David Thomas, "Ghoulardi: Lessons in Mayhem from the 1st Age of Punk"

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The first and possibly only native punk movement in America ended in the mid-60s and was to be found, not within rock music, but within the fluid boundaries of local radio and TV media communities. The Garage Punk bands of the 60s should be seen as an evolutionary growth of rock music as a folk phenomenon; the American Punk activity of the late 70s as a pop artifice promulgated by foreign cultural imperialists and promoted by corporate interests, Madison Avenue arrivists and chicken-hawking sexual deviants. It was designed, by intent or circumstance, to subvert and short-circuit what was already an emerging wave of third generation Rock Youth represented by such literate bands as Television, Talking Heads, Pere Ubu, the Residents, MX80 Sound and others. Simultaneously, a media-induced state of datapanik served to bury Meaning within a flood of anodyne and charming data-chaff.

Driven by local circumstances, inspired by local characters, and fueled by the sort of unrefined exuberance to be expected even in the last wild days of a technological frontier, isolated pockets of punk activity were capable of throwing up sometimes astonishing phenomena that blossomed and then withered unnoticed outside a limited geography. Where, in former times, mountains, deserts and rivers might have served to isolate communities, in the 50s and 60s, broadcast throw and reception range would act in a similar way. These were the days of regional radio hits - localized charts were the norm rather than the exception. These were the days of the wild child personality radio jocks and their story has been told often and in great detail. Less known, less appreciated and far rarer were the wild child TV punks. There were, of course, influential national figures such as Ernie Kovacs, Soupy Sales and Steve Allen, and radio antecedents such as Arthur Godfrey, but spotted here and there across the country were equally innovative and often far more idiosyncratic local characters. The one I know about is Ernie Anderson. He is the father of director Paul Anderson, and between 1963 and 1966 he was the biggest thing in Cleveland, unrivaled even by the mighty Jim Brown. His presence dominated the city's landscape at a time when Cleveland was the second largest Hungarian-language city in the world. His catch-phrases entered and still remain in the vernacular. His antics and jokes were recounted in every school and bar and factory and office. He outraged the great and the good. But even so, at the peak of his popularity, the omnipresent family restaurant chain, Manners Big Boy, would produce blue milk shakes in plastic cups emblazoned with his image and his slogan, "Stay sick and turn blue!"

Ernie Anderson left Cleveland after 1966 and moved to Los Angeles where he, eventually, became the voice of ABC, Monday Night Football, Ford Motors, and most memorably the voice of "The Luuhv Boat." Imitators who traded in his persona rose and fell and rose again in the Cleveland and Detroit markets over the decades. He died in

February 1997. On TV, in Cleveland, he was known as Ghoulardi.

While radio jocks traded heavily in the Persona Marketplace, ultimately, they prospered or failed depending to a significant degree on the popularity of the playlist. Success on TV, however, is more thoroughly reliant on the immediacy of the mask & the masquerade - certainly in the case of Ghoulardi, a Friday night / Saturday afternoon monster movie host constrained by a local TV budget to packages of the cheapest Hollywood B-movies. The Disembodied, World Without End, Ghost Diver, Sh! The Octopus, From Hell It Came. The list makes Attack of the Fifty-Foot Woman look like quality. Most people were not tuning in to see the movie.

The Cleveland / Akron underground of the mid-70s has been subject to speculation and keen interest because of the "otherness" of the bands it spawned. But why was it such a specific and limited generational window? What was the source of such rage, such disaffection from not only the mainstream culture but also from the so-called counterculture - in fact from any subculture you'd care to mention? What could produce such a contradiction as this set of radical innovators who embraced consumerist media with such enthusiasm?

The answer for many of us is simple. We were the Ghoulardi kids.

I was nine in 1963 when Ghoulardi went on air. He was 40. I was 13 when he quit in 1966. After him I believe that I could only have perceived the nature of media and the possibilities of the narrative voice in particular ways. Describing how he devastated the authority of the media, and of the Great and the Good, how he turned the world upside down and inside out, it seems, is nearly impossible for an outsider to appreciate. Some prankster sloganeering, lots of whacked hipster dialect, some primitive blue screen technique, and lots of firecrackers exploding inside Rat Fink dragster models, all sandwiched between movie segments over the course of 90 minutes on the TV every Friday night - how unsafe could that be? You have no idea. Ghoulardi was the Flibberty Jib Man - Ken Nordine's drifter who enchants the populace of a town with nothing more than the sound of his voice.

(You can get some sense of the expressive power of Ernie Anderson's voice from the vocal symphony that is his delivery of "The Luuhv Boat," a phrasing and performance that, decades later, is still fixed in the popular consciousness.)

