

HEAVY HITTERS!

A MINI HISTORY OF ROCK 'N' ROLL

GENRE: '50S, '60S, & '70S

WORDS BY ALLYSON J.L. CLAYTON AND LAYOUT BY ELENA PEJOVSKA

I STARTED LISTENING TO THE ROLLING Stones in 2020 after my friend Tess gave me an impromptu introductory seminar over FaceTime for hours on end. It was a beautifully educational bonding experience where we talked about rock 'n' roll, touring culture, and my favorite subject: fans and groupies. Tess took me back to the '50s, '60s, and '70s, regaling me with all her personal knowledge of Heavy Hitters like Led Zeppelin, Jimmy Hendrix, Muddy Waters, Janis Joplin, The Mamas and The Papas, Howlin' Wolf, B.B. King, and Chuck Barry.

I read Miss Pamela Des Barre's rock 'n' roll memoir of her days as "The Most Famous Groupie" and all about her escapades with Mick Jagger and the bassist from Steppenwolf. I absorbed every exciting detail of her dedication to the Sunset Strip and Laurel Canyon, and her friends who became the iconic GTOs (Girls Together Outrageously). I admired her adoration for people like Frank Zappa and Graham Parsons who were more like family to her and how being immersed in the culture of rock 'n' roll shaped her entire life.

I watched Rock and Roll Circus, Cadillac Records, and as many documentaries as I could find. I studied the inception of *Creem Magazine* and the usurping of *Rolling Stone Magazine*. I watched *Almost Famous* and the documentary on Ben Fong Torres, manifesting that one day I would have the trust of my rock 'n' roll idols to let me follow them on tour, writing about the magic of the music.

But through it all, I longed for more women in the scene, Black women especially, and wondered where the histori-

cal memoirs on Black groupies were and why we only ever hear about the white girls. I found an article about Sister Rosetta Tharpe when I was researching the origin of the electric guitar, and found out how influential The Godmother of Rock 'n' Roll was to every white man band that took over the genre.

Rock 'n' Roll, to me at least, is characterized by its distorted sounds and pushing the limits of the electric guitar – how many trance-like sounds can you get out of this wooden tool with steel strings? What kind of incendiary symphonies can you compose? Sister Rosetta Tharpe, born in Cotton Plant, Arkansas, was a pioneer in this very thing, popularizing the electric guitar and using heavy distortion when she would play her bluesy gospel songs. Blues, of course, part of her nature as it is a genre born out of the deep south and out of a need for Black American enslaved people to have a way to tell their stories.

She is cited as the influence for guitar idols like Eric Clapton and Keith Richards—the influence of Black musicians often left out of the global subconscious.

Blues, Rock 'n' Roll and every subgenre inbetween are a huge part of my spiritual-like affinity for music. Listening to distorted guitar and letting the bass and drums fill up my body until I can't help but move is my most favorite thing in the world. Rock can never die. Unless I die with it.

ROCK IN ROLL NEVER DIES



NOSTALGIA COMEBACK:

JOY

MEAT

ONCE AN '80S AUSTIN, TEXAS STAPLE, THE BAND COMES BACK TO BRING THEIR DIY SOUND TO THE NEXT GENERATION

WORDS + INTERVIEW BY KAITLYN WILKES
PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEAT JOY
LAYOUT BY SARAH DEAN MORALES

AUSTIN, TEXAS, IS KNOWN AS THE LIVE Music Capital. The city prides itself on the amount of local venues that allow artists of all genres to find their people through music expression. The sounds of up-and-coming bands ooze out of every bar, house and concert hall imaginable, creating a diverse and eclectic music scene.

In the 1980's, the DIY punk band Meat Joy found their calling to entertain. Through their experimental sound, they gained a cult following both in their active years and after they parted ways. Now, 40 years later, fueled by a desire to play together again, the band reunited in the town they used to call home.

Pleaser: Now that y'all are back in Austin, what's it like being back in your old stomping grounds?

Melissa DeMille: Confusing [laughs]. It's so much bigger, [than when the] three of us left in '89.

Gretchen Phillips: It's changed an awful lot, and I mean, I've been coming back off and on.

John Hawkes: It's a lot bigger, that's for sure. But it's really wonderful to be here, and to be with these guys.

Does it take you back to the old days, so to speak?

Tim Mateer: I've been writing on the cards when I send them to people with the swag that

they're buying. It's like 'it's pretty cool to pretend it's 1985 again.' [Everyone laughs] You try and put yourself in the mindset of maybe losing a little bit of our rebellion as you grow older. It's like, 'Oh remember? Nothing mattered, we let nothing stop us,' and we're working toward that again.

GP: I mean I think we are pretty unstoppable, I flew here with a broken leg from Canada. It's like we don't want to stop. There is a momentum that's very real that's been created by weekly FaceTime meetings for the past 20 months.

JH: We've done a lot of work through that too. We made a lot of merchandise – remotely put all this together, we re-released the record and cover and –

Jamie Spidle: The book.

GP: There's a lot of energy, there's something very energetic about it. Even if the energy is depleted it's such a big feeling of depletion. You know, the five of us together is its own forcefield, and I think it always was.

Are you feeling that energy from your fans or the people who wanted to hear you get back together?

TM: The people have been very positive! We sort of hit the zeitgeist of the young feminists finding us, or finding Gretchen first and then finding [us] – so there's been that energy to it, and an interest.

JS: I would say I feel [it] in the present. But it's so nice to play these songs again because I've always remembered the Meat Joy songs and I've always felt like this is my favorite band I've ever been in, and the songs are so good. So now, it's just a great opportunity for more people to hear them hopefully.

TM: Of course, part of our game is always to create an opening for every



PICTURED ABOVE: Vocalist Tim Mateer

show. And today was just a magical little exploration of sound.

