

THE EXPERIMENTAL IMPULSE
LA COUNTRY PUNK
1970s – 1980s

INTERVIEW WITH
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What was the music scene like in Downtown Los Angeles in the late 1970s/early 80s? IT WAS A TIME OF INCLUSION. THERE WAS A FEELING OF CAMARADERIE AMONGST THE MUSICIANS, WRITERS AND ARTISTS. WE WERE ALL IN IT TOGETHER, BUCKING THE SYSTEM - CREATING ART AND MUSIC IN OUR OWN WAY. WE WERE MAKING STATEMENTS IN OUR MUSIC, OUR ART, OUR POETRY AND OUR FASHION - SOMETIMES ALL SIMULTANEOUSLY. WE WERE DOING THINGS OUR WAY WITHOUT THE APPROVAL OR THE AID OF THE MAINSTREAM ESTABLISHMENT. IT FELT LIKE A FAMILY, LIKE A COOL FRATERNITY, LIKE THE IN CROWD.

What drew you to the punk scene?

THE PUNK SCENE WAS WHAT FACILITATED THE MUSIC, POETRY AND ART. THE PUNK CLUBS IN THOSE DAYS - CATHAY DE GRANDE, THE MASQUE, THE ANTI CLUB, FLIPPERS, ALS BAR, THE ATOMIC CAFE, MADAME WONGS - WERE VENUES WHERE PERFORMANCE ART WAS WELCOMED AND ENCOURAGED. IT DIDNT MATTER IF YOU PLAYED HILLBILLY MUSIC OR HARDCORE PUNK, YOU WERE AN ANARCHIST BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE.

LA is usually not known for its "country culture" - what was the country music scene like? What were some of the major clubs? Who were some of your favorite country musicians playing at the time? I PLAYED THE ANTI CLUB, THE VEX CLUB, ALS BAR, THE CRUSH BAR, THE CATHAY DE GRANDE, THE MUSIC MACHINE, THE ATOMIC, CLUB LINGERIE, ANTI CLUB, WHISKEY A GO GO, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY THE PALOMINO CLUB. IT WAS AN UNUSUAL TIME BECAUSE YOU COULD SEE A HILLBILLY BAND - (THE ARMADILLO STAMPEDE -- THAT WAS THE NAME OF MY BAND), LONE JUSTICE, TIN STAR, JAMES INTVELD, THE SCREAMIN SIRENS, BLOOD ON THE SADDLE, THE RADIO RANCH STRAIGHT SHOOTERS, RANK AND FILE, DWIGHT YOAKUM) ALONGSIDE ROCKABILLY BANDS (THE BLASTERS, THE PALADINS, THE ROCKIN RENEGADES, COLIN WINSKI, JUMPIN JERRY SIKORSKI AND AMERICAN PATROL, KITTRA AND THE COBRAS) ALONGSIDE JUMP BLUES BANDS (TOP JIMMY AND THE RHYTHM PIGS, THE WILD CARDS, JAMES HARMAN, THE HOLLYWOOD FATS BAND, MELVIS AND THE MEGATONES) ALONGSIDE PUNK BANDS (X, THE BAGS, THE FLESHEATERS, THE CIRCLE JERKS, FEAR, UNIT THREE WITH VENUS, 45 GRAVE, BLACK FLAG, WHITE FLAG, THE STAINS, THE FIENDS, THE MENTORS, LEGAL WEAPON, SOCIAL DISTORTION, THE CRAMPS, THE DESCENDANTS, YOUTH BRIGADE, TEX AND THE HORSEHEADS) ALONGSIDE NORTENO BANDS (LOS LOBOS, RUBEN GUEVARA). IT DIDNT MATTER WHAT KIND OF MUSIC YOU PLAYED. IT MATTERED THAT YOU DID IT FROM YOUR HEART. NONE OF US WERE PLAYING MUSIC TO GET A RECORD DEAL. WE WERE PLAYING MUSIC WE LOVED WITH

