die years before. "We did all-American music," says Zanes, "but it never occurred to us that's what it was until we reached Boston, with all these kids from the suburbs doing Jam covers—and we're playing 'Love Me Tender.'"

Zanes' younger brother Warren, attending Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., was so entranced by the Del Fuegos' glow in Boston's rock firmament that he frequently broke his boarding school's curfew. "I'd put on this costume—black pants, black shirt, black gloves, black ski mask—and sneak down to Boston to see them play," he says. "I was so swept up in the scene, I made no distinction between Elvis and Mono Man of the Lyres. They were both stars to me."

"When I first saw the Blasters with Dave and Phil Alvin, that's when I realized, 'I gotta get my brother in the band,'" says Dan.

With Lloyd on bass and Woody Giessmann on drums—and a Slash/Warner Bros. contract in its pocket—the peachfuzz quartet headed west to Los Angeles to cut its smoking, Mitchell Froom-produced 1984 debut, *The Longest Day*. Long days in L.A. turned into

years for the Del Fuegos. "It was heady stuff," says Warren, who was hanging out with X and the Blasters and having his hero, Tom Petty, play on the Del Fuegos' sessions. "We gave the best parties, too. I remember removing a member of the Dream Syndicate from our bathtub so I could take a shower."

*The Longest Day* and 1985's *Boston, Mass.* found the Del Fuegos motoring through songs about cars and girls, but 1987's *Stand Up* was a hurdle the band couldn't clear—and never recovered from. "I lost sight of what made the band cool: that we were essentially a garage band," says Dan. "The album sounds over-inflated and got us dropped." The L.A. party circuit had drained Dan's creative juices. "I'd rather go hang out than sit alone in a room with my guitar, writing songs," he says.

"We were no strangers to the barroom," adds Warren. "I was the resident wildman, but probably all of us felt that way." When it's pointed out that the cover photo of the bleary-eyed siblings on *Stand Up* makes it appear that neither one of them could, Warren heartily agrees: "People would tell us, 'Jeez, you don't look like brothers,' and we'd say, 'Hey, we both have red eyes.'"

Critical flak the Del Fuegos caught for *Stand Up* was nothing compared to the self-righteous abuse they'd taken when they agreed to be sponsored by the

translated as 'the of the fires,'" he says. To set the record straight, Warren points out the name was a tribute to '50s artists like the Del Vikings and Del Shannon. "But it also comes from Tierra Del Fuego," he adds, "the southernmost point of South America—about as lowdown as you could get."

—Jud Cost

## Guadalcanal Diary

"It used to be that we didn't get a record review without R.E.M. being mentioned," says Guadalcanal Diary frontman Murray Attaway. "But you've gotta figure, we both came out of the same region, both had a guitar/bass/drums set-up. We both wrote songs about something other than cars and girls."

Guadalcanal Diary formed in 1981 in Marietta, Ga., where Attaway and guitarist Jeff Walls met in 1977 while whetting their embryonic punk appetites in Strictly American. From the moment Guadalcanal first plugged in—adding drummer John Poe and bassist Rhett Crowe—there were already sounds emanating from Athens, a college town just a few counties away.

"R.E.M. helped open the trade routes to the clubland of America," says Attaway. "They made it easier for the next wave of people to come behind. Athens

bands like the B-52's, Love Tractor, Pylon—they were the first ones to play college pubs and coffeehouses, because there were no venues booking what would eventually become college rock. By the time we got to it—our first national club tour was in '83—there was already a network. Some clubs had been in operation for a while but decided they were going to cater to 'the kids and their groovy new sounds.' It was as weird and exotic as you could imagine. There were places where a bunch of college kids had decided to become entrepreneurs and turn some place that had been a garage in 1920 into a club. The only thing they had to do was scam a business license out of the local community and get some version of a P.A. Then, it was a club."