This may sound improbably portentous for a mere monster movie host but you really had to experience it - experience the mayhem - to appreciate how powerful this masquerade was. Everyone who saw Ghoulardi will tell a favorite story - like the night he set off a egregiously large home-made explosive device sent it by a fan - he was always setting off fireworks and blowing up things in the studio - and quite clearly off-camera crew were telling Ghoulardi not to light it up and you could see people running across the studio, the camera abandoned to skew off balance, pointing at the floor, and then the entire room was stunned senseless for some minutes... live... smoke, curtains on fire, people stumbling around...

Or the night he repeated the "What, me worry" phrase for 10 minutes progressing through the range of all possible inflections and dramatizations... or certainly enough of them. (Ghoulardi would sometimes set out, perversely, to induce tedium as its own form of mayhem. In a Gunsmoke parody he and supporting characters sat round a table not saying anything, not moving - stone cold nothing - for a minute. "Let me think," he said and he sat there.)

But the most memorable and distinctive feature of the Ghoulardi show involved the lexicon of audio, film and blue screen drop-ins he and his crew developed to artfully disrupt any linear experience the audience might hope for, and to generally punk out the proceedings. Some of the staple film drop-ins included clips of an English gurning competitor, two trains colliding, an improbable winged aircraft collapsing inward, and a fat lady dancing like a ballerina. Audio drop-ins were likely to be bits of polkas, Rivingtons and Trashmen riffs or Scream Jay Hawkins eruptions.

The best drop-ins were the real time blue screen improvisations, each timed out to the second and cued by an engineer looking at a stopwatch. The technique, traceable to John Zacherle in New York City, seems to have been independently developed by Chuck Schodowski, Ghoulardi's "producer/engineer." In a haunted house Ghoulardi appears in a hallway warning, "Don't open that door!" Dropped in next to a caveman gnawing on a bone he offers to take him out for a pizza. And there is a particularly memorable scene from Dr Cyclops, repeated to great effect in Attack of the Crab Monster, where Ghoulardi drops into a cave scene amongst a bunch of nervous characters and he's running from side to side waving his arms and jumping ludicrously up and down.

The B-movie was for Ghoulardi a canvas, an open invitation to spread mayhem, and generally engage in ransacking any sense of good taste, worthiness or respectability that local TV might aspire to. The amateurish enthusiasm and naive intention of the B-movie encourages a kind of communal abstraction that approaches folk culture, and the frequent lack of a coherent agenda leaves lots of wiggle room for whatever personalized context or agenda an audience - or TV host - chooses to overlay.

But Ghoulardi was in a different league from other monster movie hosts. He eschewed the gothic make-up, and Bela Lugosi affectations. Even his name subverted the genre - the first syllable acting as the set-up, the last two the sucker punch. Chef Boyardee, maker of canned spaghetti... Et voila! Ghoul-ar-dee!

Look at him. Fright wig, fake mustache and goatee in constant peril of peeling away. Lab coat, sunglasses with missing lens.

Note the Nixon-Lodge button. The "LBJ for the USA" button. The "I've Had Enough, I'm Voting Republican" button.

Think of Ghoulardi as a Last Hurrah of that pop culture masquerade, The Rebel Without A Cause. Just a guy with a Bad Attitude. Apolitical, non-aligned, drifting across the

landscape content to leave behind nothing more than mayhem. "What are you protesting against?" "Whatta ya got?"

The politicization of 60s pop music - and the effective end of the Rebel Without A Cause mask - was certainly well under way when Ghoulardi bowed out in 1966. Ghoulardi hated pop. He was a jazz fan. He and Schodowski orchestrated the musical side of their mayhem with mainly instrumental rock, jazz and blues clips - The Ventures, Booker T, Tom King and the Starfires, Oscar Peterson, Jimmy McGriff (who wrote "Turn Blue" for Ghoulardi) - along with... polkas. Duane Eddy's "The Desert Rat" was his theme tune. Frankie Yankovic's "Who Stole the Kishka?" figured prominently. The instrumental tracks featured lots of raw guitar. The fewer vocal tracks were pointedly aggressive nonsense like the Rivington's "PAPA-ooM-Mow-Mow" and "The Bird's The Word," or barely articulate rages like Screamin Jay Hawkins' "Constipation Blues" or "I Put a Spell on You."

Ghoulardi didn't do safe. In the days when Huntley & Brinkley and Walter Cronkite and any number of local luminaries were demigod arbiters of truth and reality, Ghoulardi launched an assault on their credibility, ravaging the third-rail untouchable righteousness of the Media Priests. The most devastating effect was achieved with a single word, 3 syllables, one question mark: "Dor-o-thy?!"

Dorothy Fuldheim was a frumpish intellectual drawn from academia to serve as a nightly commentator on Channel 5 news. She was the Grande Dame of the media elite, the great and the good were tucked up snug and warm inside her huge handbag. The master of mayhem, the rebel with no cause, Mr. Bad Attitude, locked her in his sights and homed in. Ghoulardi understood the medium better, far better, than his targets.