PEOPLE WE LOVED FOR FREE BEER AND SELF EXPRESSION. IT WAS AN ALL INCLUSIVE TIME AND WHAT MATTERED WAS THAT WE WERE ALL IN IT TOGETHER. IT WAS US AGAINST THE POLICE -- US AGAINST THE NORMAL PEOPLE. I WAS A YODELING, HILLBILLY SINGER WITH A MOHAWK WHO POSED NUDE FOR JUGGS AND HUSTLER MAGAZINE. I WAS BUCKING THE SYSTEM AND ACCEPTED AS AN ANARCHIST BECAUSE I WAS BEING MYSELF. I WAS A MUSICIAN LIKE ALL OF MY HARDCORE FRIENDS - REGARDLESS OF THE GENRE. IT WASN'T A COUNTRY SCENE AT FIRST. IT WAS JUST A MUSIC SCENE -- ALL INCLUSIVE- THAT GRADUALLY BECAME MORE OF A WELL DEFINED COUNTRY SCENE. BUT AT FIRST, PLAYING COUNTRY MUSIC IN A PUNK BAR WAS JUST AS COUNTER CULTURE AS PLAYING THRASH PUNK IN A PARKING LOT. IT WAS RAW AND UNEXPECTED. IT WAS HONEST AND THEREFORE IT WAS COOL.

Who were some of your favorite bands to see perform during this time?

THE SCREAMIN SIRENS WERE AN AMAZING ALL GIRL COUNTRY BAND WITH PLEASANT GEHMAN AND ROSIE FLORES SHARING LEAD VOCALS - FUR DIXON AND BOOM BOOM ON THE DRUMS. BLOOD ON THE SADDLE WAS A GREAT COUNTRY PUNK BAND WITH GREG DAVIS ON GUITAR PLAYING FASTER THAN LIGHTNING PUNK LICKS ALONGSIDE HIS GIRLFRIEND ANNETTE ZILINSKAS ON VOCALS/ (ANNETTE LATER JOINED THE BANGLES) HERMANN SENAC ON DRUMS AND RON BOTELHO ON BASS. I LOVED THE WAY THEY WOULD TEAR THRU A CARTER FAMILY OR JEAN RITCHIE SONG AT BREAKNECK SPEED. RADIO RANCH STRAIGHT SHOOTERS LED BY PAUL GREENSTEIN WAS AN AMAZING, AUTHENTIC WESTERN SWING BAND WITH FIDDLE AND PEDAL STEEL. JAMES INTVELD WAS LIKE OUR OWN HOLLYWOOD ELVIS - CROONING AND MAKING THE GIRLS SWOON. THE BLASTERS WERE UNBELIEVABLY EXCITING - GOING FROM A BLUES TUNE LIKE "IM SHAKIN" TO THE YODELING OF THE "NEVER NO MORE BLUES". THEIR SONG " AMERICAN MUSIC" PRETTY MUCH ENCOMPASSED WHAT WE WERE ALL ABOUT. RANK AND FILE - WITH THE KINMAN BROTHERS WERE AN AMAZING ROOTS - COUNTRY BAND. THE PLUGZ WERE PUNK BUT PLAYED SOME WESTERN STYLE SONGS TOO. AND TOP JIMMY AND THE RHYTHM PIGS WERE THE SHUFFLE KINGS BUT COULD ALSO WHIP OUT A MEAN TWO STEP OCCASIONALLY. WE WERE A CONGLOMERATION OF ALL KINDS OF MUSICAL STYLES, BUT IT WAS ALL AMERICAN - AND IT FELT LIKE IT WAS ALL HOLLYWOOD GRASSROOTS MUSIC.