While R.E.M. was forging its brand of arty, thinking-person's rock, Guadalcanal Diary spent less energy on obfuscation and more time on contemplation. The band's music was typified by its first single and best-known song, "Watusi Rodeo" (later covered by the Reverend Horton Heat for the *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* soundtrack), a beguiling mixture of African-based Burundi drums and surf-guitar twang zipping by at 100 mph. Attaway's compositions revealed a literary and spiritual bent, from the Civil War fixations of "Trail Of Tears" to the vision-questing that marks songs such as "Fire From Heaven," the Cure-like "Sleepers Awake" and an aggressive cover of "Kumbayah." If William Faulkner had ever harbored visions of jangle-pop glory, Guadalcanal Diary would've been the manifestation of that dream.

After the success of its chiming, Byrds-like debut, 1984's *Walking In The Shadow Of The Big Man*, Guadalcanal Diary negotiated a phenomenal contract with Elektra that allowed it an extraordinary amount of creative control—but didn't lack for ugly brushes with industry types who thought they knew the path to riches and fame. "I don't know that we were ever striking enough, visually," says Attaway. "God knows I heard that enough times. I had PR people at record companies tell us, 'If you'd just grow some hair ...' This was the '80s. Remember bands like the Alarm? Once R.E.M. signed with Warner Bros., the labels were thinking, 'All right, they're big stars, and we've got number two right here.' Boy, were they wrong. Guadalcanal was always more mainstream rock than R.E.M. was; we liked really loud guitars. R.E.M. was a lot cooler than we ever were."

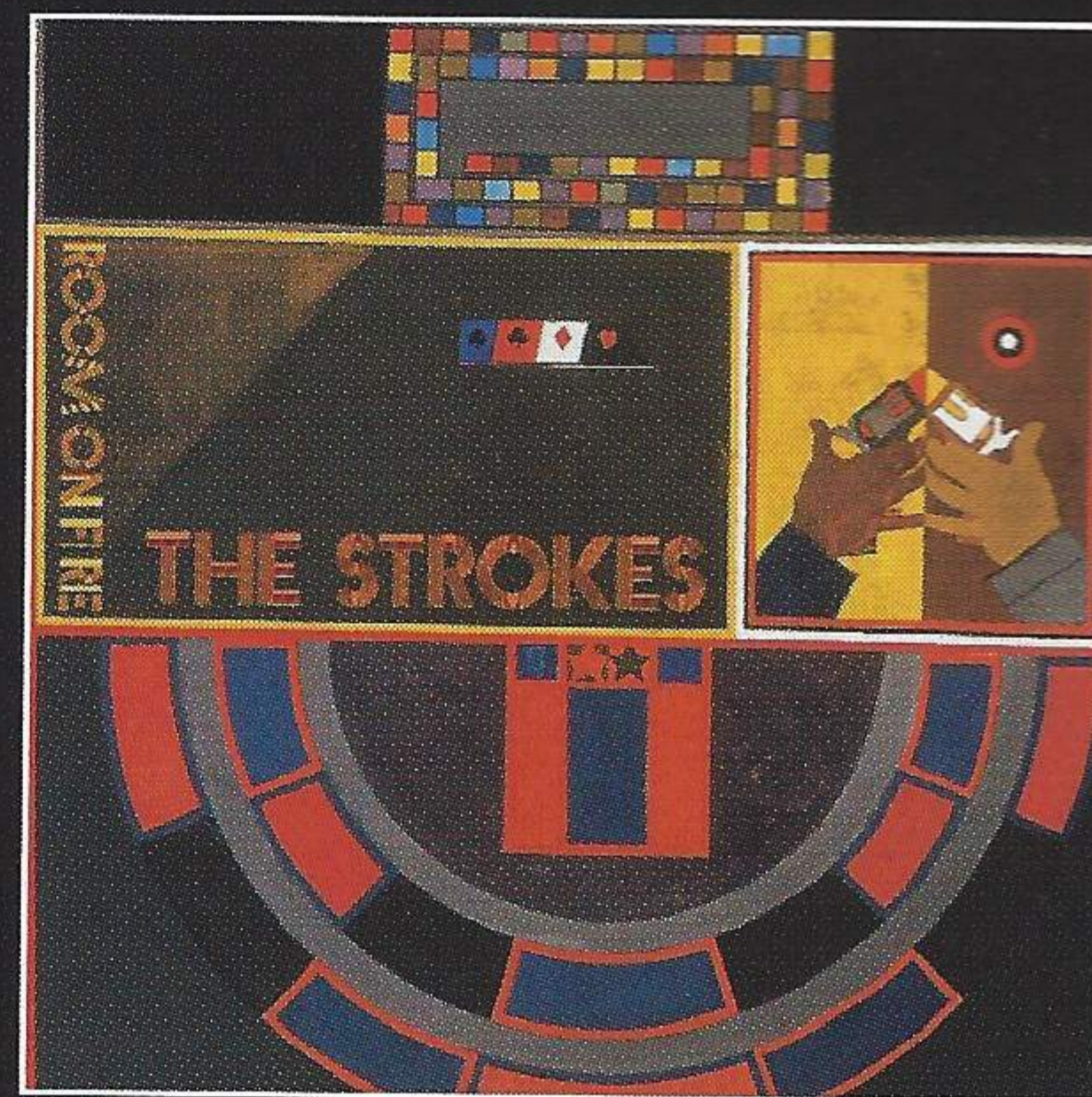
By the time the '80s sputtered to a close, MTV had become an institution, with grunge and hip hop on deck. Guadalcanal Diary was already a memory, having released four full-lengths (including what's widely considered to be its classic, 1987's jagged, rocking *2 X 4*) before calling it a day in 1989 after a grueling tour in support of its last album, the uneven *Flip-Flop*. (The band's entire catalog is soon to be reissued by Rhino Handmade.) But even as the group amicably parted ways—with Attaway



