

PERE UBU'S (AND ROCKET FROM THE TOMBS') DAVID THOMAS

BY STEPHEN SLAYBAUGH

THEY SAY HINDSIGHT IS 20-20, AND IT IS NO DOUBT THAT WITH SUCH VISION HISTORY REVISIONISTS LIKE TO place **ROCKET FROM THE TOMBS** at the forefront of punk's pioneers. The truth is, for all its brilliance, the band operated very briefly (eight months) and in the deepest obscurity. Making music in Cleveland in the mid-'70s very unlike that of popular celebrated native sons like Michael Stanley was not going to gain much recognition within the city's bounds, let alone on a broader level. But what great music **Rocket from the Tombs** did make, as witnessed on the first proper retrospective of the band, the recently released *The Day the Earth Met the Rocket from the Tombs: Live from Punk Ground Zero, Cleveland 1975* (Smog Veil).

But perhaps more important were the seeds that RFTT sewed. Upon its dissolution, guitarist **GENE O'CONNOR** (a.k.a. **CHEETAH CHROME**) and drummer **JOHNNY MADANSKY** (a.k.a. **JOHNNY BLITZ**) joined up with RFTT hanger-on and eventual punk casualty **STEVE "STIV" BATORS** to form **THE DEAD BOYS**, who would remake, albeit inferiorly, RFTT's "Sonic Reducer." Singer **PETER LAUGHNER** and the band's other principle songwriter **CROCUS BEHEMOUTH**, as David Thomas was known then, formed **Pere Ubu** with four others and rerecorded the **Rockets'** "30 Second Over Tokyo," releasing it on their own Hearthan label—which was changed to Hearpan for the band's

America no longer exists. There are no cultures that exist anymore. The future destroys culture. The media, which is the voice of the future, destroys culture. Phil Donahue is the culprit.

second single, another RFTT song, "Final Solution." Laughner left the band before its third single and would be dead a year later.

While past bandmates have fallen, Thomas and Pere Ubu, aside from a five-year hiatus, have persevered, continuing to exist on rock's fringes. Still the band now bears little resemblance to what it was when the *Big Takeover* last caught up with Thomas (Jack interviewed him in his adopted home England in 1993 for issue 34). Only Thomas remains from the line-up that recorded *Story of My Life*, and the band has dropped the poppy sound of that record and its predecessors, *Cloudland* (1989) and *Worlds in Collision* (1991). In its stead, Pere Ubu has returned to a clanking, atmospheric din much closer in resemblance to the sound of their classic first two LPs, *The Modern Dance* and *Dub Housing* (both 1978). Albums such as 1995's *Raygun Suitcase* and 1998's *Pennsylvania* are clearly some of the band's best work. Thomas meanwhile has continued to work on other projects in between Pere Ubu records, both on his own and with **THE PALE BOYS**. One such project, Thomas' opera, *Mirror Man* done with **THE PALE ORCHESTRA**, will be performed in February next year at a three-day event the band is hosting at UCLA called Disastrodome. What's perhaps most exciting about this event, though, is that it will include a reunited Rocket From the Tombs, which Thomas nonchalantly comments on below. At the moment, though, Pere Ubu is the main concern, with the band on tour to promote its newest release, the epic *St. Arkansas* (spinART). I caught up with Thomas in the band's birthplace before their show at the Beachland Ballroom. Former guitarist **JIM JONES** lent us the use of his kitchen for the interview. Thomas is an enjoyable conversationalist, as cantankerous as he is effusive, never short on words or opinions. Thanks to Jones for his hospitality and **BRENDAN GILMARTIN** for setting this up.

