

## Some thoughts on Devo: the first Postmodern Band

On the first page of his excellent book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey says:

There has been a sea-change in cultural as well as political-economic practices since around 1972. This sea-change is bound up with the emergence of new dominant ways in which we experience space and time.

It is fitting that Mr. Harvey designates 1972 as the year of this change, as it was precisely that year in which the seminal didactical works establishing the theory of de-evolution were first published in the *Los Angeles Staff*.

Although neither Gerry Casale nor I knew it at the time, these articles, *Readers vs. Breeders* and *Polymer Love* were part of a re-evaluation of modernism and its reliance upon science, technology and "rationalism" that was occurring all over the Western world. The structuralism of the 60's and 70's, exemplified by Claude Levi-Strauss or Ferdinand de Saussure, gave way to de-construction and the post-structuralist theories of Foucault, Derrida and Lacan. Such musings came to be lumped into an unruly body of thought collectively labeled *Postmodernism*, but the Devo writings prefigure the label postmodern by nearly a decade. While the term "postmodern" may be traced to Frederico de Oniz in 1934 and its first significant use was in a treatise by Arnold Toynbee in 1939, it did not enter the common lexicon until applied to Philip Johnson's Chippendale AT&T building in the early 1980's.

Gerry Casale and I spent the summer of 1972 in San Clemente. During the day we hung out at the beach learning to play beach Frisbee. At night we'd go back to an overcrowded duplex a block or two from the ocean, make dinner and continue the theoretical discussions that had begun in 1970, shortly after the shootings at Kent State University. Also part of this devolutionary group were airbrush artist Gary (Genral) Jackett, photographer Bobbi Watson, Kensington's own Tamara Cora Lande-Moore, and assorted housemates. Our next door neighbor was Sgt. Mike, an explosives instructor at nearby Camp Pendleton. Each night when he got home from the base Mike would put on the Guess Who and crank out *American Woman* . . . *stay away from me!*

Every week or so Gerry, the Genral and I would drive into LA to insinuate DEVO propaganda pieces into the failing magazine. I spent a lot of time in the garage with a blond Telecaster and a black-faced Fender Champ amp. Gerry had his lipstick pickup Danelectro guitar, which he played upside down and backwards. The Genral airbrushed monolithic riveted block letters spelling out D-E-V-O. We sat in the small courtyard pounding out propaganda on my Royal portable typewriter, but the foundation for the theory lay in Ohio.

By 1972, Gerry, Peter Gregg and I had already recorded *I Need A Chick*, *Auto Mowdown*, *I Been Refused* and *Beehive* in the living room of my apartment over

Guido's Pizza Shop and Dayho Electronics. Gerry played bass, I played slide guitar, Gregg supplied the nasty hallmark guitar licks. I believe there had also been a second recording session of songs like *Wiggle Worm*, *The Rope Song*, *Might Not Live Forever* and others done in Dayho's small recording studio.

Let me be plain about this: contrary to popular belief DEVO was not and is not a phenomenon of Akron, Ohio. It was rather a logical extension of a series of inexplicable forces that made Kent State University a mass culture nexus for a brief and shining moment. Perhaps it was the stream of baby boomers that swelled attendance at Kent from 8,000 to 20,000 students in just a couple of years. This rapid expansion caused the university to hire freshly minted professors as quickly as they could be processed, and as it turned out this new faculty blood changed Kent State from a sleepy commuter campus to a hot bed of radical thought and action. Perhaps it was the fact that Kent sat athwart the major interstate routes from New York to LA or San Francisco. If you drove from the East Coast to the West Coast, you passed within spitting distance of Kent. Perhaps it was something in the water. In any case, a constantly mutating parade of intellects created a cultural scene that seems unlikely in retrospective. An acid dealer from New Jersey once told me he thought of Kent as the westernmost borough of New York City.

Prominent were Charles Swanson, an art history professor who studied at Black Mountain with Buckminster Fuller, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Ed Dorn and John Cage, and Robert Bertholf, a doctoral student of A. Kingsley Weatherhead at the University of Oregon, who became an eminence in the criticism of American poetry, and brought an unparalleled group of artists to Kent State: Robert Duncan, Harvey Bialy, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn. Bertholf ran the Creative Arts Festival as a personal fiefdom, and sponsored DEVO's first two public appearances at the Recital Hall and the Governance Chambers.

International musical groups like the Blues Project, the Animals, Jeff Beck, Small Faces, Captain Beefheart, Buffalo Springfield etc. played at nearby venues like the Mentor Hullabaloo, and could often be seen for a couple of dollars. On Water Street local bands featured the likes of Joe Walsh, Bobby Goldthwaite, Bob Kidney and Phil Keaggy.