Guadalcanal Diary

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As the band commenced recording *Surprise Surprise*, a number of labels began showing interest. Mulcahy recalls one memorable scene in the New York office of an Elektra Records A&R person who'd abruptly turned indecisive: "We said, 'Are you signing us or not?' He said, 'I don't know.' 'Well, fuck you, then!' We were fried from driving all night, and we had a gig that night at CBGB, too, so we were pissed off and at the end of our rope when we did the gig. This guy from Rough Trade was there. He saw us, then said, 'I want to sign you guys.' We were like, 'Yeah, fuck you, too!'"

"I went along to CBGB specifically to see Miracle Legion and loved them," recalls Rough Trade owner Geoff Travis. "*The Backyard* had found its way into the Rough Trade record shop (in London), and I just loved the tone of Mark's voice, its pleading and moving quality without a hint of being contrived. That, plus Ray's 'illogical' guitar swirls that wrapped the whole thing up in an unusual way."

Miracle Legion signed with Rough Trade, and a national tour—both as club headliners and as openers for Aztec Camera and Pere Ubu—left audiences awed by the striking Mulcahy/Neal visual contrast: the former a long-haired, tartan-jumpsuit-clad shaman with a

**"I HAD PR PEOPLE AT RECORD COMPANIES TELL US, 'IF YOU'D JUST GROW SOME HAIR ...' THIS WAS THE '80S."  
—MURRAY ATTAWAY, GUADALCANAL DIARY**

going on to a solo career and Walls recording with Dash Rip Rock and producing acts such as Southern Culture On The Skids and Man Or Astro-Man?—it was becoming clear the foundation it helped lay would find its commercial footing in the next decade.

"Guadalcanal broke up before all of that hit," says Attaway of the grunge explosion that kicked off the '90s. "I loved Nirvana. But they didn't sound as new to me as they did to lots of other people; they sounded like the sound I'd been hearing—college-radio bands—all through the '80s. All grunge did was bring college radio to a commercial format. And then came 'commercial alternative,' which became an oxymoron. What was it an alternative to? After a while, it became an alternative to interesting music."

—Corey duBrowa

## Miracle Legion

Let's do away with one lingering myth about Miracle Legion: that the New Haven, Conn., quartet, extant from 1983 to 1996, was just another jangly R.E.M. clone. Admittedly, the group's early trajectory might bear out the assertion. Both 1984's *The Backyard* EP and 1987's *Surprise Surprise Surprise* did, at times, tilt in a folk/rock, *Murmur*-ish direction; critics and coeds alike ruminated at length upon the band's soft-focus, enigmatic lyrics; and frontman Mark Mulcahy's eccentric stage persona

definitely compared with that of Michael Stipe.

