

STEVE MACKAY-SAXMAN OF INTERSTELLAR ROCK PATHWAYS

If by the turn of the seventies there was little prominence for the saxophone within rock music, it would unexpectedly be those savages with power tools, The Stooges, who would incorporate the instrument's lush and skronked amplifications to bring it justly to the fore. Following Iggy Pop's vision of detonating the blues into a new rock n' roll reconfiguration, it would seem appropriate that a sax player whose influences included Coltrane, Junior Walker & King Curtis, (significantly he would expand on the precepts set by these artists in concocting his own sound), and nurtured in the Michigan late sixties avant & radical art/politics scene, would be the man to inflame the Stooges archetypal avant-garde/destructo tunes during their blood & wattage odyssey. Enter Steve MacKay - born Grand Rapids, Michigan USA in 1949.

His instrument, the Selmer Mark VI Tenor Sax - the one he still plays to this very day - was a fundamental conduit in intensifying the band's mangled raunch via MacKay's multidimensional luxuriously freakoid helixes of sound. The righteous seismic music of the Stooges continues today, and those sonic helixes are as relevant in 2004 as they ever were.

A new track from the band, 'My Idea Of Fun', where MacKay's outer limit sax forges the melody with Ron Asheton's riffage, is the first new offering from the future Stooges canon. The melody carried simultaneously by MacKay & Asheton, where both seem to be on a psyched-up raid no Landsat multi image could locate, seems an early indicator of where the upcoming Stooges album is heading to. If so, the band is clearly tapping & integrating the same innovative primeval & psychotic funeral pyre from where their brief but exceptional catalogue was originally mined from.

MacKay's own zest for playing has him still working within avant-garde parameters. His also forthcoming solo effort, Michigan & Arcturus, finds him not just kickin' those jams but abusing them too. A work of vast experimentalist scope from tracks like 'Cauchemar De Satie', a veritable Lovecraftian suite, to the randomly atomized 'Los Altos

Blues', freaked out free-jazz synergies that seemingly follow but one credo: that of researching new sounds within a mire of adventurous music.

Steve MacKay & the Radon Ensemble, the collective of musicians who have collaborated over the past three years to create Michigan & Arcturus, sound positively predatory. This solo work suggests that MacKay is not content to remain symbolic of one pivotal Stooges LP, even if 'Funhouse' is a hugely influential meisterwerk to rock music. The indefatigable saxophonist is not merely a subtext to the band's legend.

Charging Rhinoceros Of Soul, Commander Cody & His Lost Planet Airmen and Carnal Kitchen, (houseband of activist John Sinclair's Rainbow Peoples Party for a while), are MacKay's other most prominent bands & were leading players on that fabled Michigan/Ann Arbor scene of the late sixties. Throughout the years Steve MacKay has collaborated with the Violent Femmes, Andre Williams and that visionary known as Snakefinger. Recently he's been sitting in with those other keepers of the Detroit garage rock flame, the Dirtbombs.

Today this rock 'n' roll saxman seems more active than ever before, even though he's really never stopped working on and playing his music. This welcome activity should redress and up the ante on his position in rock history as an imaginative sax pioneer. This is good to see as his innovative contributions within the rock field have been criminally ignored.

This spring Mackay has played solo in Europe to great praise, while summer sees the Stooges on an extensive European jaunt, as the band's still monolithic & portentous live delivery skull plates audiences across the continent. Additionally the Stooges will have a track on a forthcoming Junior Kimbrough tribute on Fat Possum, while Steve MacKay has a track, 'You Could Smell The Nightmares On The Pillow', on the first of a number of compilations, to say nothing of the sax-as-stun-gun beauty included with this here journal.

Steve MacKay's sax *still* very much has the power to tense the verisimilitude between reality and rock 'n' roll surrealism.

PT: How did you picture yourself in music initially?

SM: I wanted to be the saxman at age 9.

