

**Songs
the
Cramps
taught
us:**

**Ivy
in L.A.**



The instructions were that while I was rubbing the sleep from my eyes at 7 am, Thursday, September 24, Cramps, rhythm guitarist Ivy Rorschach would be waiting beside a phone in Los Angeles for my call. Los Angeles? The band that reputedly spent the first twelve months of their existence watching sci fi movies on TV in a blacked-out New York apartment are in Los Angeles? *Living in Los Angeles?*

"Yeah, we've been here about six months," replies Ivy, for whom it is midday.

"There are some bad things here, but you're free to do what you want to do. And you can drive a car here, which you can't do in New York. I grew up driving a car, and I always thought driving around with cassettes playing was a part of rock'n'roll. We may go back to New York, but we've always been pretty transient."

So what are you actually *doing* in Los Angeles? The third album?

"We're between labels at the moment. We weren't happy with some things at IRS, and I'm happy to be making a new start. We think we might start on the new album around February, but at the moment we're just gigging around and writing songs. I can't say who has expressed interest in us so far, but we don't expect there will be any problem."

Overseas, the Cramps have released two albums, one extra single ('Drug Train') and a five-track EP. It seemed logical to backtrack.

"We started playing at Max's Kansas City late 1976. We auditioned first for CBGBs but we weren't accepted. Our first gig was amazing. We got four encores, but it was really strange, because we were out of tune all the way through the set. We'd just put new strings on coz we thought they would make us sound better."

The vinyl debut came on the tiny Vengeance label, with the

justifiably legendary Alex Chilton producing (the first two singles later came out as part of the *Gravest Hits* EP). So, why Alex Chilton?

"We met him through a mutual friend. He'd been coming to all the gigs, though we didn't know that, and he loved the band. He said he could get us into the Ardent Studios in Memphis, so we went with him."

Chilton, who was soon telling anyone who cared to listen that the Cramps were the best rock'n'roll band in the world, was retained for the first album. The awesomely raw trademarks of his own records were understandably a feature of his proteges' — that, and an almost obscene use of distortion. How did the engineers react?

"Everything was recorded in the red," says Ivy gleefully. "We used a really old microphone that distorted real bad — I love that sound, though some people don't. *Gravest Hits* is still my favourite of what we've done. It's real wild, it doesn't sound like anything else."

Chilton seemed to disappear without trace after the first Cramps' album. Those who remember wasted photos of him slumped at New York club tables in the late 70s might not be too surprised to hear Ivy talk of his 'problems' ...

"He's back in Memphis somewhere. He was in a band for a while but I don't know what he's doing now. I'd like to work with him again, but probably not for an album. He changes his mind a lot."

For *Songs The Lord Taught Us*, the Cramps went into one of rock'n'roll's genuinely famous studios — Sam Phillips' Sun Studios in Memphis. What did the veteran rocker think of the Cramps?

"He wasn't there during the recording, though we did talk to him one day when he came by to cut the hedge outside the studio — the branches were starting to obscure his name on the sign. Nick said he had all his records, and Sam told him he was real lucky. He's a very mysterious guy."

The thing that got most critics about that first album was the fact the band had no bass guitarist.

"It just sort of evolved that way. At the start when we didn't know much about playing, nobody wanted to play bass — and a lot of those old rockabilly bands didn't have a bass anyway. It's just an intuitive thing, but I don't think we need it."

They sure don't. Most (male) bass players would give their right ball to be in a band with as much graunch at the bottom as the Cramps. So how do they do it? Tune the guitars down maybe?

"No. Kid plays an open E tuning, but that's about it. I guess you're just hearing more tones. We don't play anything lower, though we might wind a note down at the end of a song."

Ivy furled a few eyebrows with the guitar she was playing on the sleeve photo for *Gravest Hits*. What was, or is it?

"It's a Lewis, a Canadian guitar. I've never seen another one, and I'm sure they're not making them anymore. I don't let anyone else play it."

Still obsessed with this guitar sound business, I enquire tactfully how come the live 'Tear It Up' on the 'Urgh!' movie soundtrack doesn't sound nearly as meaty as on the album.

"I think that was mastered poorly," she replies. "There's about 25 minutes to a side, and we sound too thin. I wasn't

too happy about it."

