

RISE OF ROCK FANDOM,

FALL OF THE DICTATORS

BY ROBERT ALAN COLBY

(thanks to Rita Daniels for research.)

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The DICTATORS, my favorite American rock & roll band of the mid-70's, are gone, and though that may be a tragedy, it was also more of a formality than anything else. By the time Handsome Dick Manitoba had been given the old heave-ho for lack of "commercial" polish in his singing, and Ross The Boss had enlisted his lead guitar in the service of SHAKIN' STREET, enough of the band's original spirit and ideas had dropped by the wayside that they might as well have been a different group altogether. And while Adny Shernoff is still one of the USA's great songwriters, and while I have high hopes for his new group, THE RHYTHM DUKES, the situation is still a damn shame. But before I get into details of that shame, let's begin at the beginning with a little

HISTORY

Stepping out of our time machine into the primeval murk of the early 70's, we are greeted with a dismal sight. The heroes of 60's rock were rapidly going senile (except for Ray Davies, who was only beginning his long descent from the heights reached on songs like "Waterloo Sunset", "Days", and "Get Back In Line".)

Of the three groups that kept my faith alive through the turn of the decade, THE VELVET UNDERGROUND and THE MC5 were kaput, and THE STOOGES were between record labels. And while there was still a functioning rock and roll underground in Europe (backed by maverick dj's like John Peel), Americans had no such luck. What were our two big choices?

Well, on one hand, you had near comatose "singer-songwriters" falling asleep in their bowls of crunchy granola; on the other, the deadening sludge of boogie/metal, whose "beat" was more likely to force you back in your seat like a sea of wet cement than make you wanna get up and shake it. It seemed like the frantic beat that had ignited two generations of American teens had disappeared from its birthplace.

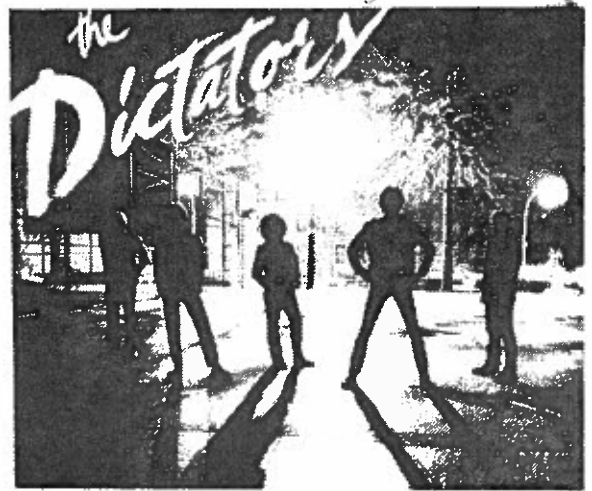
But, as successful as the anti-rock faction was, they couldn't suppress everything at once. Ignored as they usually were, a small handful of bands were still determined to offer more to the listeners than the two choices mentioned above. Bands as classic as the FLAMIN' GROOVIES, eccentric as SPARKS, and as blatantly pop as the RASPBERRIES (the only commercial success of this group) were all thumbing their noses at the surrounding boredom, and paying heavily for it in the scorn of "hip" audiences.

Luckily for all of us; for every group that was rebelling in the early 70's, there was at least one critic who felt the same way. Surprisingly, these maverick critics would almost always manage to sneak

into the pages of a big-time rock mag, where their willingness to stand up for quality and against ageing hippies, country rock, and boogie bands, quickly made them the most hated writers on the staff (at least as far as the public was concerned).

But the angrier the letter-writing readers became, the bolder writers like R. Meltzer, Nick Tosches, John Mendleson, Lester Bangs and others became in turn. Soon, some of them were flaunting in print lives that were seemingly designed to top both Lou Reed and Iggy Pop for sheer self-destructive excess. (if you could beleive half of what they wrote, it was a toss-up as to whether they would wake up in the drunk tank or the loony bin on any particular morning). And eventually it began to pay off, as cult followings began to develop both for the bands and for the critics who supported them. Soon other fans, inspired by example but not able to break into "professional" rock journalism, began to take the "do it yourself" route and, in the process, created the institution that was to change rock and roll history: the rock fanzine.