Y'all mentioned kind of being found by the young feminists. When you announced that you were doing a comeback, did you think there would be that "next generation" of people who wanted you to come back?

MD: We had the ethos of 'if you build it, they will come.' We were stepping out into what looked like thin air, and it was a big investment of time and money to get this all together, but we really believe if you build it they will come.

JH: Even if you build it, we will come. I feel like Mellissa stated it in a sentence. The last time we were here was in May, which was when we decided that we couldn't live without each other. It's kind of what brought us back while we were beginning to talk on the phone and wondering what we would do, expressing interest in re-releasing the record.

Steve Shelley from Sonic Youth has always been really helpful, or has been over the years always still a fan and saying we should put the record out. And we weren't all talking for a while so it wasn't really until the last 10 years I suppose — 28 in between where we didn't speak — while we were having our Sunday meetings, things like Bikini Kill passing through Texas and apparently name checking Meat Joy from the stage without any of us knowing and [Bikini Kill] not knowing that we were reuniting.

I bought a book called *Punk Women* that was written in 2022 and I was reading it and all of a sudden, Meat Joy was in it. It was the weirdest, craziest thing. So all of these things have been happening since we decided to come back together, and hopefully people will come.

This issue of Pleaser is all about nostalgia and childhood music. Did that play any influence in the music that y'all decide to create now?

JH: I never saw it as nostalgia, personally, unless breathing air is nostalgia. It felt like something I really wanted to do. It's something that I've wanted to happen for 30 something years, really. I guess nostalgia is kind of part of it, but I think it's more that the songs still live. I think they're still alive in all of us.

MD: Well, it was definitely nostalgic for me. John started calling, talking about how this was his favorite time of his life, was doing Meat Joy. And it was just incredibly moving and I'd go to sleep and I'd have these vivid dreams full of nostalgia.



PICTURED ABOVE: Guitarist Gretchen Phillips

GP: In a way that the past is present. Cause I see stuff like what's the spiral, what's the circle, what's the linear. This band started when I was 19 and I just turned 60. That's a long time. But in a certain way, it is helping me stay young which is what an old person wants. An old person's dream is not to grow old.

So a really important thing to me about Meat Joy was that we were more than a band that was singing a love song, [it] let me just express my feelings.

There was something very organic, but also thoughtful about it being women and men, and being women and men who are talking about being women and men. That's not always what a mixed band does, topically. And that is what we did. And I would say that comes from British punk, what was happening then. We didn't invent this. But there is a specificity to our glue.

MD: Initially we were an all female band — and these men that we brought in weren't just any men. They were kind, empathetic people. Maybe it's because they're from Minnesota, but I think it's a lot more than that. It's very easy to play music with them.

Looking at the musicians that are popular now, or maybe even the underground punk musicians, do you see yourself in them, or do you see what y'all were trying to do in what they're doing?

GP: With Meat Joy, never. I mean I really thought that we were so amazing that everybody would try to do what we were doing, cause it was clearly so awesome and that never happened. Pretty much to my amazement.

They didn't see the vision.

GP: Or they didn't have the chemistry or I really don't know why. I haven't seen the likes of us, personally, I haven't seen it.

JH: I guess in the years since we've played here, Meat Joy and the Austin scene in the riot grrrl movement, indie rock, grunge and all that kind of thing



ABOVE: (From left to right) Meat Joy members Gretchen Phillips, Jamie Spidle, Tim Mateer, Mellissa DeMille and John Hawkes.

"I never saw it as nostalgia, personally, unless breathing air is nostalgia. [...] I guess nostalgia is kind of part of it, but I think it's more that the songs still live. I think they're still alive in all of us."

BELOW: BAND ON THE RUN (From left to right) Mellissa DeMille, Carl Leefe (their roadie), Gretchen Phillips, John Hawkes, Jamie Spidle, and vocalist Tim Mateer on top of the van.



that we were not necessarily directly influencing — maybe indirectly, or who knows — but just a lot of the sounds were familiar and more kind of produced in a commercial way down the line. But I did recognize that from what [we] and a lot of people around us were playing.

JS: Tim Kerr from the Big Boys, he had an art show and he signs all of his paintings with 'your name here,' meaning that you should go out and do the next painting. And so we were very influenced by them or inspired by them to start our own band. So I think if we could do that for other people, and just say 'be creative, just try it, if you've always wanted to do it, you can do it.'

My last question for y'all: why write a book, why document this experience for the masses?

JH: You know, it's 125 books so maybe not for the masses [laughs]. But I was interested because I love books to begin with, more than anything. It was an important enough experience to me,

personally, to just want to document it like you say. It was something we all thought would be of worth somehow, of use to someone.

TM: Part of it is realizing what a special time it was, and that in other scenes at the same time, things weren't happening like they were in Austin.

GP: Maybe not as queer in the punk scene.

TM: Not as queer maybe, or generous in general.

GP: We're not invested in being cool. None of us have that as an important goal. We are dorks, but also in a certain dream, I think for me — I won't speak for them — that a fellow dork would feel safe to be a dork with me. That's what I want. And plenty of great artists are super fucking dorky, so let's make safe space for that.

TM: But the book, again, is just to share the time and the ideas and stuff. I often

tell people that we had our own little Black Mountain College here because everybody did everything. And that was one of the bases of the band is that everybody plays every instrument, that you know how to or not, and then you learn.

Who knows, maybe one of your book copies will land in the hands of somebody and they're inspired to take on the mantle.

GP: In our dreams, that's exactly right!

JS: That would be the best outcome.

JH: I'm hoping one of these will show up in a yard sale, in yard sales 100 years [from now] and someone will find it as this weird ephemera.

GP: I just want to be a good thrift store find. Everything I've ever made, I just want to be a good thrift store find. ©