But this is no children-of-the-kudzu tale. Miracle Legion's sound was wide-ranging: chiming/plangent pop, sure, but also Velvets-style punk/drone raveups, dark, British-flecked psychedelia, even left-field forays into dub, funk and cowpunk. "We may have ended up being like R.E.M.'s little brother," says Mulcahy, "but we were really more influenced by the Gun Club, Mission Of Burma, Hüsker Dü, even the Clean."

Miracle Legion began as a two-piece—Mulcahy plus guitarist/keyboardist Ray Neal. It was an apt time and a fortuitous pairing: Not only was New Haven, with its confluence of clubs and colleges, a thriving musical community in the early '80s, Mulcahy and Neal were complementary musical personalities. "[It's] just one of these things when two guys come together and make a whole," says Mulcahy.

After rounding up a rhythm section and recording *The Backyard*, issued on the local Incas label, Mulcahy and Neal were pleasantly surprised to learn Miracle Legion was an immediate critical and college-radio favorite. According to Christopher Arnott, a longtime Miracle Legion fan and a staffer at weekly paper the *New Haven Advocate*, "In terms of influence, they weren't the most commercial band, but they were clearly part of a bigger regional/national thing, more so than anyone else in town. It was the kind of success story that everybody could relate to."

piercing stare, the latter a brush-cropped fretboard virtuoso pinwheeling about like a dervish. But on the eve of a spring '88 tour opening for the Sugarcubes, Miracle Legion's bassist and drummer quit. Mulcahy and Neal did the tour anyway, hitting it off famously with the hard-drinking Icelandic popsters. (The connection later yielded an interband collaboration, the *You're The One* Lee EP, credited to the Sugar Legion.)

But just as Mulcahy and Neal had recruited a new rhythm section and readied itself for another tour, Miracle Legion was forced to endure a series of crippling setbacks. First came the 1991 collapse of Rough Trade's American operations, which not only put the band back at square one but also tied up all its records in bankruptcy court as physical assets. A year later, Mulcahy and Neal wound up at the Rough Trade auction to find their new label, Morgan Creek, bidding against them for ownership of Miracle Legion master tapes. A vanity project of film company Morgan Creek Pictures, the label was looking to cash in on the early-'90s alterna-rock groundswell. Miracle Legion was to be the label's prize, with no expense spared, from a hip producer (John Porter, of Smiths fame) to high-visibility gigs (including *Letterman*).

"Morgan Creek had a bunch of people they'd hired from the old music game, like the guy who broke Bob Seger," says Mulcahy. "When they opened their doors, they had about a hundred gold records on their walls. And they probably had some take on what was happen-

ing in music at the time. But they had this weird attitude. They said they weren't going to do anything with us at college radio. They thought we were just going to break right onto commercial radio, because right when our album was coming out, U2 was the alternative band, and when U2 became a Rolling Stones-level band ... "

*Drenched*, released in '92, certainly failed to make Miracle Legion the next U2 (the video for single "Out To Play" registered at MTV exactly once, on *120 Minutes*), and when none of Morgan Creek's other bands (including Eleven and Mary's Danish) made significant chart or radio inroads, the label found itself downsized by its parent company. The *Advocate's* Arnott points out that Morgan Creek, lacking any indie credibility, wound up "acting like a major label in all the worst, horrible, band-destroying ways."

Sure enough, when Miracle Legion asked for release from its contract, it was thrust into a year-and-half legal limbo. The band continued to tour on its own and began recording its next album, the prophetically titled *Portrait Of A Damaged Family*, but group morale had taken a mortal hit. Neal had gotten married and simply wasn't that keen on touring anymore. New drummer Scott Boutier and bassist Dave McCaffrey had taken second jobs as Frank Black's rhythm section. Mulcahy, having found work scoring the music for the Nickelodeon series *The Adventures Of Pete & Pete*, was ready to embark on a solo career; he subsequently issued two albums on his own label, Mezzotint.