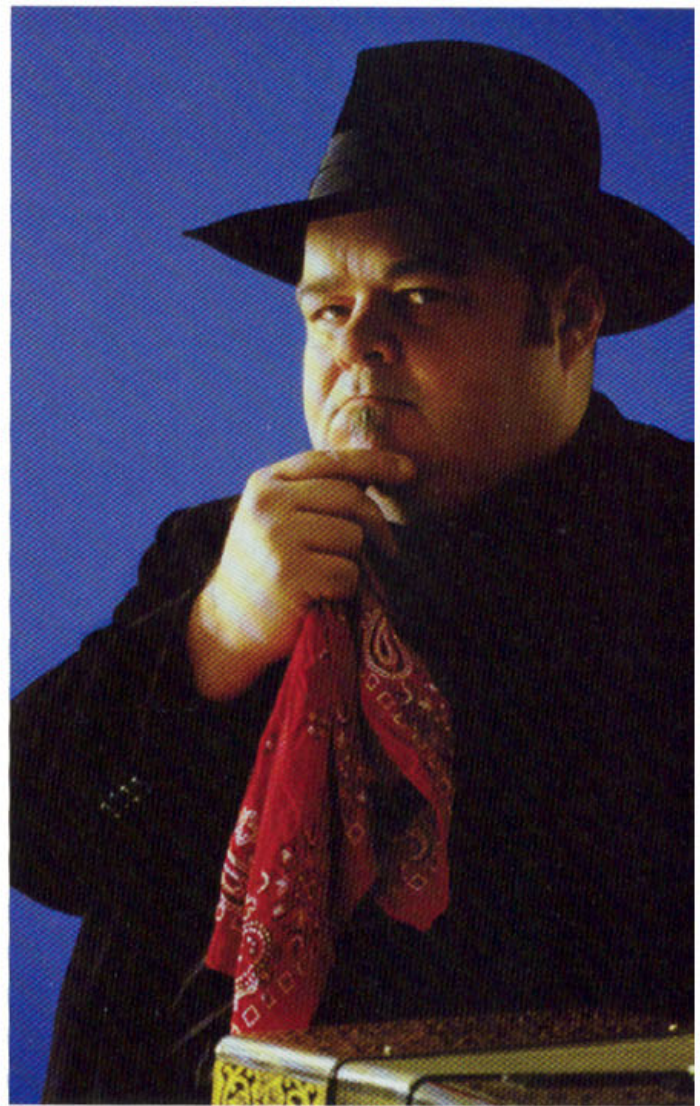
SS: You once said, "fundamental to rock music is the American geography." So is it hard for you to make music residing in England?

DAVID: I don't write about England, I write about America. By the age of four or five, your geography is permanently implanted. When it comes time to write words, I come here. I don't really do much writing in England. I do do some stuff now and then, but generally I come over here to write.

SS: How do you bide your time then?

DAVID: There's plenty of stuff to do. There's always an endless amount of paperwork. I have all sorts of production stuff to do, compiling and editing, and paying taxes. Somehow the time gets filled up more than easily. I don't write all the time; I only write when it's time to write.

SS: So you're not constantly working on songs?



DAVID: No, when it come time to work on a new project—whether it's The Pale Boys or the opera or Pere Ubu or any of the theater things—I've done a certain amount of ground work ahead of time and I've got a feel for what I want to achieve, but that's when I start working on it. I don't sit around and think pretty thoughts for the hell of it. I don't like writing. I don't like music. I don't like doing any of it, so I don't just do it. When it's time to work and it needs being done, then I do it. It hurts too much to be screwballing around with it just for fun. I like the process of it. I like the hardness of it, that's the part I enjoy.

SS: Do you view it as a job then?

DAVID: It doesn't matter what I view it as; it *is* my job. That's what I get paid for. I get paid to be sensitive. It's a hell of a job!

SS: So you're not one of these sensitive artists who have music seeping out of their every pore?

DAVID: Artists lie. Musicians can't be sensitive and be professional musicians. They lie to people like you because that's what you guys want to hear. It requires a lack of any sensitivity, because you have to get on-stage and usually humiliate yourself in front of a bunch of people and then get up and do it again the next night. Normal people couldn't do that because they would feel shame or remorse or embarrassment, or that they should get another job, or any number of other things that a professional musician will not think or feel. My opinion of musicians is extremely low. There is this sort of romantic view that everybody has of musicians, and of course musicians play to it. Not to say I'm not sensitive, but I'm paid to be sensitive. Generally, musicians have all the faults of actors, who have to be loved and will do anything to be popular.

If Nazism was the reigning cool philosophy, we'd all be Nazis.

SS: So do you need to be loved?