By the time the Cramps were ready for their second album (*Psychedelic Jungle*) they had replaced their outrageous lead guitarist Bryan Gregory with a person variously referred to as Kid Congo, Congo Powers, or even his real name, Brian Tristan.

Gregory must have been a hard man to replace. "Not really. Kid had been in the front row of our audience for ages. We didn't hold an audition because we didn't know how to hold one — besides, we thought it should be a bit more magical than that. Kid is a real Cramps' fan, which Bryan wasn't. I think he fits in better."

After Gregory left the band, there were rumours of suicide. "I think he started a lot of those rumours himself to stay in the public eye. I've no idea what he's doing now. He tried to get a few bands together for a while. I'm really not that interested in him."

The Cramps kept basically the same sound for the second album, though some did feel it was a little less bizarre.

"We could have done with a bigger budget — we did it for about \$10,000 in ten days. The first one had a lot more time and money spent on it, and that could account for the difference. But many of the songs on the second album were from before the first album. I'm happy with the second album."

Both Ivy and drummer Nick Knox are fervent record collectors. So, did they get the sublime 'Green Fuzz' from the original, or the *Pebbles* — that and 'Primitive'. I love 'Green Fuzz'. The original was so simple but so beautiful. I hear the writer is real shocked about us doing it — he's a hippy down in Texas or something."

The conversation shifts to talk of great sixties' American punk bands. I suggest it's time the Cramps did the Fendermen's 'Mule Skinner Blues'.

"Yeah, we thought about doing that — it was the 'Surfin' Bird' of its era. We still might do it. At the moment we're doing Paul Revere & The Raiders' 'Hungry', Tommy James' 'Hanky Panky' and Red Crayola's 'Human Fighter Plane'. We always did half rockabilly and half sixties' punk, but I think on the next album there will only be one or two covers."

The obvious single to me on *Psychedelic Jungle* was 'Green Door'. Ivy agrees.

"I think we would have done Shakin' Stevens on that one — especially as he got the idea of doing it from us."

But 'Goo Goo Muck' got the nod. It was the first Cramps' single to get any radio play in America beyond 'special college programmes', but it certainly was no hit.

What, therefore, does Ivy think of those acutely reaping dollars from rockabilly at the moment — the faithful non-updating copyists like Stevens and Stray Cats?

"I don't think they're faithful, I think they're disgusting. The old rockabilly people didn't dress like that, or sing like that. The real rockabilly was too wild. These people are grabbing at the wrong things."

The Cramps have played with a few of the old rockers in America, and Ivy says there has been a degree of acceptance there. But a typical Cramps' audience shreds all boundaries.

"There is no typical Cramps' fan. We get a real mixed crowd, and I love looking out at that kind of crowd where there are people together who would normally not go anywhere near each other."

Time is running out. A final question — the writers in the feminist magazines are forever championing the many women teeming through today's rock charts. But ole Ivy never gets a single mention — even though she's climbed right inside a real traditional male arena, the aggressive electric rhythm guitarist arena, and come out shining.

"Yeah, I haven't had as much attention there as I would have thought. It's strange — there have always been women fronting bands — but it seems a lot more unusual doing what I do. Hard rock has always been associated with sexism, but the two don't necessarily go together. Maybe the feminists think our sort of rock is a bit backward."

Quite possibly they do. But as any real rock fan knows, backwards is where much of the fun really lies.
Roy Colbert

CITY SALON PH 795-626

at last
THE FURYS
'RARE RECORD'
EP
is readily available
4 tracks
\$3.50



AT RECORD SHOPS & THRU PO BOX 6537, AUCKLAND (\$4 BY POST)

'81 'RARE APPEARANCES' TOUR

THE FURYS

AUCKLAND 10-11 NOV. CHRISTCHURCH 19-21 NOV.
HASTINGS 12-14 PALMERSTON NORTH 23-24
WELLINGTON 16-17 TOKOROA 25-26
BLENHEIM 18 HAMILTON 27-28

R&B IS BACK!
INFO: SNAP-ON MUSIC, PO BOX 5556, AUCKLAND, PH (09) 872-687

WANNA SELL YA RECORDS
TOP PRICES PAID RECORD EXCHANGE ST. KEVINS ARCADE K'RD. 790-812
★ AS NEW ALBUMS GUARANTEED