Seems to me working with the Stooges on a lateral level in relation to anything happening at the time, really going into uncharted sax territory... what were your intents, how did you envision the Stooges sound and how would you guys set about recording such new music clearly intuitive in origin if not in execution?

It was always my best path to be the rock or punk saxman as opposed to the stereotype, (plus I don't read music very well!) We just did it with little or no discussion.

Please describe your early bands such as Carnal Kitchen and Charging Rhinoceros Of Soul - what was your role besides the sax, compositional?

Charging Rhino was mostly R&B covers, Carnal Kitchen was a no-charts reaction to that. In a sense I guess you could call it compositional.

When you introduced such an influential component of sound into 'Funhouse', how did you propose in your solo work to follow up such a huge contribution within the rock context, indeed if you ever set out to follow it?

I hoped we would continue in that direction, a la Carnal Kitchen, but Pop had another agenda.

What was the fabled Ann Arbor scene like at this stage - how did it manifest itself as a breeding ground for such acts such as yourselves in Carnal Kitchen, Stooges and MC5?

Heaven on earth for someone like me! Carnal Kitchen got to play all the time at free concerts and got to meet with and play with all kinds of people; blues, jazz, rock and laid the foundation of my musical career.

I understand that besides jazz Iggy Pop wanted to explore funk in the vein of James Brown in 'Funhouse', how did you approach this?

Just like that; James Brown meets Coltrane, (sort of like Carnal Kitchen).



You jammed with the MC5 live on occasion, what was the strategy here as opposed to that with the Stooges?

I would play on 'Black To Comm' where everybody picked up horns, a finale without end.

How much would you say you have to summon in terms of what you do from a conventional jazz background to have that warped? Or would you be coming from a totally unconventional platform to have your sax ignite like that?

It is a synthesis of all my experiences, clichés n' all, always trying to sound like something I would want to listen to.

I believe you became aware of Iggy Pop at a Chaos Inc gig in the mid 60s; did you two hook up immediately? If not how did your relationship develop?

Chaos was from Grand Rapids (MI) but we had a manager/sometime agent who had managed Jim and the Iguanas. We heard all about what a wildman this angry drummer was. I knew him from Ann Arbor/Discount Records. We were peers.

How does it feel to be playing Stooges songs with the original line up? Do you feel a kind of vindication with what must be one of the most successful rock n' roll reunions ever? Conversely how did you feel when the acclaim did not come early on for the band?

Reunion, Homecoming, Vindication! I knew that stuff was good but also a bit ahead of its time and was surprised and delighted to get the call from Pop about Coachella, the first reunion gig. Way back when in 1970 who could have imagined.

Before you actually became a Stooge (and there's few who would argue with you being a full member), you actually saw them in the years 68-9. Could you give us a description of the band at this time, as this period remains really very much undocumented? Just how primitive were they & how do you think you helped shape the sound later on?

Original Psychedelic Stooges manager (Jimmy Silver) beats on 200 gallon oil tank with astrological

glyphs of band members painted on sides with a 5lb sledgehammer. Pop dances and falls, invents the stage dive (no one caught him!), shrieks and croons to the likes of 'Asthma Attack' & 'The Dance Of Romance' with the Asheton brothers and Dave Alexander. Many other gigs then too, but that was my first impression. Their progression from there was natural and nurtured by the power chord.

A lot has been made of Don Gallucci's production on Funhouse, could you describe what his working methods were and what his actual contribution was as producer? The general impression is that the record was recorded as if a live record with few takes.

Gallucci was great. Mix magazine wrote a whole article about the LP but said that I was dead(!) He wanted the live sound as much as possible, but refer to the Rhino Box Set of the sessions (i.e. 32 takes of "Loose")

Regarding this, was there a particular way to "psych up" for you all to deliver the absolute sonic carnage so resolutely manifest in Funhouse? There is the undeniable feel coursing through the record that you were playing to an audience, quite visceral...