DAVID: Clearly I have a need for something, but I'm not into doing a psychological analysis. You don't have to go on a stage to make up words or ideas. You can do it at home. But if I wasn't actually being paid to make records, I wouldn't make music. If I wasn't being paid to deliver something, I wouldn't write words. I don't see the point of doing that sort of thing in isolation. I don't see the point of just writing something just for the sake of it. The point of it all is to perform in front of people on some level—it doesn't have to be a commercial level—but just some sort of formal presentation.

SS: So there always has to be a listener?

DAVID: There always has to be an audience. There's no point without an audience. Music doesn't exist—sound doesn't exist—unless there's someone to hear it and react to it. But that's just me. I came to it from a different angle than other people.

SS: Is it your preference to work specifically in Ohio?

DAVID: No, I just write when it's time to write. For any particular project, let's say *Arkansas*, we get together and **TOM [HERMAN]** and the others bring in the musical ideas. We bash the ideas around and shape them into succinct packets of music and sound and then we record them. Then I start working on the words. On this one, I decided that I was just going to get in the car and drive for a number of weeks until I felt ready to write. Once I felt ready to write, I set off again, and basically the thing was written between Conway, Arkansas and Tupelo, Mississippi. Then I came home.

SS: Did you know where you were going when you got in the car?

DAVID: No, I drove 'till I got in a certain state of mind. It took more than a week. I can't remember exactly, but it took awhile. Along the way, I would drop in on people I knew—a person in Detroit, another person in Conway, which is how I got out there. I hung out in Conway for a few days, decided I was ready to write, and headed back. I drove down 49 to Clarksdale and across Mississippi 6 to Tupelo. By Tupelo I was pretty much done with the album. It probably only took a day and a half of writing, but as with any of this stuff, you have to get in the right frame of mind. During that process you collect notes and get an idea of what you're going to do. Then I was open to the road, as it were. You could probably trace where each of those songs were written across that span. There's usually some line or some thing in it. "Phone Home Jonah" comes from this exit, Crystal Hill, right outside Conway. On it, I sing, "On Crystal Hill, I'll be crawling in the dust on my belly when the sun goes down." Maybe not all of the songs could be put somewhere, but most of them could.

SS: Is the album in any sort of linear order then?

DAVID: No, I wish it was, but it's not.

SS: So was your process similar for *Pennsylvania*?

DAVID: No, the processes are never similar. As you go into a record, you have an artistic idea, an emotional idea, and at a certain point you figure out a technique that will produce the best results for that idea. On *Arkansas*, I was going up the road, and on *Pennsylvania*... I can't even remember what the technique was. It wasn't anything so dramatic. Usually, you have a way you are going to record the album and put the sound on tape. The technique is really important to achieving the end.

SS: Has living in England at all spawned this fascination with America?

DAVID: My career, as far as writing goes, has taken any one of several various courses at different points, but it's always centered around the nature of geography and sound. That was always the thing about Pere Ubu in the beginning. Everyone always goes on about the sound of the Flats or whatever they are

always going on about. First, we were post-industrial and then we became pre-industrial and I never figured out how that worked. It's like Peking. One day it was "Peking" and the next it was "Beijing" and you were an idiot if you didn't know it. The nature of what we've done from the beginning has always been very geocentric, having to do with sound and geography and space. Ever since I went out to Siberia... I was sent out to Siberia by *SPIN* magazine to write an article, which I did. It cost them a whole lot of money—\$15,000 or something—and they never printed it. They said, "It's a great article, but it's a little too smart for our readers." But they paid me, so I didn't care. I had gone out to take a look at the nature of isolation and electronic music when it interfaces with cultures in isolation. While I was out there I ran into **ARTEMY TROITSKY**, who was the leading counterculture critic in Russia during the cold years, though obviously he is now the establishment. But he said a very interesting thing. He said that the most ordinary garage band in Kansas plays rock music with more authenticity and soul than whoever you want to name from England—**THE ROLLING STONES** or **U2** or **THE SMITHS**, or whoever you want to put in there—because they're playing a music that is in their blood. There's an authenticity to them—this ordinary garage band in Kansas that doesn't exist—that these other bands don't have. I began thinking about that. It tied into the nature of music in Russia, which was an analogue to what was happening to music in America in the '70s. So from then on, I became interested in that. Then the Cultural Geography department at Wooster College asked me to do a lecture, that I eventually finished as "The Geography of Sound in the Magnetic Age." That solidified a lot of my thoughts on how to produce music and the importance of sound in space and culture. This is a really long answer to the fact that the last number of albums—beginning vaguely with *Raygun Suitcase*, emphasized on *Pennsylvania* and moving a step further with *St.*

Continued on page 186

Arkansas, as well as along the way doing *Mirror Man* and the Pale Boys records—have dealt with these ideas.