The art department was vibrant and alive with people like J. Charles Walker, Robert Culley and Richard Myers, an experimental film-maker who brought the Kent Film Festival to the campus, exposing the students to film-making from around the world. The English department boasted luminaries like Howard Vincent, the world's leading authority on Melville (during 1973 Gerry stayed in Vincent's house, we rehearsed in the basement, which was filled with nautical memorabilia and nicknamed Whale Hall), Bernie Benstock, a noted Joyce scholar and Eric Mottram, a poet, occasional visiting Marxist professor and editor of the *Poetry Review* in London, England. In poetry classes we were taught by people who had been in Black Mountain with Charles Olson, when objectivist poetry was being forged. We read Kesey and Pynchon, Farina and Barth.

The smorgasbord of cultural influences couldn't help but influence even those who didn't want to be influenced, and it was heady and liberating for those who did want

to learn something. We were surrounded by musical influences, from Elizabeth Cotton to Captain Beefheart, Robert Johnson to Schoenberg. The film spectrum stretched from *The Andalusian Dog* to *Pink Flamingos*, *Metropolis* to *Akran*. And then of course there was acid, quantum mechanics and the Second Law of Thermodynamics.

At the epicenter of this cultural hotbed was the Commuter's Cafeteria. Tacked on to the back of the Student Union, the cafeteria served hot food and bad coffee, but it served the same purpose as coffee houses in Greenwich Village, Paris or *fin de siècle* Vienna, providing a place where highly caffeinated ideas could be exchanged. In an interdisciplinary *mélange* that would probably be impossible to recreate today, the cafeteria was a place where students and faculty from fine arts, theatre, music, anthropology, psychology, literature and science could and did freely interact. It was truly electric, and underlying all of the academic discourse was rock and roll, Vietnam and resistance to the state and its ill-advised war.

The point I'm trying to make is that for this brief period there was an active and vital learning situation going on in Kent, Ohio, something unexpected in a backwater town on a crooked river. But the fact is, it happened. And then on May 4, 1970, the door to the classroom slammed shut.

When the university shut down after the shootings, the administrators learned that the university actually functioned better without the students. They were messy and troublesome, and the system would work so much better with 'droids. But the stresses and pressures placed on the scene by such naked oppression created a superheated plasma stream that had to vent before it reached critical mass, and one of the places it emerged was in the birth spasms of de-evolution, whose *raison d'être* was a desire to create a universe of discourse that would be both an aesthetic capable of critical analysis and a tool for social justice.

Early Devo was a child of dada, the theater of the absurd, the blackest of black humor and rabid political backlash against the Establishment. People were pissed off, and early Devo is full of political anger and comment: *My Lai Mama*, *I Been Refused*, *All of Us*, *Auto Mowdown*. The songs not only presented a hunkered down aesthetic, but they were political songs in quite specific ways.

It is commonly understood that Devo was a pioneer in multi-media projects, and this interdisciplinary approach goes back to its very beginnings. Devo's first performances occurred under the aegis of Kent State University's Creative Arts Festivals in 1973 and 1974. Even earlier, however, were contributions to *Human Issue*, Kent State's literary magazine. Gerry made a rubber stamp of a coital couple, and one evening at John Zabrocky's (Modern Props) apartment we hand-stamped adhesive labels, customized each one with dialog balloons, and placed one on the cover of each manila envelope containing the special "all-art" publication. I contributed an epic-length poem entitled *Space Man*, a pastiche of high and low poesy, quotes from TV Guide program descriptions, scenes from John Wayne movies . . . "the fire-gutted Philippine freighter sank slowly in the convoy's wake . . ." and so forth. Poet and critic Alex Gildzen described the poem as a "state of the universe address."

We had already spent considerable time brain-storming on multi-media applications for our embryonic aesthetic. We plotted TV shows, full length features and advertising campaigns (Cheek t' Cheek ADS [anal deodorant spray] in three scents: Apple Blossom, Pinch o' Mint, and Unscented). In addition to applying de-evolutionary analysis to music and commercial media, the *Staff* writings were addressing issues that would soon be of concern to postmodern theorists. Questions like Lewis Herbert asked in *Towards Liberating Technology*, "What is the liberatory potential of modern technology, both materially and spiritually? What tendencies, if any, are reshaping the machine for use in an organic man-oriented society? How can the new technology and resources be used in an oecological, manner, that is, to promote the balance of nature, the full lasting development of natural regions, and the creation of organic, humanistic communities?" Devo's answer was simple: "What we seek is that transcendent state of being most fully engendered by Fred Flintstone--technologically sophisticated caveman."

In any case, Gerry and I returned to Kent from California in Fall of 1972, and the stage was set. Soon after our return I got a call on Saturday morning from Bertholf, who wanted me to help him move a washer and dryer. When I got to his place, there were Ed Dorn and Jennifer Dunbar Dorn. Ed had been hired as a visiting poet for the year, and we moved a washer and dryer into his big green rental house on Crain Avenue. As I recall, I was trying to quit smoking, and had for some reason assumed that if I substituted weed for tobacco it would ease the transition. Dorn assessed the situation, gave me a Marlboro and we became instant friends. Later that academic year, Dorn and Bertholf arranged for the incipient Devo to perform at the Creative Arts Festival and the die was cast.