Think I'm crazy, don't you? The thought of a bunch of xeroxed or mimeographed little magazines with a circulation of a few hundred, having influenced recent events to a greater degree than the marketing decisions of the Warners/Elektra/Atlantic etc. colossus must seem pretty hysterical to a lot of you, especially those who are recent converts to all this ferment. Ah, what you've missed. The thrill of completely emptying a crowded party room within two minutes of replacing the hosts Grateful Dead album by the first side of Funhouse by the STOOGES! That special warm feeling that would come from exposing your best friend to White Light/White Heat by the VELVET UNDERGROUNDand never hearing from him again! The indescribable pleasures of total isolation (all that free time)! Until, oneday while looking through the new Creem for the latest Lester Bangs epic, you hit upon a classified ad for a magazine called Bomp (or Jamz, or Shakin' Street Gazette) that seems to offer something a little different. You send for it, and a few weeks later it arrives. You page through it, eyes growing wider every second. The messy mimeography, lousy artwork, laughable attempts at photo reproduction, loose staples, none of it matters at all. Let's see what's in here; COUNT FIVE! THE DEVIANTS! THE FLAMIN' GROOVIES! QUESTION MARK! mod fashions! THE STOOGES! SHADOWS OF KNIGHT! T. REX! NEW YORK DOLLS! RED KRAYOLA! THE VELVETS! KINKS! SYD BARRET! PAUL REVERE AND THE RAIDERS! DAVE CLARK FIVE!





N.Y. DOLLS

And, wonder of wonders, THE MONKEES! Can this be? Yes it can, and you sit there a little stunned as the realization hits; there are people like me out there!

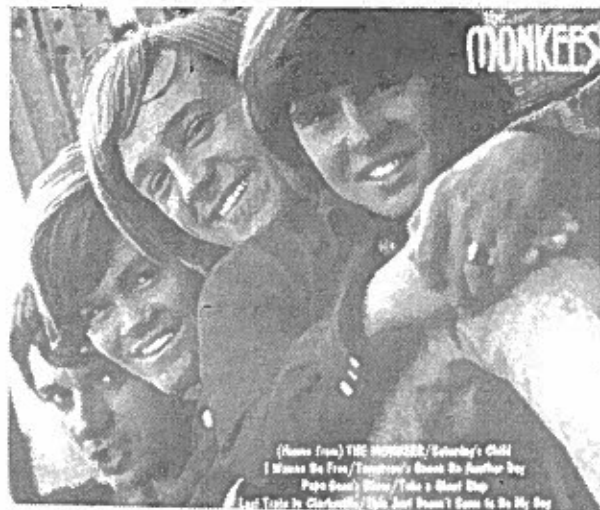
Okay, so maybe I exaggerate a little. But I only do it to make one point clear: had not the isolated, one-in-a-crowd fans of cool music back in the early 70's found a way to communicate with like-minded others, the active local scenes of today might not have come into existence at all. For, of the first wave of new rockin' bands in the mid 70's, a large

number were brought together by the fanzine circuit: these bands were inspired to take the "do-it-yourself" route one step further and actually pick up instruments in order to play the music that no one else wanted to. They were usually the first in their respective cities to do so, to lure other people into what would soon become a movement, and from these seeds grew the American new wave. And it is here, now that I've given you all this background info, that we bring on the stars of our show: Adny Shernoff, the legendary "Teenage Wasteland Gazette", and (finally!!!) the DICTATORS.

"one of my obligations is my latest high energy, laid-back, rock and roll band. our name?...still up in the air, but a few suggestions are: beat the meatles, the fabulous moolah, the deadly bees, the dictators, the new york roaches, norman's dandruff, and tommy the truck."

(from Adny's editorial for Teenage Wasteland Gazette #9)

As I've already pointed out, the first fanzines were pretty inspiring stuff, and they all contributed heavily to readers sense of rock history, fun and irreverence for the music industry as it stood. But in this last all-important category, one zine stood out from all other contenders. The name of that zine? Why, it was Adny Shernoffs Teenage Wasteland Gazette, the magazine which refused at any time to respect anybody or anything. Which only means that this zine was like an x-rated, totally inebriated version of The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show than anything else here, there, and everywhere,



then, before, or since. What more can you possibly want?

