

Listening to Comets On Fire is like travelling in a brakeless train full of partying people. Born in Santa Cruz, California this five piece band has sold all the self-released 500 copies of its homonymous debut, now reissued by Alternative Tentacles, and has emerged as one of the most astonishing contemporary rock acts. The reasons are obvious: by merging different rock sounds Comets On Fire defies our definition of what's psychedelic. They urge us to imagine it in a broader sense where freedom goes along with a more adventurous sound experience, by letting us go within music that blows our minds, eyes and life. Ethan Miller (the Voice and the Guitar Man), Ben Chasny (the new Guitar Man) and Noel Harmonson (the Echoplex Man) explain how, why and more. Now read on.

PT: How were Comets On Fire formed?

Noel Harmonson (NH): Comets On Fire was formed as a "weekend" band consisting of Ethan, Ben Flashman and first drummer Chris Gonzalez. The idea was to get locked into a very small practice space with dozens of beers and various stimulants. Ingestion of these things would cause the participants to reach a delusional state in which they would try to play the (very short) songs too fast and record them onto a 4-track plugged into a bunch of distortion pedals. The role of Noel actually came about during a delusional "post-production" session when simultaneously he introduced the sound of the "shitstorm" as a musical instrument.

Ethan Miller (EM): It's not really that different than how I'd guess a lot of people get together to make music, record and jam out. In the beginning we were all living in a small town without a focussed music scene, just some students and people around. Ben, Noel and I were buddies and we listened to records and ran around drinking and such together. Ben Flashman and I were in a more conventional rock band and we just got sick of bickering and bullshit and playing classic rock and we wanted to begin working in a realm where we could just vomit and *rock and roll* instead of honing it and constructing it. So I told Flashman we should get together with Chris G. and some booze and some speed and a four track and just let some shit happen like puking up a hydrogen bomb onto your gas stove. Just take



BY JOSÉ MARMELEIRALA



IKER SPOZIO 2003

the sounds that you love, channel them into your body and then let it shit out all over the place, half digested, stinking, hot and something you can't take back. Well that was what we were attempting, and for the first album I believe we accomplished it. That is the sound more or less of the first album, but not the description. In other words, let me put it another way, we were opening up to a lot of new music to us then, around the time that Comets on Fire was formed. Like some of the monumental work of Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Miles Davis, Archie Shepp, Sonny Sharrock, etc. etc. - especially with Noel around getting into deep listenings of their really wild, shameless, ferocious, most aggressive albums, the rip-roaring ones when a lot of folks who loved those cats peeled off and said 'No way-these guys are assaulting and insulting me through the speakers, through their methods-too far out'. We thought, (unconsciously I think), what if we take that soul vomiting wild method of those guys, where love of the universe and the conflict of the moment, pleasure and pain, rules and time, rhythm, order, chaos, assault and caress, -all those things - are blurred into a certain method of artistic expression (one that is very complex to listen to and even more complex to understand or make sense of in your listening experience) - what if we use that method and apply it to the construction of a "great rock album" like 'Kiss Alive II'. Well, in the end luckily I don't think we commercialised or *kitchified* the sound of free jazz or anything, like Kiss or Grand Funk would have done - we accomplished what we set out to do. We vomited and puked up our love of music onto an album without any clean up or second thoughts. No weeding out, no songs left out, we made that album from beginning to end in a very short time, with almost total abandon. And there was a risk that in 8 months things we felt were great in the heat of the moment then could prove to be really bad or uninteresting things to listen to even if they were honest and with conviction at the moment of conception. But, luckily I think the heart and abandon still shines 3 or 4 years later and the album serves those heart's who long to hear honest music that isn't watered down in any way. That's what the Back in the USSR cover was about. People have asked or written, "why the fuck did they do this song of all songs? This is terrible! This is stupid!" But they are speaking intellectually about the

song we did and questioning the motivation when there was no motivation to it. Man, when we were banging that tune out with our heads and blood full of whiskey and cocaine and speed and the amps cranked and vibrating our bones in a shithole of a tiny no-car garage, drums banging, knocking the tiles off the roof and the carpet down off the wall and the four of us right there making that thing happen...that's why that song and all the others are there. That's no justification either, it's the truth.