SS: Are these songs about rural America at all an attempt...

DAVID: I don't really see it as being about rural America. I don't really see that I'm working on that sort of agenda. I see stories of people and I hear the stories of people, and I try to translate those things. Now, a lot of this, I guess, happens out in the country. I'm not sure that I'm seeking that, though. It's just that I love to drive and I love to see things. I think that's where it comes out. When I'm writing, I drive around a lot. I go someplace and I try to live it for a minute or two.

SS: Let's just say "these unique places." Is it at all an attempt to capture these unique places before America becomes totally homogenized?

DAVID: America was wiped out in a nuclear attack by the Red Chinese in 1979, and has been repopulated since then by clones. So America no longer exists. There are no cultures that exist anymore. The future destroys culture. The media, which is the voice of the future, destroys culture. It's all too late. I'm not trying to capture anything because it's all gone. I'm not trying to signpost anything. **PHIL DONAHUE** is the culprit.

SS: Is there really salvation to be found on AM radio? [laughs] You can interpret that however you like.

DAVID: Clearly, this is a character. There is a particular power in that song, and it tries to paint a picture of a person. It's not autobiographical. That's actually the one song that wasn't written between Conway and Tupelo; it was written between Nashville and Memphis. It doesn't say anything about salvation; it says "radio will set you free." There's a difference! Another one of the themes of my work—if you can talk of it in such terms—is the conflict between the media, which is the destructive voice of the future, and the average person—the common man, struggling to cobble together order and meaning out of the detritus of culture and anti-culture that he finds around him, you know the cynicism of the media priests. That was certainly drawn into this piece. AM radio has always been the voice of the people, as it were. Even back when there wasn't "talk radio" there was talk radio. It was "hit" radio, AM radio. It was still the voice of the people. FM was always this snooty, do-gooder, self-satisfying, elitist medium. And it was in stereo, which is just an abomination. FM is principally responsible for the compression techniques that have blighted popular music since the '70s, so they have a lot to answer for. AM radio has always been the vox populi, the voice of the people..

SS: Do you think internet radio has the potential to be that?

DAVID: No, it's a lousy medium. It sounds lousy. Everyone wants to pretend it's OK, but it doesn't sound any good. It's all based on elitism of one form or another, anyway. I am pretentious and I revel in my pretensions, but I don't like elitism, particularly. I like to hear the voice of people, both musically and verbally. And that of course is one of the big fears of the media priests. One of their objectives is to keep the voice of the ordinary person silenced as much as possible, because ordinary people say things that don't fit into neat, little packages. I think there needs to be more awkward and embarrassing things said in the future. Trouble always comes when you try to silence that stuff because it never works and backfires, as it's happening now in Europe.

SS: Let's talk about the recent *Rocket From the Tombs* release. I assume you had more input than the radio broadcast disk from ten years ago.

DAVID: Yeah, Jimmy [Jones] and I put it together.

SS: Do you think this release will show the significance...

DAVID: I don't know that we had any significance. It depends on

what you mean by "significance." This is a weird subject. You might have thought you were asking a simple question, but it's not really simple. It really depends on whether you believe in morphic resonance or not. If you do, then yes, the band had significance. And if you don't, it was a totally insignificant band as no one ever saw us other than a couple hundred people, most of whom were musicians themselves who went on to form bands that no one ever heard of either. I don't know if it really makes any difference. Clearly it was a strong band doing interesting things, but no one ever knew about us. It was a foundation stone to what myself and others did later. Every-

[On *Rocket From the Tombs*:] I don't know that we had any significance. It depends on what you mean by "significance." It was a totally insignificant band as no one ever saw us other than a couple hundred people, most of whom were musicians themselves who went on to form bands that no one ever heard of either. [But] everything I've done since then has been built on that foundation.

thing I've done since then has been built on that foundation.