Looking back, Mulcahy scoffs at common wisdom holding that Seattle and grunge blew his and other pop bands of the era out of the water: "I really feel that Miracle Legion just fell apart in its own organic—or non-organic—way."

—Fred Mills

## Connells

Jangle-Rock Case Study #27603: wherein the Connells, an unassuming band of button-down Lands' End types, outlast every one of their Carolina contemporaries. "It's amazing our capacity for banging our heads against the wall all these years,"



Connells

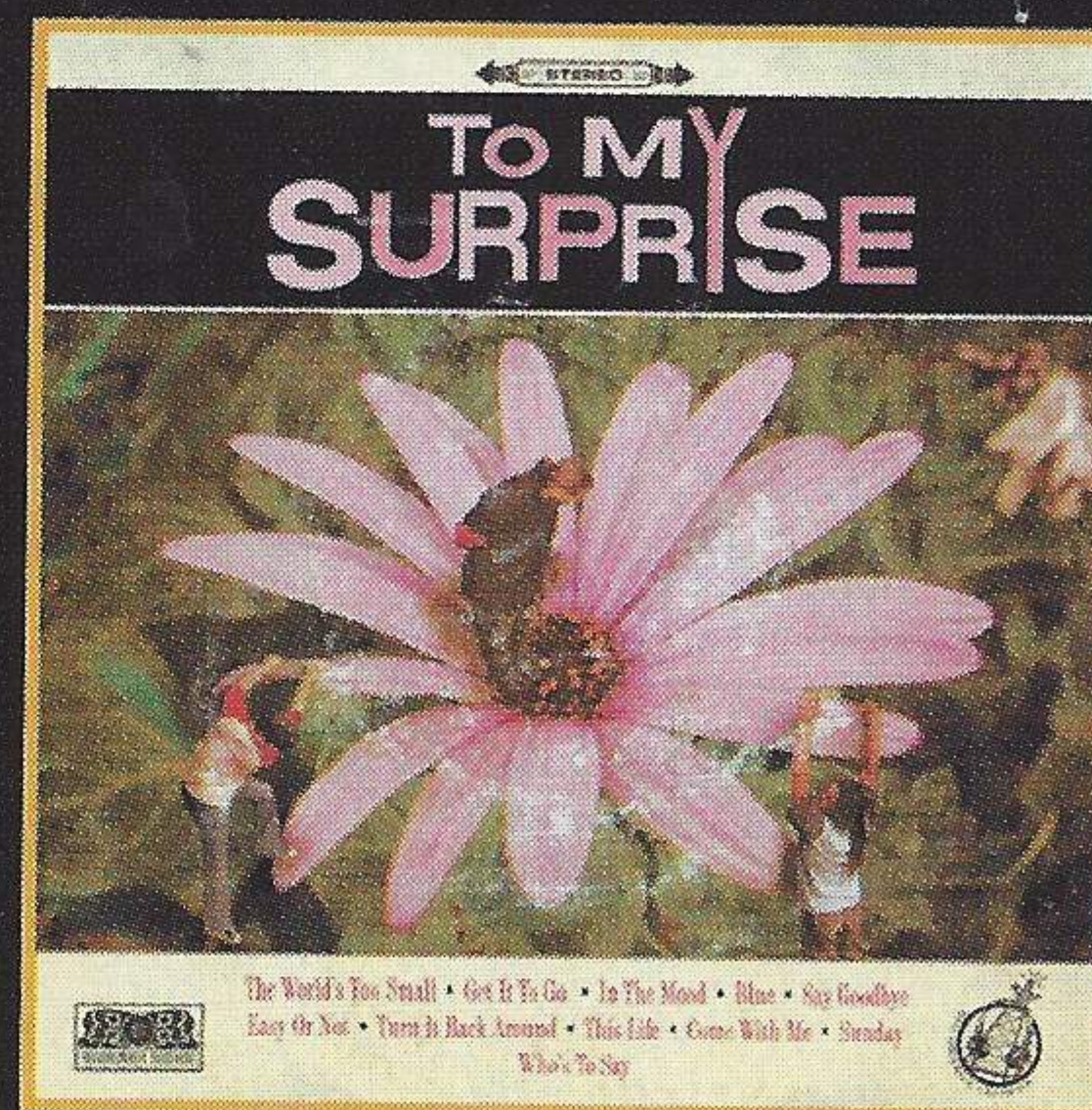
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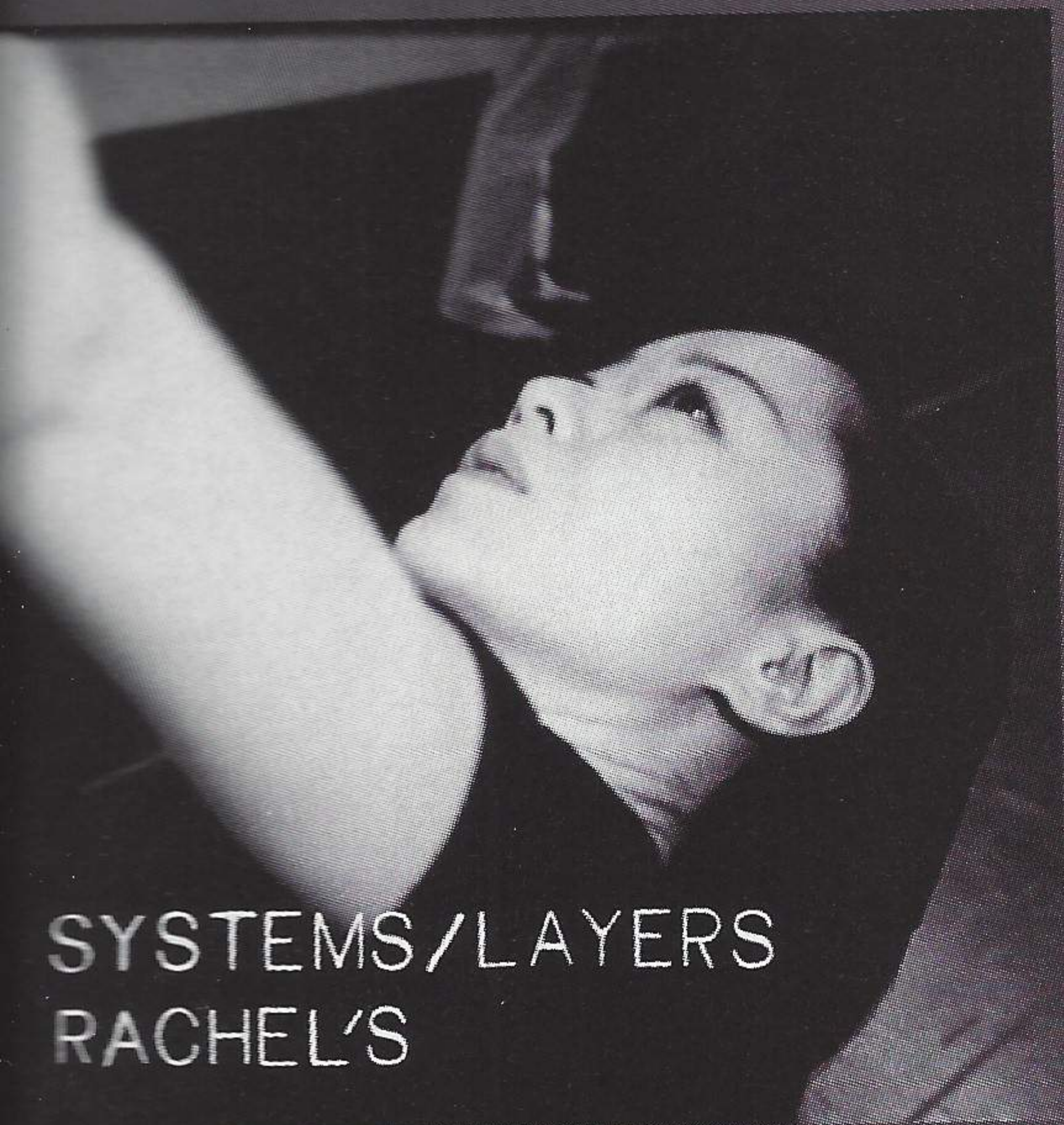
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5. Just in case, you said, one of us were to disappear mid-sentence. 65,000 miles of electrical wires. Carries them off as some code to assemble and understand later. 50 miles of steam mains. 11:50. 2000. Music made by 33 humans + The Siti Co. Rachel's album number six. Not very reachable but that's okay. Now I'm standing next to the cloud refrigerator. October 7th, 2003. I remember. Once a month or so. Because, so far as anyone could really say, that was always a possibility. It was rush hour in the city, a time I tried to avoid because of the tense pushy crowds. It rained hard that day, just as people were getting out of work. Voices are heard, calls are made. The same signs, the same crowded sky. We'll just be trying each other, I'm sure... and eventually get a hold of each other. Sweet dreams, I'd reply, and then we'd continue our conversation, sometimes for hours. 19 songs. 1:02:13 total running time. 631.9 MB. Harvey Wang. Shannonwright. Bob Weston. Field Recordings generously provided by 20 humans.