It was at this time that Mark Mothersbaugh came on board. Mark was an exceptionally talented keyboardist, and through his backers provided us access to a sound system, high end instruments (an electric clavinet, a Hammond B-3 organ with Leslie speaker system and a mini-Moog synthesizer). Prior to his involvement with de-evolution, Mark was playing in a band called *Flossy Bobbitt*, along with Mike Powell, a drummer from Cuyahoga Falls who later served time in the Arizona state prison for a beef involving hitchhiking, a stolen car and a .357 Magnum. Their act was a high energy drummer and Mark playing multiple keyboards in an over-the-top display of warped virtuosity. It was, however, a long, long way from being *Devo*.

Mark was a quick learner, however, and once inoculated with the virus he quickly began contributing to Devo source material, unearthing the Shattuck *Jocko Homo* pamphlet and other esoteric materials. While Mark readily adopted the postmodern techniques of "quotation," pastiche and hyper-textuality within the already established matrix of de-evolutionary dogma, it has never been clear to me whether he also absorbed any of the political thrust of de-evolution. Mark came from a much more Republican background than either Gerry or I, and seemed to have a certain quirky disdain for war protestors or politically active people. I don't know that I have ever heard Mark make an overtly political statement. I found very interesting the excerpts from his journal *My Struggle* excerpted in Jade Dellinger's

and David Giffels' *Are We Not Men* band bio. Referencing the first Devo performance, Mark expresses a tortured conflict in his longing for bourgeois acceptance as a "respectable person" while being forced to perform in lab coat and monkey mask. Being a "respectable person" was at the bottom of the list for bohemian artists of the '60's and '70's, but Mark's rebellion always seemed to be of a very personal nature.

The melding of Mark's musical talent and Devo's preposterous theorizing was a synergistic event. As he himself said in the smoking-gun tape recording of an interview by Michael Hurrah at the debut of Devo's 35 mm *film In The Beginning Was The End* on March 12, 1977 at the Akron Art Institute: ". . . these guys (Gerry and Bob) had a bunch of ideas and no talent . . . and I had talent and . . . no ideas . . . (laughter) . . ." While the bifurcation was not that cut and dried, there is no doubt that Mark's musical abilities and access to professional equipment made the next step in the de-evolutionary journey possible. And gradually, Devo's repertoire mutated from being all Casale or Lewis songs to the point where Mark was a major contributor thanks to his exceptional musical skills and prolific output. This shift in creative sourcing also gradually affected Devo's aesthetic and its equilibrium of power. Gerry's aesthetic vision was one of big statements, grand gestures and confrontational politics. Mark's aesthetic was introspective, convoluted and intensely personal.

As the band became more successful and well-known, attention shifted from Gerry, who was as Ed Dorn put it, "the gears of Devo," to the newly highlighted front man. Mark put a softer, sometimes even silly face on Devo, which made the band more commercially palatable in an immediate sense, and his ability to adopt childlike or foolish stage persona reiterated points made in the seminal 1972 articles: As G. Spencer Brown said in *Laws of Form*: "It is all too often forgotten that the ancient symbol for the pre-nascence of the world is a fool, and that foolishness, being a divine state, is not a condition of which to be either proud or ashamed."

After the band moved to LA, Mark became the most-recognized and feted member, and most of the accolades were directed to him. Fans began to think that Mark *was* Devo, further shifting the equilibrium of the band, with Mark gaining more recognition and concomitant control. As the content more and more became determined by Mothersbaugh, the music lost much of its edge and political thrust. While the postmodern aspects of de-evolution continued, primarily in Devo's recombinant sloganeering such as "Freedom from Choice" or "The Important Sound of Things Falling Apart" with its clever echoes of Yeats *Second Coming*, its aim seemed to waver and lose focus. In some sense, Devo *became* the rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem. Many critics found later Devo albums to be over-synthesized, muddled and somewhat pointless. No longer were big statements being made, the use of "quotation" and pastiche overwhelmed the material and the work became boring.

While Mark has been by far the most successful member of the group post-Devo, his body of work subsequent to Devo reflects the differences between the artists. Gerry continues to strive for political statement and "high-concept" art, still maintaining some modernist, or perhaps more accurately, anti-postmodernist

tendencies, in that Casale clings to notions of social justice and a materialist utopian spirit engaged in transcendentalism, i.e., “that transcendent state of being most fully engendered by Fred Flintstone--technologically sophisticated caveman.” Mark, on the other hand, has gained recognition for essentially commercial pursuits: television and film soundtracks, commercial jingles, etc.; his fine art prints continue to reflect his introspective highly personal aesthetic, which make their statements in a “small genre” manner; Mark IS postmodern. This is in no way derogatory of Mark’s talent and productivity, which have generated an impressive body of work, and for which he has received recognition and acclaim. The work is not, however, *Devo*. Make no mistake, *Devo* could and would have existed in some form with or without Mark Mothersbaugh; without Gerry Casale there would be no *Devo*.