To adequately describe TWG's sense of humor by plucking random quotes from the issue I have on hand (one of the great regrets of my life is that, more fool me, I only managed to get my hands on one) would be next to impossible, and since space considerations forbid quoting entire articles, let me just run down some of the highlights of TWG #9.

1) The unrelentingly obscene letters section, contributed by Mike Saunders, Rick Tosches, R. Meltzer, Lester Bangs, and Sgt. Steve Hesseke.

2) "The Johnny Cool Story" by Richie "china cat" Blum (the future Handsome Dick Manitoba)-mostly about downers.

3) "Pazo Hemmoroid Ointment can banish your asshole misery" by Nick Tosches - use your no-doubt-fertile imagination

4) A satirical report on the 'second national fanzine conference' by Buck 'Ralph Gleason' Sanders - don't ask me if it actually happened, I haven't got a clue.

5) 'WEO ! How A&P prices have changed' by Robot A. Hull - inspired ranting about various subjects.

6) Telethon report - a comprehensive report (unsigned and presumably by Mr. Shernoff himself) devoted to the full enjoyment of the cerebral palsy telethon, one of our great national art forms.

7) And endless (I mean endless) attacks on the hapless Mr. Jon Tiven, editor of the rival (and, relatively, very straight) New Haven Rock Press. Attacks ranged from the merely vicious-"*there are faggots like jon tiven (whose ass i will personally kick before the year is out) who don't like geebs but run around in stupid looking fairy clothes. Boy, if that's what gets that guy high, I don't want to have anything to do with him (or her)*"- to the scatological - "*I guess your readers would like to know what Mr. Tiven's doody looks like, it is of the child's turd variety: 'small, round, marble-sized, light brown in color, certainly not the kind you or I would ever do*" - This sort of thing showed up in one letter, three articles, and a cartoon.

As to the general level of humor shown in the (sometimes literal) execution of the above topics, you'll just have to take my word for it that TWG #9 is one of the funniest things I've ever read. On the other hand, this may merely indicate a mental aberration on the part of the author, who, as has been recently proved, is neither wise man nor saint. Take your pick, but take it quick, cause it's time to talk TATORS!

Dictators can swing!

make you dance and sing!

cause no oil spill!

you don't know us, but you will!

- "Master Race Rock"

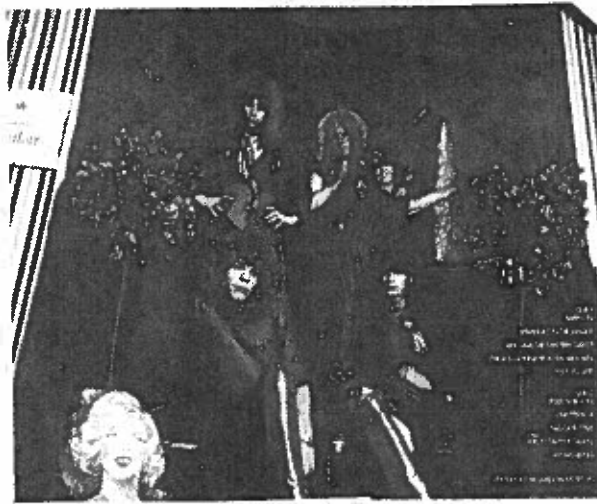
- from "The Dictators Go Girl Crazy"

As great as TWG was, all good things etc., and Andy eventually left TWG, gathered some of his New Paltz, N.Y. buddies (including TWG co-conspirator Richard Blum) into a band, and the DICTATORS were born. About two

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years after I had received my copy of TWG #9 (which I think was published in early '73) I began to read short articles about the band in various magazines, and later in the year one of my all-time absolute fave-rave albums appeared called "The Dictators Go Girl Crazy".