What made you to go on the path of music instead of pursuing another career? The emotion and bleakness of rock music? The spiritual vibe that you feel when you are playing live? Or more prosaic things such as sex and eternal booze?

NH: It seems to me that sex and eternal booze come easier to people in higher professions. Besides booze is relatively cheap. This music is no career. How could it be? It seems really difficult to me to make any money playing music and be able to maintain integrity. I'll stop though before I get too cynical.

BC: I don't think that rock music is bleak at all. To me, rock music is the final fight and redemption. People like to say that rock music is an attitude and they think that to dress up in leather or to have a certain haircut or to indulge in excess is to be rock and roll. Obviously what they have picked up on is the detritus from previous rock musicians. The shit of yesterday's rock and roll has become the golden idol for today's kids. Today's rock music must strive for a spiritual violence to rip ourselves and each other from this banal existence. Any digression into physical violence, especially against others, or excess of tools (ie drugs) is merely diving into the same murky pond of banality that we are hoping to escape from.

EM: Rock and roll as a career?! I hate to break the news to but I got a motherfucking day job! Some of the guys in the current line up have careers but they are not as rock and roll musicians I hate to say. The reason to do an art, to truly do it for your life or have it consume your life, career or not, is the same over and over again...and they'll all tell you this. Because you feel like shit if you don't have it in your life and in fact you find it hard to see the point in living or the sense of things if you can't do that thing. You feel like it's your purpose and you feel useless and pointless without it. But, that said, I don't have a child and I hear when you have

ple that were not really interested in reaching standard perfection, but rather were interested in capturing a feeling, amplifying it and really make that feeling hit home with the listener or the audience rather than wowing them with perfection and conventional tricks. That's why I like those genres, whether my theory about them is a myth or reality.

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Comets On Fire have been described as an psychedelic rock band but I guess we can find in your music some garage rock and punk elements. How does these three genres co-habit in COF music and if so how did they appeared in the first place?

EM: As far as I can tell garage, punk and psychedelic genres were all more or less seemingly born out of defiance and disdain for the popular music of their respective times. And they all share a lack of technical perfection in trade for a kind of broke-dick virtuosity of the imagination. All three genres seem to reek of bands and peo-

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Was it a surprise to you that the first edition of the first Comets On Fire record sold out?

EM: We hoped it would because 500 aren't very many records to sell. When you've never sold any before though I guess it can seem like a lot. But really it was just a few boxes on the floor of mine and Raeni's silk screening room downstairs in our little apartment in Santa Cruz. The silk screening was extremely time consuming so I was damn glad to see those cocksuckers finished and gone. Whether you like what you've done or not you can never really tell if other people are going to catch on to it or if you just did some kind of music or art to indulge a part of you that isn't universally wise but personally compulsive or something. But after a few copies got out there we started seeing the way people were taking to it and it seemed like people had a special bond with the record so...then they

started rolling out the door. Revolver wrote or called the first time and said we'll take 50 or 80 or something. A while later "we'll take 80 more", then "All right lets get the rest of that shit...". I was selling them out of my house to here and there and sending them around to a few magazines and then when Revolver got involved we were set with a pressing of 500 copies because Revolver moves some shit and makes it look easy. They really deserve a lot of credit for the disappearance of the first pressing of the self-titled. They always sent their checks on time too and paid in full, and there were a few places that when I started trying to get those albums out there took 30 copies and never

sent a check and I know they un-l o a d e d them. There are those few people that when your trying to get your start were there from the beginning picking you up on to your feet like a little kid learning to walk. And even if its not true you kind of believe they are out there watching you grow and succeed with folded arms kind of nodding and got that look in their eye like yep, another job well done, little Johnny is walking on his own now and growing up to

be a fine young man. Ed Hardy-Eclipse, Revolver, Ben Goldberg, Tim Green, Aquarius, Tim Daly, The Lowdown. Those are those kind of folks to us. They get talked about with a little awe and respect in the voice around our circle because that's the status you gain when you place your respect and faith and belief in someone else and their dreams for no other reason than to help them make their dream happen because you think it is a good one. That's a powerful thing.

