



MUSIC: ROCKABILLY MAYHEM

MARTIN ROCKA & THE SICK SHOP



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IT'S A FILTHY SONG, BUT SOMEONE'S GOTTA SING IT.

WORDS: Jon Monsoon PHOTOGRAPHY: Dylan Culhane

The murky waters of South African music are alive with life. Whilst we have our fair share of pond scum, every now and then something good and vital and not entirely uninteresting crawls out of the swamp. Jon Monsoon discovers that Martin Rocka & the Sick Shop is a beaut of an example.

Jo'burg's East Rand: not exactly the cradle of civilisation, nor the birth place of rock 'n roll, yet ask anyone down at the mayor's office who their sickest resident is and they will point you in the direction of a blood red, faux-leopard-trim satin smoking jacket, black leather diamond-studded wrestling mask, evil-scented cigar between yellowed teeth, a howling, demon-possessed Setzer-signature Gretsch slung over his shoulder; the one, the only, direct from the bar, Martin Rocka. For the past 6, 6, 6 or so years, this musical masked man of mystery and his psychobilly Sick Shop sidekicks James Flames (double-bad bass) and Boy McCloud (demon drums) have been kicking out the sickness of a uniquely South African rockabilly hybrid that has left fans from Bloemfontein to Brixton itching up and down. Their songs are mostly X-rated, contagious and outrageous. "We're not a chin-stroking kind of band," admits Martin.

Whilst Martin Rocka's real identity is one of speculation (rumours abound that he is also a member of another big name South African band), behind the mask he is 100% himself. His success as one of South Africa's prime exponents of the rockabilly genre is testament to a man and his band who do it 'cos they love it, and for no other reason. "It's amazing what you can achieve when you're not trying!" reasons Rocka. "One of the reasons we have lasted as long as we have, is because people can smell honesty. And it's very easy to sell something to people when you believe in it so much yourself."

"We've all been in bands where we've played the game, and where the game has played us," he muses over a trailer standard double brandy 'n coke. "This time we're making art, doing whatever the fuck we wanna," confirms McCloud, himself a pedigreed muso of repute (being the former sticks

man for trip-rock legends Sugardrive back in the day). "There is not one song in this band that we play because we have to, and there is not one song that we play as Martin Rocka & the Sick Shop that I don't personally love. This is the music that I listen to, all the time. I don't listen to anything else," he continues. "The whole rockabilly scene, although relatively small, is so vital. It's full of people that live it, day to day," gleams Martin.

"Rockabilly culture is very similar to hip-hop culture, in terms of it being pure lifestyle. It's not only what music you listen to. For example, hip-hop is not just about rap music, it's about b-boying, graffiti, the cars, all of that. For us it's the whole hotrod culture and the tattoo culture. You dress it, you live it, you smoke it, you drink it. You don't see people from the club last night that were out in their quiffs and creepers go home and put on a crimpalene three-piece suit!"

"I often wonder if it would be cool if rockabilly became more popular," ponders McCloud out loud, "And I quickly realise the answer is no! It wouldn't be cool. I am so comfortable in the way that I dress, that I would hate to walk outside one day and suddenly see that everybody is dressed the same way I am. I can handle going into a shopping mall and seeing little emo kids walking around everywhere. I just wanna say to them, 'Well done, you're part of a fad, but it'll pass.'"

The band has recently begun work on their fourth studio album. "Some of it is quite rootsy in places, but all of it is sick and filthy and nasty," grins Rocka through a puff of evil smoke. "Songs that aren't recommended for Bar Mitzvah's or under-18 birthday parties. No daytime radioplay songs on this album – thankfully! So we don't have to go begging anyone to play it!"

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