SS: Are there other RFTT recordings that have yet to see the light?

DAVID: There are a few things, but the question is how many versions of "30 Seconds Over Tokyo" can the world stand? We have a recording of the first show, but it would only be interesting to idiot fanatics. We're going to review the situation in a year and see what we have left to put out and how we feel about it.

SS: You're doing a reunion in L.A. Who's involved with that show?

DAVID: **GENE**, i.e. **CHEETAH**, [bassist] **CRAIG BELL**, me, [former Peru Ubu drummer **STEVE MEHLMAN**, and an as-of-yet undetermined second guitar player, though we have a couple people in mind. We're going to get together in a couple weeks before I go back to England and go over the stuff and make a decision then.

SS: How did it come about?

DAVID: I'm putting on this three-day festival with UCLA, Disastrodome. We needed to get an opening act for Ubu and the guy at UCLA weirdly, half-suggested the idea. And so I said "sure." There wasn't any particular grand plan and it's not going to go any further. I thought it might be fun. I talked to Gene and Craig and they were keen to do it.

SS: When was the last time you played with those guys?

DAVID: Oh, I don't know, 1975! [laughs] That's why you rehearse.

SS: I'm going to read a quote from what you told my editor, **JACK RABID**, in 1993, for *Big Takeover* issue 34. "I mean, clearly what's going to happen is the record industry is going to split, and there's going to be the ever-corporate entertainment megalopolis, because they've already decided to eliminate hardware anyway. The CD is out. All these other things, these digital cassettes, none of that stuff. It's all going to disappear. Do not buy those machines. They will disappear. Because I know that Phillips Corp. and Sony Corp. have decided to dump all that hardware, and they're moving into

satellite transmissions and pure software, so that there will be nothing to bootleg anymore. If you eliminate the hardware and the unit that the software is contained on, then you eliminate the possibilities to boot it. So what will happen is the real record business that I'm concerned with will return to the '50s. It'll return to people selling records out of the backs of cars to Mom-and-Pop shops that specialize. The big-bucks era will be gone. Or the big-bucks will get even bigger. The Madonna level of things will exist and they'll have this Mom-and-Pop shop stuff at the bottom, at another level, and there's nothing going to be in between. And when it reaches that point, that will be good." Pretty prophetic, I'd say!

DAVID: Vaguely prophetic. It sees bootlegging only in terms of hardware bootlegging, though, and skips the one everyone is talking about now, which is of course mp3s. But close enough! [laughs] It's going to have to really, really get bad before it ever goods. The problem is I'm not sure that it ever will get good again in our lifetimes. Everyone likes to talk about the pendulum-swinging model, but someone just made that up. It's just like someone made up, "It's the exception that proves the rule," but wait a minute, how does that work? It's just one of those things someone said one day and everyone went, "Oh yeah! It's the exception that proves the rule!" [laughs] That pendulum model is in that, somewhere. As I said before, the media is the voice of the future, and it's traveling in time in an opposite direction from the rest of us. This is why you have these strange phenomena. It just might be that it ain't ever gonna get better for a long time, or at least "better" in the way we were... [obviously flummoxed at guessing my age and if I'm of a generation close to his], in the way I determine "as it used to be," which was this wide-open, cowboy operation. It was a whole lot of fun and there were people who really believed in what they were doing. Money got thrown around and people took a gamble on something someone sort of liked. There was obviously the corporate company trash, as there always has been, but there was a high percentage of good people. So that is what I call "better," but then again it's a self-serving definition, because clearly I would prefer a system where people fall in love with you and throw money at you. [laughs] It's a better system than having to prove you're worth that amount of money with your record sales! [laughs] I don't like that system!

SS: The only thing you seem to get wrong in your prediction is concerning Sony and Phillips. The corporations seem to be fighting against the new technology.