Punk and Country are such different genres, but there seem to be a lot of crossover artists - specifically going from punk to country, what do you think is the impulse? I THINK IT WAS NORMAL FOR MUSICIANS TO JUMP GENRES BECAUSE WE WERE EXPOSED TO SO MANY DIFFERENT STYLES EVERY NIGHT OF THE WEEK. JOHN AND EXENE FROM X STARTED THE KNITTERS WITH DAVE ALVIN FROM THE BLASTERS. THE FLESHEATERS FEATURED STEVE BERLIN FROM LOS LOBOS, JOHN DOE FROM X, DAVE ALVIN FROM THE BLASTERS AND CHRIS DESJARDINS AND JILL JORDAN. LEE VING FROM FEAR STARTED HIS OWN COUNTRY BAND, RANGE WAR. I HAD MY BAND, THE ARMADILLO STAMPEDE AND THEN FORMED A HILLBILLY BAND WITH L.A. WEEKLY POETRY EDITOR HEATHER HALEY - CALLED THE COUNTRY COUSINS. HEATHER ALSO HAD A PUNK BAND CALLED HEATHER HALEY AND THE ZEALOTS. THERE WAS A

LOT OF INCESTUOUS BAND JUMPING GOING ON, BOTH ON AND OFF THE BANDSTAND. THIS WAS A TIME OF SEXUAL FREEDOM - PRE-AIDS, WHEN PEOPLE SHARED SEXUAL PARTNERS WITH IMPUNITY. SO IT WAS NATURAL TO SHARE BASS PLAYERS AND DRUMMERS THE SAME WAY WE SHARED LOVERS. THERE WAS A CERTAIN ACCEPTABLE PROMISCUITY ABOUT IT. LOVE WHOMEVER YOU WISH. PLAY BASS WITH WHOMEVER YOU WISH. IT FELT NATURAL TO PLAY ANY KIND OF MUSIC YOU WANTED AND TO PLAY IN SEVERAL DIFFERENT BANDS AT A TIME. PLAYING A DIFFERENT STYLE OF MUSIC WAS AS ACCEPTABLE AS TRADING BOYFRIENDS FOR A NIGHT. I WAS A COUNTRY SINGER WHO APPEARED ON THE COVER OF THE PUNK BAND - THE MENTORS RECORD - UP THE DOSE. (see below) IT WAS NEVER QUESTIONED THAT WE WERE ALL A COMMUNITY REGARDLESS OF WHAT TYPE OF MUSIC WE HAPPENED TO BE PLAYING THAT NIGHT.

How did you arrive at the blues?

I DIDNT START PLAYING BLUES PROFESSIONALLY UNTIL MANY YEARS LATER AFTER I MOVED TO SAN DIEGO IN 1986. THE HOLLYWOOD SCENE STARTED CHANGING AS RECORD COMPANIES STARTED COMING IN AND SWEEPING PEOPLE UP- THE BLASTERS AND LOS LOBOS WERE SIGNED TO SLASH. THEN SLASH WAS BOUGHT UP BY WARNER BROTHERS. SO NOW, OUR GRASSROOTS SCENE WAS STARTING TO BECOME COMMERCIAL RIGHT UNDER OUR NOSES. THIS CHANGED THE WHOLE LANDSCAPE. NEXT, LONE JUSTICE GOT A BIG RECORD DEAL - THEN DWIGHT YOAKUM WAS SIGNED TO REPRISE. THEN I GOT A DEAL WITH CBS EPIC. SOON OUR LITTLE HOMEY MUSICAL FAMILY WAS MOVING ONTO THE NEXT LEVEL AND THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING. I DONT THINK WE WILL EVER SEE AGAIN SUCH AN OPEN AND INCLUSIVE TIME. IT WAS SO BEAUTIFUL BECAUSE WE ALL LOVED AND ACCEPTED EACH OTHER AND ENCOURAGED EACH OTHER TO BE ARTISTIC. IT NEVER FELT COMPETITIVE UNTIL THE MAJOR LABELS STARTED COMING IN AND SWOOPING PEOPLE UP. THIS MADE US COMPETITORS WHEN BEFORE THAT WE WERE ALL LIKE ONE BIG FAMILY OF MUSICIANS AND POETS AND ARTISTS.

