

# BACKFIRE

Volume 5 #1

# MONSTERS OF ROCK

exclusive  
interviews  
with

Ron Asheton Greg Sage Tim Kerr



Plus...

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VICTORIA RENARD PHOTO

Lightnin' Hopkins once said, "Blues is a feeling that will give you a pain you ain't never had." And who could ever forget George Clinton's jocular statement that "Soul is a joint rolled in toilet paper." Anyway we choose to label it, traditional African-American roots music has struck a central nerve in the psyche of Western society for over a century. Scores of punk rock devotees have attempted to churn rhythm and blues styles into their crash 'n' bang, distorted guitar, noise-rock endeavors in recent years. This new sonic soul movement has been led by the likes of The Blues Explosion, '68 Comeback, The Gories, The Make-Up, and The Oblivians just to name a few. Undeniably there is something intrinsic about that old music that speaks to the core id of anyone who plucks on the guitar or sways transcendental to a low humming sound in the ear.

One of the originators in amalgamating trash rock and the blues is Austin, TX punk pioneer Tim Kerr. Whether sitting on his rustic porch with a hollow-body Silvertone guitar or flailing about the stage in a dapper vest and suspenders, Kerr exudes the aura of a traditional blues man reared in the Deep South. When he was a kid growing up in the sixties, Kerr heard lots of soul hits on Houston AM radio by the likes of Archie Bell and The Drells, and Curtis Mayfield. "Fairly early on I started really getting into folk blues and acoustic things," Kerr recalls. "When everybody was leaning toward Black Sabbath and Cream, I was more into

## 'Round midnight with Tim Kerr

By James Burdyslaw

finding old John Lee Hooker and acoustic finger picking stuff. People like Taj Mahal, Sonny Terry, and Brownie McGee. I liked the way the British players did blues too, like John Renbourn and Burt Jansch. The reason that I play like I do now, is the same reason I liked what I did back then."

In describing his guitar sound, Kerr relates it as the reflection of a desire to liberate his inner being. He says that, "I like things when they're more open. Open tunings, not just using the major chords. It opens up the expansion of the music. Curtis Mayfield, for instance, would

be in some major G chord thing, and then drop into a minor seven. That's kinda like soul." One of Kerr's favorite musicians, he refers to Curtis Mayfield often because he feels the soul legend conveyed the emotion of spiritual freedom in music. Kerr says "he represents something essential to me in a human being. A person in his own way trying to uplift!"

Ever since his first band The Big Boys recorded a nasty stomp number called "Red/Green" back in '78, Kerr has let his passion for everything soul, blues, jazz, and funk creep into his songwriting. "In Texas, what you played was a wide open book. When Biscuit, Chris and I would skate, we were skating to Shotgun, Slave, and Zapp, not Ted Nugent. It was that stuff crossed with The Undertones and The Buzzcocks. We felt that you should be able to do this, that, and maybe something else out there. Then figure out a way to fuse them together for yourself." A major part of the retrospective appeal of The Big Boys has been the eclectic nature of their material. One minute your brain is being pile-driven by the blasting hardcore of "Assault," and then you're suddenly inundated with the funky groove of "We Got Soul."

After The Big Boys disbanded in '84, Kerr started Poison 13 with fellow Big Boy Chris Gates and Mike Carroll on vocals. Poison 13 had a heavy blues sound that was firmly rooted in the style of 60's rock acts like The Rolling Stones and The Pretty Things, but Kerr says

the impetus to play in this direction was not strategically deliberate. "It was really Mike's band when we started and he was really into all those old '60s groups. The blues element was kinda more me, because of what I liked as a kid. We weren't playing to be a '60s garage band, but the reason it came off like that was because we were doing exactly what those bands were doing back then. We took old stuff like Howlin' Wolf songs and tried to play them our way, but now this generation had seen Black Flag, so the music was rougher and we had louder stuff. It was the same attitude, but it wasn't set out to imitate anything."