(stupid critics are always shortening the title to "Go Girl Crazy", which is such an obvious case of missing the point that I don't want to talk about it!) The album in many ways was more like the last issue of TWG than a regular rock record of the time. Adny's sense of anarchic teenage humor translated perfectly onto vinyl, the purely musical side of his song was almost as inspiring, the band was spirited and self-confident. Anticipating a lot of what was to come in the next few years, this record kicked off the surf revival two years before the RAMONES were to make it into a movement. It was here that "California Sun" was revived first, and, more importantly, it was here that Adny's greatest teen anthem, '(I Live For) Cars And Girls' sent the BEACH BOYS colliding head-on into THE VELVET UNDERGROUND, producing a multi-car pile-up that probably rendered that particular studio useless to this very day!



N.Y. DOLLS

Best of all, Adny had discovered in Blum (now Handsome Dick) the perfect symbol of his own vision. Pro wrestling is the punk^{rock} of sports, and this fact was exploited to the limit all over the album, from constant references on the cover photo and liner notes to Handsome Dick's hilarious monologues (in a voice copped directly from Handsome Jimmy Valiant of the notorious tag-team champion Valiant Brothers) at strategic locations.

Supporting the self-proclaimed title of 'handsomest man in rock and roll', Handsome Dick set out to portray the classic American teen bad in Shernoff tunes like "Teengenerate" ("give me an hour, and I'll destroy your house") and "Two Tub Man" ("I'm never gonna watch Channel 13/edjucation ain't fo' me/I'm so drunk I can barely see!"), with superb success.

All in all, it seemed a sure bet that the 'TATORS would conquer the world in the name of fun, but as you know by now, it didn't happen quite that way. The talent (and press contacts) that produced a contract failed to produce any significant label support (a situation to be repeated later with asylum records), and "The Dictators Go Girl Crazy" stiffed. As to why, I have a couple of opinions for a little later, but for now let's just accept the facts.

Which is where we begin a different and sadder story, one of compromises made and vision diluted, that eventually led to the bands demise. The first

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step was to fit the band into a quasi-stadium-rock mold, a simple task for the band's producers (Murry Krugman and Sandy Pearlman) who had been working with the Blue Oyster Cult for several years. After a brief absence, Adny returned, not on bass (his starting position) but as a multi-

keyboardist (in the meantime, Mark Glickman, under the name of "Mark'the Animal'Mendoza" had been brought in on bass, and Stu-boy King had been replaced by Richie Teeter on Drums).

With this new line-up, the band released Manifest Destiny on Asylum (they had previously been released by Epic). The result were mixed. Adny's grasp of pop songwriting had strengthened considerably, leading to gorgeous numbers like "Heartache", "Hey Boys", and "Sleepin' with the TV on", along with the near-awesome "Steppin' Out" with the chorus' perfect Lesley Gore cop. However, this was offset by the overdone, excessive arrangement of "Disease", the boogie band syndrome afflicting too much of side two, and the adoption of a 'Flash' virtuoso style (sometimes) by Ross 'the Boss' Freidman. Generally, it is a good (at places great) album, but you get the feeling that this was just not what they would rather have been playing.

In any case, this approach failed to generate much sales either, although a few stations had started to play them and their live shows received unqualified raves everywhere. Most of the compromises of "Manifest Destiny" were then jettisoned (along with Glickman/Mandoza) and 1978 brought Bloodbrothers, an attempt at a toughened - up version of their earlier sound. Again, there were good and bad things about this record. Handsome Dick finally got the chance to take all the lead vocals, and did a great job. Adny could still turn out an inspiring anthem like "I Stand

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Tall" or great hard pop number like "Stay". But in the end, there's something missing here. The fun felt forced.

All such problems disappeared the moment the 'Tators hit the stage, tho, and I'm speaking from experience. The bands late-summer appearance at the Rat in '78 was one of the two best shows I saw that year (the other was the Flamin' Groovies at the Paradise). Handsome Dick, slimmed way down from the old days, was a great dancer and explosive performer, the band (Andy Dick, Richie, Ross and Scott 'Top Ten' Kempner on rhythm guitar) was perfect, and the crowd was rowdy and half delirious. Nothin' forced about this stuff! There was still hope.