A d v e r t i s e m e n t

Louisville collective Rachel's are hooked on classics much in the way you'd be hooked on a butcher's wall...they've spent three years forcing classical orchestration into compromising positions...

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says Mike Connell, the band's guitarist and primary songwriter.

Connell was in law school at the University of North Carolina when he founded the band in 1984 with his brother David (bass), drummer John Schultz and East Carolina University swimmer-turned-singer Doug MacMillan. The group's first gigs were typical frat-party affairs, but things started to get interesting a year later when a four-song demo caught the interest of Britain's Demon label. It would be more than a decade before Mike entertained the idea of actually using his law degree. "Things were going well enough that I had the sense that I'd regret not pursuing the band," he says. "So I finished law school and went to work in a record store."

Indie careerists in most every sense, the Connells recorded seven albums for TVT Records. They snickered when their cheap-ass videos aired on *120 Minutes* ("Seven" was on the show's first episode). They toured until their teeth hurt, then toured some more. Later, they settled down with wives and girlfriends and made babies, never seriously considering a life outside their hometown of Raleigh. They'd seen what happened to their pals in the dB's when they moved to Hoboken, N.J.—mainly nothing—and that was the problem. The Connells could do nothing in Raleigh, and rent was cheaper.

Yet they were never indie enough for the factions of DIY pundits who found the Connells' post-graduate degrees, frat-friendly reputation and commendable personal hygiene reprehensible. Existential angst simply wasn't in the Connells' vocabulary; their message was caught up in a wistful convergence of chiming Rickenbacker guitars and abstract personal reflection, all grounded in the sort of achy singer/songwriter earnestness indie-rock snobs loathe. "We have a pretty healthy complex," says Mike. "Believe me, we are well aware that our hip quotient was never where it needed to be."

Credibility issues aside, the Connells can claim at least one masterpiece, 1987's *Boylan Heights*, which ranks just a half-notch below R.E.M.'s *Murmur* and the dB's' *Stands For deciBels* as a near-flawless college-rock composite—one afforded an extra boost by Mitch Easter's echoey, wind-tunnel production. The Connells weathered the grunge era with a pair of power-pop albums and re-emerged in 1993 with *Ring*, their strongest, most well-crafted album top to bottom. *Ring* sold almost 150,000 copies in the U.S., but it did even better in Europe, where its single, "'74-'75," went deep into the top-20 in more than 10 countries. "I had one friend calling me Mr. Hasselhoff because we were so big in Germany," says MacMillan.

Three years later, however, the band snuffed out any remaining commercial viability with the grungy, experimental *Weird Food & Devastation*. Ominously, the album—which sold less than 30,000 copies in the U.S.—preceded a series of personal setbacks, including major intestinal surgery for MacMillan and the death of David's wife from a brain tumor. The band took another hit following the release of its final TVT album, 1998's *Still Life*, when longtime drummer Peele Wimberley left. Undeterred, the Connells released 2001's *Old-School Dropouts* on their own, with Superchunk's Jon Wurster filling in on drums. Save for a few ragged performances, *Dropouts* shows a band that's long since learned to work efficiently—and predictably—within its own constraints.

