



PERE UBU

For the better part of three decades, Pere Ubu has been challenging perceptions -- perceptions held by the powers that pull the strings of pop culture as a whole as well as those held by those already drawn into the band's inner circle. Moving unblinkingly into the storm -- like a modern day version of the crew commanded by The Flying Dutchman -- Ubu has never shied away from taking sharp turns, but, at the same time, never lost the homing instinct that leads it back to the so-called "avant-garage" that gave it life.

That duality is palpable on *Why I Hate Women*, Pere Ubu's 15th studio album, and first for Smog Veil Records. The dark, compulsive sounds -- rife with restless rhythm and guitars that loom menacingly -- resonate with a near-claustrophobic intensity, all the better to underscore frontman David Thomas' surprisingly sinister musings on love, lust and the maelstrom kicked up when those elements merge in unforeseen ways.

"The whole album is extremely obsessive," Thomas acknowledges. "I set out to do that. I was thinking about [the pulp fiction writer] Jim Thompson. My goal was to create the Jim Thompson novel that Jim Thompson never wrote. That's obsessive, but the best rock music is brutally obsessive."

The bare-knuckled worldview espoused in Thompson's prose, painstakingly narrated in the voice of an omniscient anti-hero, is echoed in many of the songs on *Why I Hate Women* -- from the roilingly antsy "Two Girls (One Bar)" to the pinpoint-pupil seething of "Babylonian Warehouses." The sound, which guitarist Keith Moliné describes as "hyper-naturalistic," is remarkably enveloping, extending tendrils that touch upon seldom-touched synapses -- which can be both intoxicating and maddeningly disorienting.

"I think of it as artful mayhem," says Thomas. "Artful mayhem is a way of keeping any one person from getting their own way. It's important that the whole becomes greater. It's not random absurdity -- there is a guiding force, but at certain points, you let it go and subject it to the forces of chaos and mayhem. The idea will take shape and form, but it'll take shape that's surprising and revealing to everybody involved."

He's been testing that theory since Pere Ubu first emerged from the ashes of Rocket From the Tombs -- an early '70s Cleveland band that pre-dated the CBGB punk explosion. In its first incarnation, Ubu combined disorienting, often dissonant, rock and urban blues in a stunningly original and outlandish mix, but never lost an urgent, joyous party atmosphere -- colored strongly by David Thomas' plebeian intonations. One of the most innovative American musical forces, Pere Ubu is to Devo what Arnold Schoenberg was to Irving Berlin.

That edition of Ubu -- responsible for such enduring classics as 1978's *The Modern Dance* and the same year's *Dub Housing* -- lasted until 1982, at which point Thomas turned his attentions to other projects and solo works that were taking him in a more eccentric, more improvisational direction. As the '80s drew to a close, the singer found himself working with fellow Ubu alumni in The Wooden Birds -- a situation that led to a re-opening of the avant garage via 1988's *The Tenement Year*.

While he'd since relocated to England -- where he lives in a coastal town near Brighton -- Thomas maintained his ties to the town that spawned Ubu in the first place. The singer, who half-jokingly says "I'm like Saddam Hussein in that I only trust people from my own village," was revived by the infusion of sonics that could only come from those raised on the banks of the Cuyahoga River -- sonics that burn through the grooves of early '90s albums like *Worlds in Collision* and *Story of My Life*.

As Pere Ubu reached its 20th anniversary as a band — a feat in itself, given Thomas' assertion that the band initially planned to split up after recording just one single — it returned to indie-dom for the release of *Ray Gun Suitcase*, a wildly eclectic, captivatingly meandering set that harked back to its early '80s incarnation even though the lineup was radically different.

"In practical terms I'm the one who determines if something is going to make it or not," Thomas states. "I certainly have a particular approach to rock music that's similar to what Pere Ubu has been for a number of years. But I never try to recapture anything. I don't look back. In reality, Pere Ubu is an astonishingly stable organization, but people can grow apart, and if your ideas start to differ too widely, there's no point in continuing to work together."

There's been little divergence in the world of Ubu in recent years. Synthesizer player Robert Wheeler -- who spent his formative years living just a block away from Thomas -- and bassist Michele Temple came into the fold eleven years back, with Ohio-bred drummer Steve Mehlman joining shortly thereafter. British-bred guitarist Keith Moliné -- despite being a geographical interloper -- is certainly spiritual kin, as he's proven in a decade's service with David Thomas and Two Pale Boys.

Why I Hate Women -- a phrase Thomas notes is a mantra associated with the album's central character, and not his own -- is a mesmerizing synthesis of the members' personae, alternately skittish and heated, playful and purposeful. From the sonic legerdemain of the moody "Stolen Cadillac" to the propulsive drumming that powers "Texas Overture," the disc bears out Thomas's assertion that the band was able to capture the flinty hardness of Thompson's work without sacrificing the melodic intrigue that's always been a part of Pere Ubu.

"I'm very pleased with the fact that I'm surrounded by a group of musicians capable of doing what Pere Ubu does, but also out and out improvise from zero," he says, adding -- with a laugh that betrays an underlying seriousness -- "there's something that happens when the right person joins the band; something clicks somewhere and I hate to see it because it means they're doomed."

That appraisal might seem unduly pessimistic, given the plaudits Ubu has garnered over the years, but Thomas puts forward the notion that he -- and by extension, his compatriots -- are "doomed" to exist in an odd limbo, one independent of both pop culture and carefully-constructed counter-culture.

"I've always been a stranger in a strange land as far as popular culture or contemporary culture. We didn't particularly fit then, and I know we don't fit now, so I'm not sure there's any difference. Clearly, we're a product of our time. Pere Ubu could not come along now. It wouldn't have come along removed five years in time, but I don't see it locked in the '70s -- or people's perception of '70s."

On the topic of perceptions, Thomas knows he's set himself up for some doozies with the title of Why I Hate Women -- particularly given his decision to remove one escape route by emblazoning the motto "this is an irony free recording" across the sleeve, a severe, mesmerizing design by John Thompson -- the man who's helped shape virtually all of Ubu's artwork over the years.

"When the title occurred to me, I thought 'this is going to be a nightmare,' he acknowledges. "But I did not necessarily want there to be a soft option. Eric Carmen, who's not one of the world's great conceptualists, had this great idea that he'd write a song called 'Hit Record,' and it was going to become a hit record and this would be the greatest thing ever. So he wrote it, recorded it, and the record company said 'you cannot call it that' so he changed the title to 'Overnight Sensation' and it became a hit, but it broke his heart that he had to change the title.

"So when this came to me, I decided I wouldn't do an Eric Carmen. Knowing what lay ahead, I was not happy. I searched in vain for an alternative. I was then determined to construct the album package in such a way that the consumer would have no easy outs, no pat answers. Pere Ubu does not dabble in irony. It is the last refuge of the weak-willed and cowardly. We are no cowards."