How do you feel about your first CD being re-released by Alternative Tentacles?

EM: I feel great about it. In a way I have a special feeling about the fact that Jello did it because for my part I

think when we did that first album for part of the sound I was trying to reach into the genome of that early 80's American punk like the Dead Kennedys or Black Flag or the Misfits. Especially to take my favourite parts from them and throw it into the thing that was going on. So for a man that was part of that original genome to become enamored with the album I think is exceptional and flattering and some how cosmically twisted and illuminating at once in a kind of David Lynch Mullholland Drive kind of way.

Then there was Fields Recordings from The Sun where we find Ben Chasny contribution. What happened between the two records and how you met Ben?

BC: Between the two records I moved to Santa Cruz and ended up living only a block away from Ethan. We had shared a few good times drinking beer and smoking hashish but one evening he came over with a record of Son House singing John the Revelator. We listened to that song 32 times in a row, just that song, and

on the 33rd time, at exactly 1/3 way through the song, a cloud overhead broke and thunder slapped the sky's ass while the storm spit down rain and all the dogs started barking and then we knew that work had to be done together for a while. I picked up my guitar and wrote the unicorn.

EM: I've known Ben for some years, he grew up in the same small town in Northern California called Eureka that Flashman and I grew up in and Utrillo and Ben Chasny had actually cut their musical teeth in their first bands back in high school together. Pop-punk bands is what they called it back then. Now pop punk means something a little different but anyhow... so Chasny had been coming down and visiting us down in Santa Cruz and toying with the idea of moving down there and we just said that it would be great to get him to play some jams on the new album with us when we recorded. Get him into the studio with us for fun. Around the time of the Field Recordings conception Comets on fire was expanding, we were creating an orchestra-and would have some shows

where a dude played congas, someone on sax, someone on keyboards and 12 string guitar, someone doing some detuned autoharp drones and then all the Comets dudes and the jams were expanding. We had some good shows like that - Field Recordings is a mix of the pared down rock band and the orchestra - though now we haven't done any larger group effort like that in a long time and were distilling the essence and blast of the band again in preparation for the third album that were going in for in January.

What voices inspired you sing in the way you do? I'm guessing Rob Tyner circa 'Kick Out The Jams'.

EM: Y'know, I like the MC5 OK, I have all their records and love putting them on when I'm drinking hard and got the blood rushing, but I'm not one of those obsessed fans that think they were the be the all end of all rock and roll. To me part of their magic was their hype machine. They showed that it doesn't matter if you are fake or the real deal. They were dealing with illusion and hype but with total

conviction which I think in show business is the essence of a successful project. You do get that tingly gritty swirling feeling when you try to imagine being at one of those old grand ballroom shows or the Fillmore East breakdown... it would have been very interesting and probably very affecting. So, great records and an even greater myth but I don't think that guy is the greatest singer of all time. But I'll bet he and I like similar singers-like Sly stone, Little Richard, Otis Redding. They were fudes that could just open up and holler at the sky-wail and scream without loosing the heart line. I like those guys singing a lot and I don't in any way shape or form have their lungs or pitch or voice at all so luckily my voice will always be my own not a replica of Otis Redding or Howling Wolf.

The chants on Field Recordings From The Sun are incredible. How did you come up with them?

EM: Thank you! I think I came up with the idea for the chants because I was listening to a lot of Exuma and

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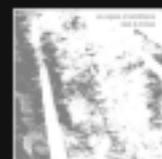
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