When you look back over the group's career as it nears the 20-year mark, perhaps the only sin the Connells have been guilty of is sounding too much like themselves from one album to the next. "I'm capable of only writing these three-and-a-half minute songs with a few minor chords thrown in," says Mike. "We understand our limitations."

—Hobart Rowland

## Vulgar Boatmen

In film theory, there's a term called "the cinephiliac moment" that comes close to explaining the Vulgar Boatmen's charm. It's loosely defined as a moment when you see more on the screen than is being shown. Again and again, Robert Ray and Dale Lawrence—the leaders of the shape-shifting Boatmen—capture such moments in song. On the three albums the band released between 1989 and 1995, there are characters on the verge of life-changing decisions or equally life-changing inaction, men and women wrestling their own self-doubt as they pick up a phone, sit down to write a letter or drive to the train station. It all plays out over remarkably catchy guitar lines, fast-strummed chords, inventively nervous



rhythms and perfectly placed bits of viola and Hammond organ.

That Ray is a film-studies professor at the University of Florida had everything to do with the Boatmen's unique version of the college-rock journey taken by hundreds of other bands. Few of those groups had a professor join up. That happened in 1981, when the Boatmen were a group led by Gainesville art students Walter Salas-Humara (later of the Silos) and Carey Crane.

College being college, the players drifted apart, but the Boatmen were reborn later in the decade. Lawrence, a former student of Ray's, joined the band, despite the fact he lived in Indianapolis. Lawrence and Ray wrote by mail, swapping cassettes. Ray and his viola-playing wife Helen Kirklin (now a member of the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra) centered a group of musicians in Gainesville, while Lawrence played with a separate group in Indiana. In effect, there were two working versions of the Vulgar Boatmen. While Ray was never going to get in a van and drive around the country playing the emerging indie-rock circuit, Lawrence compensated by assembling a touring band. When the Boatmen recorded *You And Your Sister* in 1989, the Gainesville players dominated. On 1992's virtually flawless *Please Panic*, the playing was more evenly split, with the touring Indianapolis band asserting itself. "It was a little like having a deep basketball team," says Lawrence. "Everyone was motivated to play their best, but maybe some feelings got hurt at times."

As unusual as the Boatmen had been up to this point, their tale of signing to a major label is distressingly typical. "They wanted me to quit my job," says Ray. "I told them no way. I'm a tenured professor. I might be willing to take a semester off, but quitting? That wasn't going to happen." It's a good thing Ray didn't trust the label. Because when Sylvia Rhone became president of Elektra, says Lawrence, "the first thing she did was drop 15 bands. We were one of them. That was it."

Eight years later, the Vulgar Boatmen are still around, though they've been on a recording hiatus. Lawrence is essentially a member of Mysteries Of Life, featuring former Blake Babies drummer Freda Payne. Ray has published several books on film theory. No Nostalgia—the label run by Lawrence and Mysteries singer/guitarist Jake Smith—recently issued *Wide Awake*, a 21-track anthology that draws from the three Boatmen records. It opens with a remixed "Change The World All Around" and includes a couple of unreleased tracks. The plan is to reissue the three albums in the spring. "We're hoping *Wide Awake* will get the name back out there," says Lawrence. "Then we'd like to make the albums available again. *Please Panic* is out of print. (1995's) *Opposite Sex* was never even released in this country. Once we do that, I really hope we can make a fourth album."

Ray is satisfied with what he and Lawrence and their band(s) were able to accomplish. "I never dreamed I would be able to write songs and put out records and have them listened to and written about so generously," he says. "We got compared to people like Buddy Holly, Otis Redding and R.E.M. What could be better than that?"

—Phil Sheridan **M**

"I heard him play in an empty room once... it was like a knife fight in a phone booth. The man scares me!"

—Paul Westerberg

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