DAVID: No, of course they love the new technology. They're not clamping down on it. They're just trying to maintain control of it, which is perfectly reasonable. You don't get a sympathetic ear from me on this thing. Here you have people like us [Pere Ubu], who spend all of our time to make it sound just right, and then it gets compressed into this format and we're supposed to think it's great? As far as the other issues, you know the companies pay the musicians. The musicians sell the copyright to the company—they don't have to, but they do—so let's not have any phony weeping about that. As usual on this whole debate, which I guess is between the pirate, freeloading youth of today versus the corporate structure, it's the musicians who get dumped in the middle. Both sides want us to give up our split. All of the people who want mp3 for free want us to cut our royalty rates for internet radio. The companies meanwhile say they'll do it, but they need to cut the rates to the musicians. So both these sides want us to solve their problem by taking less money. I'm not sympathetic to it at all. Also, you get what you pay for. If I go out and buy an album for \$15 and you download the same album for free, I have \$15 worth of value from the listening experience. You get no value out of the listening experience. Now this is a concept that most people have difficulty dealing with because it has to do with a Zen or spiritual value. If you value something, you treasure the experience of consuming it. If you don't value it, it just goes right through you. I can prove that if you pay nothing for something, you will not get the same value from it. This is the nature of the great sentimentality for vinyl that's lasted for so long. To me, it has nothing to do with the sound. I never liked vinyl; I hated it. I was delighted when CDs and

digital sound came along. But one of the reasons there's this great nostalgia is that you have to treasure a vinyl record because it can be destroyed. If you have something that can be damaged, you have to preserve it. So if you place value on the container of the art, you place greater value on the art itself. When you are confronted with that art, your mind is open to a much greater degree. With a CD, you can Frisbee the thing across the floor and odds are you won't damage it, and if the jewel case breaks you can get another one.

SS: As the only constant, does Pere Ubu adhere to your vision?

DAVID: In theory, Pere Ubu doesn't adhere to anyone's vision. Clearly because I write the words, though, the mostly obvious part of the vision ends up being reflective of my own ideas. But musically, it's pretty even across the board and it always has been. The music is the product of everything. Over the years, because I'm the one that stays, I'm the one who asks people to join and I've asked people to join that coalesce with the vision. Everyone who works in the band knows the ways we do things to preserve the essential core of the methodology. The sound is a result of that.

SS: With *Raygun Suitcase* you returned to a sound that was more like your older records...

DAVID: Well, that's what everyone says.

SS: Well, if you look at *Cloudland* and *Worlds in Collision* and *Story of My Life*, I think that they were far more conventional.

DAVID: They were conventional for other folks, but not for us! [laughs] I'm sorry, what's your question?

SS: How conscious of a decision was it?

DAVID: It was a very conscious decision. The band was in a fragile state at that time. **SCOTT [KRAUSS, former drummer]** didn't like the songs we were writing, even though he was part of the writing process, and didn't want to do them. So I said, "OK, but I'm going ahead." And the other people in the band wanted to know how we were going to record a record without a drummer, but I said, "Look, we're doing this." That was the record that changed the basic structure of production in the group. I said, "I'm producing this record and we're not going to do it the way we used to." So I put the whole record together and recorded it, waiting for Scott to change his mind. The thing was recorded with a click track and then on the last day of recording, when it was apparent Scott wasn't changing his mind, we had the drummer from **MICHELLE's** other band come in and lay all the drums down in a day, which was quite a feat to do after the fact. It was quite a feat anyway to do the whole thing without a drummer, and then add it at the end and not have it show. So whether it goes back to an earlier sound, I don't know, maybe. It was the first record that we didn't use the same producer and the first record that wasn't done in the confused state of things that had prevailed for awhile.

SS: Original guitarist Tom Herman returned to the band with *Pennsylvania*. What caused him to come back or what did it take?

DAVID: A lot of money! He actually came back to the band for the *Raygun Suitcase* tours because Jimmy had some health problems and couldn't go out on the road for a long period. I asked him and he said okay. We almost asked him back some years previously, but some confusion got in the way. So the tour went well and he stayed on when it was time to make *Pennsylvania*.

SS: Do you feel like the band sound's is more "Pere Ubu," whatever that means, with him in the band?

DAVID: Versus Jimmy?! Do you want me to say that in Jimmy's house? Well, no, the answer's no. Tom brings a very particular thing to the group. Jimmy brings a very particular to the group. And other people in that position, which I guess would only be **MAYO THOMPSON** [also guitarist of **RED CRAYOLA**, and producer of **THE CHILLS'** first LP, among others], definitely brought a particular thing to the group. I don't see any of them being more "Pere Ubu" than the others. ☉