"Dor-o-thy?" he asked. It was only a question - usually followed by a drop-in of the exultant intro to "Who Stole The Kishka?" - but the incredulity of the delivery was withering in its impact. "The Emperor has no clothes," it shouted out in the irrefutable language of the inarticulate front-end that is television. What response is possible? Logic? Reason? Counter-argument? Impotent, the great and the good could only bemoan the corruption of youth.

Years later in the early 70s in Cleveland there was an art terrorist crew, on the fringes of the Coventry Road / American Splendor crowd, called Fred & Ethel Mertz. They "adjusted" billboards - always smiley-faced, perfectly coifed local TV news portraits - with the slogans "Question Authority" or, more often, "Nuke The Whales." They painted on sunglasses and goatees. They were Ghoulardi kids.

One more chapter of the Ghoulardi story needs to be described and relates most significantly to his downfall. It concerns "Parma Place," a mini-soap opera incorporated into his program slots. Parma is a western suburb of predominantly Polish extraction. The vocal performance that is "Dor-o-thy?!" had been previously honed and perfected with the exclamation, "Par-ma?!" to such effect that Parma City Council would spend much effort countering the mischaracterization of their town. Parma Place featured three

"certain ethnic characters", as they were described, played by Anderson, Schodowski and the wife of a well-known local DJ. They were usually seen sitting on a couch watching TV and talking about what they had been doing or might do - if they only could stop watching the TV. It was parochial, unabashedly working class ethnic and full of local inside jokes.

So one night at Severance Hall, home of the imperious George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra, then at the very peak of its powers, Maestro Szell introduced a violinist noting that he had grown up in Parma. From all accounts a shockingly large proportion of the audience, considering the classiness of the venue, erupted with the "Par-ma?!" Question.

The hammer had to come down. This had gone too far. And Ernie Anderson himself had grown tired of the part and of the escalating hassles. He quit. He moved on. He left behind a generational window of kids with a different sort of POV.

So, without Ghoulardi would there have been The Cramps - a band so thoroughly co-optive of the Ghoulardi persona that when they first appeared Clevelanders of the generation were fairly dismissive. Would there have been an Electric Eels dressed in tin foil running a lawnmower over the stage? Or, a Rocket From The Tombs with a name that so obviously synthesizes sci fi and horror B-movie-isms. The Mirrors sang about the people who live on the inside of the earth. Pere Ubu drew on a Ghoulardi-esque persona for its name.

Consider the common characteristics of these bands. There is that distinctive narrative voice which is an idiosyncratic mixture of the observational, the self-participatory, and the Intrusive Other, by which I mean the notion that the telling of a story should involve the incorporation of additional, intrusive POVs that might run in parallel or at some angle to the central narrative, crossing it, intruding, overlaying, contradicting, deprecating, or even ignoring it. Certainly we, the Ghoulardi Kids, could have, and eventually did, encounter this form of sur-reality in various literary and art traditions, but we were introduced to the basics from some guy on the TV, at a young age, unencumbered with the baggage of pretension, elitism or dogma. To tell a story this way was simply how you did things - it wasn't sophisticated, or clever, or important. But it made a neat mess. And that was cool. Consider the startling musical inserts and abrupt image jumps beloved by these bands, the enthusiasm for noise and abstract sound, the appreciation of absurdity and extremism, the sense of the theatrical but an abhorrence of artifice. Running a lawnmower across the stage - the equivalent of shooting off fireworks in a TV studio - sounds about as artifice-laden as you can imagine but you had to be there, you had to see it - the diminutive cripple Dave E partnered with the hulking aryan bleach blonde John Morton - and it all looked pretty normal - well, natural, or right or, uh, clear - dare I say organic? (You had to be there.)

These bands were fronted by guys with extreme persona, odd hosts archly mediating a musical experience, each serving as a funhouse lens through which the musicians look outward at the audience and through whom, in turn, the audience receives context, perspective, and scale. The observer is himself watched. The narrator is generated by the

story he tells.

In Charlotte Pressler's seminal piece, "Those Were Different Times" she asks a question she is not able to answer.

"Why, for example, are so many of the people in this story from the same background? Most of them were from middle or upper-middle class families. Most were very intelligent. Many of them could have been anything they chose to be. The Sixties drop-outs dropped in to a whole world of people just like themselves but these people were on their own. You can ask, also, why they all turned to rock n roll. Most of these people were not natural musicians. [They] would probably have done something else, if there had been anything else for them to do. One can ask why there wasn't; why rock n roll seemed to be the only choice."

Maybe the answer to her question is that rock music provided the best medium, the most readily available masquerade through which to pursue artful mayhem, to practice the narrative extremism of the host mediator, and to leave a mark worthy of Mr Anderson's approval.