We were able to pull off that sound thanks to Don, the band, and baf-fles! I only did a few of the sessions but I enjoyed the process immensely. God rest the soul of (engineer) Brian Ross Myring.

Is it true that you played drums for the twin guitar edition of the Stooges post Funhouse? If so what were those shows like and how did you factor in different dynamics into the band?

Only once, when Scott Asheton got hurt in a truck accident. It was a last minute thing and I was less than excellent to put it mildly.

You've played with other undervalued acts too namely Snakefinger, Andre Williams & Violent Femmes; in fact you still play with the latter. Could you expand on how working with said bands helped evolve their sound?

Also five years with Commander Cody. I came up with some parts on the Femmes LP 'The Blind Leading The Naked', and I just did a cou-

ple of covers of cartoon themes with them, to be released on a Rhino compilation. With Snakefinger it was blues covers as part of a three-piece horn section and also a lead sax soloist.

How did you meet up with Snakefinger? Could you give us any insights into this vastly underrated musician?

What a great man to work with and for. I was a sub for another guy & ended up being the lead tenor in a superb blues covers show, (Snakefinger's "History Of The Blues" tour). The reaction was great but first they booed us in Paris and then adored us! I also did a few dates of his own material. also played his more personal music on a couple of occasions and that was also a thrill. I miss him very much. He was a good friend and consummate bandleader.

I believe Iggy called you up unexpectedly, can you tell us what you guys talked about after not seeing each other for so long? Had you kept in touch with Ron and Scott at all? Any collaboration with them that remain unheard?

"Hi Steve, this is Jim. I recognized your voice when you answered the phone. Would you like to play with us in Palm Springs?" "Yes," I said. I had played in San Francisco with Ron and J Mascis a year or so before, during the Stooges tribute portion of their set. Watt was the bassman.

When the Stooges infamously played "Ungano's" in New York, apparently due to copious drug intake you all vamped up & warped a fabled tune called 'Way Down In Egypt'. Could you describe that night?

Truly an amazing evening! I will spare you the details but the very extended 'Egypt' was a milestone for me. I have heard that there is a recording.

With the sound you produce, characteristically multidimensional, have you had access to any variations, possibly, on the sax or instruments at say a prototype stage that you really think could've taken sound into even other avenues? Do you think this possibility within a freeform context is still to be pursued?

Yo Tony! [laughs] The bulk of my work is on tenor sax, for and with others but I love playing on, and with unique instruments (Nequaquam

Vacum, Radon). The sky is STILL the limit!

I understand you've actually designed guitars, are you still designing them?

I chopped up a cheap guitar so it would look like a gun, but it looked like the U.S.A! Made a more sensual model for a friend, but I'm always at least thinking of custom personalized instruments.

Carnal Kitchen where very much an experimental band, in this regard do you feel any kinship with any bands working today? What's your take on Borbetomagus for instance?

Pop was in attendance at the Kitchens first gig. I was impressed but HE was getting ideas. We were outside jazz with a rock beat but I am delighted to hear so many bands going after that. Sorry I'm not familiar with Borbetomagus but would love to check it out.

How did you come to sign with Radon?

Liquorball (first Radon artists) gig in S.F. - I played with and sat in later with Temple Of Bon Matin; Scott was with them.

On your 'En Voyage' release [Steve MacKay's compilation CD], you demonstrate a highly tuned sense of humour and a keening politicised pop sensibility with traditional jazz. How did you go about selecting those tracks?

When I was touring with Commander Cody, and later, The Violent Femmes, I would take my tour wages and invest them in recording sessions. Those were my "top ten".

Is your identity as a saxophonist staunchly revolving around an unconventional axis in spite of some of your more pop oriented work?

I am all over the map. I like to play it all, I like to rise to whatever occasion, no matter what genre. In recent years I have become more reactive than pro-active but never want to tie myself to any particular "genre". Oui, je parlez français - Carnal Kitchen VIVE!

Steve MacKay was interviewed by Tony Sanders, January 2004. © Ptolemaic Terrascope