In the late '80s, Kerr branched out into a more contemporary take on soul music by forming the funk and rap influenced band Bad Mutha Goose and the Bros Grimm. This was the first time he had worked with African-American musicians, but at no time has he sought out any particular artists because of their racial background. "I think a human being is a human being. The only difference is that some people know how to play from inside themselves, from your soul instead of copying something else."

By 1991, Kerr wanted to get back to playing more of the blues/punk music that he had relished creating in Poison 13. A few of Seattle's punk rock stars had fallen in love with the Texas band and had established friendships with Kerr, in particular Mudhoney's Mark Arm and Steve Turner and U-Men/Gas Huffer guitarist Tom Price. Together with Australian transport Martin Bland they formed The Monkeywrench, giving Kerr an outlet for his raw blues leanings with slide-heavy tunes like "Bottle Up and Go."

Over the last 10 years, Kerr has favored creating various musical projects that are peppered with huge chunks of the soul and blues flavor. In the mid-'90s there was the raw, raunchy racket of Jack 'O Fire, followed up with the psychedelic noise/blues freak-out sound of The Lord High Fixers featuring Mike Carroll. In between playing with the Fixers, he recorded the R & B-esque The King Sound Quartet album with Mick Collins, and released a second Monkeywrench album in 1999. For the new millennium, Kerr has created The Now Time Delegation featuring Lisa Kekaula from The Bellrays on vocals. This group is probably the closest Kerr has come to playing straight soul, but make no mistake about it, it's still chock full of his bombastic bursts of noise and wailing guitar spasms. In the not-too-distant future expect more thrills from Kerr's latest project with Mike Carroll, The Total Sound Group Direct Action Committee (How's that for a name!).

Witnessing Kerr on stage can rival a religious experience. His exuberant communion with the audience is reminiscent of an evangelical minister reaching his hands out to the masses desperate for a touch of salvation. During Lord High Fixers shows, Kerr says he became awakened to a higher power coiled in the performance. "It took me to a whole different place. It completely turned spiritual. I

was having the greatest time because I remember people standing still with their mouths open. Our whole thing was to play like you are never going to play again. Right now, this is it! This is a celebration of life."

Kerr firmly believes in the necessity to eliminate doubt while attempting to be creative and how easily one can draw an inner strength from doing so. He says "Human nature makes you want to go 'Do I look OK? Am I playing this right?' But as soon as you step over that, you just tune into yourself and don't care what people think you look like, or if they think you can play, or if you've missed a complete song because you were on the floor doing something. Once you've done that, there's so many other things you discover you can do, like oh my God! I didn't realize the guitar could make this sound if you slammed it up against your knee. Whatever happens is what happens, and that's the beauty of it."

By freeing himself musically, Kerr finds the need to strive for more experimentation.

While engaged in this process, he admits that, "If what I do comes off sounding like blues and soul, it is because I've always liked that stuff." He defines soul simply as "giving 120% into what you're doing every time you do it. If you are going to do something that comes from within yourself, what the hell are you doing if it isn't 120%...period. Burn bright. That to me is soul."

Kerr does not care too much for textbook musical definitions. He firmly denies a conscious effort to specifically play soul or punk because he feels the genres all merge into a collective whole that encompasses the essence of creative thought. He says, "To me, John Coltrane is soul as much as Black Flag, or Minor Threat, or any of that stuff was. People were doing something that totally came from the inside and not trying to fit to a style. A style got fit to them."

On the current state of music, Kerr boils it all down "to

having the attitude of just doing what you want to do. Looking at it that way, I would say you are in an unbelievably great company. There were so many people like Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra or Funkadelic that people didn't get at the time. Now people are discovering that, yah! This stuff is really great. Those guys could care less what people thought or said about their music. There should never be boundaries put on art."

At its very essence, Tim Kerr's philosophy of musical expression mirrors what those old blues masters must have experienced. With half-closed eyes, while slowly rocking back and forth in a chair, they strummed a somber tune out toward the cold world. They unleashed a piece of themselves, that having found its mark, gravitated back towards home and reverberated across the undulating firmament. It sounds like a Zen master at work, in a way. And I guess that is a pretty good definition of soul.



VICTORIA RENARD PHOTO

*Hangin' with his big one*