

# Evidence of De-evolution

Devo comes to town on its first extensive tour in a decade



**DEVO** A product of Akron's dark energies.

By Michael David Toth

**D**EVO IS ONE OF THE IMPOSSIBLY FEW BANDS that can lay honest claim to an unprecedented, original identity. Its quirky, jerky, post-industrial-angst-ridden racket seemed to emanate from some sinister technocratic alien planet. But Devo's 1970s origins were more fantastic than outer space: Devo was the spawn of Akron.

Gerald V. Casale, who, alongside frontman Mark Mothersbaugh, constitutes Devo's creative core, comments on the band as a product of its industrial Ohio environment. In a recent phone interview, Casale notes, "[There were] dark energies in Akron. It's kind of a breeding ground for suicidal and homicidal people, from serial killers down to manic-depressives. We did what any creative people have to do — create an alternative world, which was the Devo universe."

As such, they attracted international attention and acclaim, spearheading a daring mid-'70s Akron music scene with peers like Tin Huey, the Rubber City Rebels and the Waitresses. Devo's outlandish persona was obnoxiously Dadaist and dissonant and out of step with cultural trends. Despite that, it landed a major-label recording contract and eventually infiltrated mainstream media with 1980's smash hit single "Whip It."

"As far as I'm concerned, we never got the acceptance we deserved," he says. "I always had a plan and knew what we were doing and why we were doing it. The aggression and the confrontational aspects of Devo were exactly what got us noticed by major labels. And behind all the shenanigans was the fact that Mark [Mothersbaugh] and I wrote real

songs that were different and new."

At the foundation of the Devo universe was the satirical ideology of "de-evolution," addressing humanity's ultimate decline in the face of unfounded social-evolutionary optimism. Casale explains the 1970s climate of de-evolution as part of a larger cultural shift.

"From the local level to the national level, we were just seeing so much idiocy and so many stupid people in control doing stupid things," he says. "We just watched it get worse and worse — from Nixon's resignation on to the world situation, and all the way into Reagan. And people just kept getting more and more like sheep and less able to analyze any information and think for themselves."

So, with 30 years' more life experience, are the Devo guys more cynical today? "No, just more beaten down," Casale counters. "We never thought we were cynical, we were just looking at the truth. We were more able to joke about it then...that's the difference. 'Cause we didn't really think it would go this way. It was just a cautionary tale. And then, de-evolution turned out to be real!"

Devo's musical, visual and ideological shtick dates back to the time Casale and Mothersbaugh spent together in the early as art students at Kent State. These days,

## DEVO, THE ENGLISH BEAT

8 p.m., Thursday, August 18  
Scene Pavilion  
2014 Sycamore  
216.241.5555  
Tickets: \$35-\$50

Casale is mostly occupied as a TV commercial/music video director, and Mothersbaugh as a film-score composer, but they still find time to preserve their creative partnership. Their latest collaboration, described by Casale as "very coolly subversive and silly," is so bafflingly outrageous as to sound like a hoax, but alas, it's real.

"It's *Devo 2.0* for Disney — a second-generation Devo band," he says. "It's teenagers singing and playing Devo songs in the spirit of Devo, but of course they are themselves. And this time around, the lead singer is a girl! There's going to be a DVD of them playing an album's worth of Devo songs, along with animation and interviews and karaoke stuff. They'll be on the Disney Channel on TV and Disney Radio. The target audience is, like, six year olds. They'll be doing the classics, like 'Whip It' and 'That's Good' and 'Jerkin' Back and Forth' and 'Through Being Cool.' They did *not* cover 'Jocko Homo,' though. In today's urban culture, that would mean something quite different, and they'd all get in trouble."

Casale has also just completed an album's worth of solo material for tentative fall release with a new band, Jihad Jerry and the Evildoers. There are no current plans for a new "Devo 1.0" studio album, but still, it's a great time to be a Devo fan. In addition to a summer tour, Akron's Lime Spider hosts another annual "Devotional" fan event this Saturday, the band's key albums were reissued earlier this spring, and a new *Live 1980* DVD+CD will be released at the end of this month. That DualDisc preserves a dazzling show from the *Freedom of Choice* tour, recorded on August 17, 1980 (coincidentally, 25 years ago today). The relentless, energized performances of Devo's definitive 1977-1980 songs more than compensate for some limitations of 1980 video technology. So who really cares if the vintage video resolution or camerawork is sketchy in spots? Not professional video guy Casale.

"I'm just glad that it exists *at all*," he says. "It's a document of the fact that we actually did that. And it's completely precise and intense for over an hour, and just keeps getting more intense, and you don't believe what you're looking at. At least I don't. It's hard to remember being able to do what I watch me doing. It is amazing that we got that into it and we practiced that hard to do what you're looking at."

He pauses and then adds, "And everybody's nice and young and *thin!*"