Or so I thought, but 1979 brought bad news. Blood brothers, despite heavy touring, was another failure. Asylum wrote the group off as a loss, and the final round of compromises began. Manitoba was sacked, Top Ten left, and the remains (Adny, Ross and Scott) formed the Rhythm Dukes, with Ross leaving soon after. What the new band will sound like is anybody's guess.



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The question remains: Why no success? The 'Tators at their best (and even not-so-best) played the kind of riveting but accessible rock and roll that should have taken them to the top regardless of what was 'in' at the moment. The reader should understand that the answer I've come up with and am about to lay out for you is sheer speculation, but I'm 95% sure that I'm on to something here. As over-simplified and obvious as this will seem, in the end it all comes down to one thing; that name. Bear with me.

THE NO-FUN FACTOR

"What makes Johnny Cool so famous? Is it his bop? His tracks? His inability to speak, read or rite? no, No, NO, **no** !!! It's his name. Names are what make people famous, not people. Names and color, coolness, and distinction to the world."

- "The Johnny Cool Story" by Richie 'China Cat' Blum (TWG #9).

Odds are, when Adny Shernoff chose 'The Dictators' as the name of his band, his main objective was to tweak the nose of the prevailing cultural politics. In 1973, it was still considered daring to sport a nonstandard or ambivalent sexual image; to go against the leaden, "correct-line" left-over 60's politics, with a name like "The Dictators" was just not done. Why?

Consider TV today, those of you who follow the news will know that networks seem to get in trouble all the time these days. Is it because they won't hire writers who can write? No. Is it because once they do find one, they aren't allowed to do anything different or interesting? Guess again. Maybe it's those good old whipping-boys, sex and violence? Not unless it's on kids shows. What then? Because someone didn't like what one of theirs did on TV last night.

It comes down to this: every group of people in this country (whether they define themselves by race, ancestry, sex, sexual preference, religion, or politics) large enough

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to have a political action committee also has a panel of media watchdogs on the lookout for the slightest trace of disrespect. The very act of casting any member of any recognizable minority as either a villain or a fool (and this applies almost as much to comedy as to drama) is now regarded (by the offended group) as an act of degradation, to be fought with protests, boycotts, etc. Thus, except for small protected enclaves (like Saturday Night Live), new taboos have arisen to replace all the old ones (like sex). Irreverence and disrespect for anyone in particular has practically disappeared. This is what I call the NO-FUN FACTOR.

Now consider the effect of the No-Fun Factor on the Dictators. True enough, it was radio that the publicity people at Epic and Asylum had to deal with, but this factor is pervasive throughout our culture today. And let's face it, before punk hit London in '76, what could have been more offensive than a name like the Dictators? Were these guys established super stars who had decided to change their name for a giggle, there would have been no problem. One difference between radio and TV is that the former is willing to go out on a limb for proven product, but this is what the 'Tators never were. Combine the possibility of wide spread community outrage and the possibility of low sales (and ratings), and you can probably guess what the average station program director had to say to the poor promo man on his dismal rounds from rejection to rejection. So let's face facts: although

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recent trends indicate a resurgence of good rock and roll on the radio, it's unlikely, their respective merits aside, that either the Snivelling Shits or the Dead Kennedys will be going platinum in the near future. Sorry.

"But I won't be happy
till I'm known far and wide
with my face on the cover
of the TV Guide"

"The Next Big Thing"
from "The Dictators Go Girl Crazy"

So where does all this leave us? Me, I'm pretty apprehensive. Adny is one of our great raw talents, with a love and knowledge of the music which is far beyond the average rock star's. But it is a big rock star that he wants, more than anything else, to be, and the question is; how much of his vision is he willing to give up to make it? The offending name is gone, Handsome Dick is gone, what else is going? In interveiwis, both Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley of KISS display loads of knowledge and taste in rock and roll, little of which they have ever bothered to put into their own work, for one very practical reason: it would be the end of their careers. Is this what's going to happen next? Or will he decide that enough sacrifices have been made, and stick to his guns with the new band? This is the unanswered question. Stay Tuned.

