

THE PHOENIX

Local lunatic

The lost gospel of GG Allin

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When GG Allin's prolonged and ordurous interrogation of his own existence ended at last in June 1993, when punk rock's abuser-in-chief finally exited the reeking stage via the trapdoor of an overdose, the informed consensus was . . . well, that's *that* then. There would be no musical legacy to speak of, because GG's music was godawful. Who could take anything from, or do anything with, the rubbishy noise that he made? And as a performer — helmeted in blood, throwing poo-poo, starting riots — he seemed to have taken the frontman-as-health-hazard thing to the limit. Après GG — nothing.

Perhaps that's why we still talk about him: there's no school of acolytes to disperse his influence, no clones or knockoffs to adulterate his memory. The new DVD *Terror in America: Live 1993* (Music Video Distributors) catches GG on the last tour of his life, giving everyone hell. It's a gentler viewing experience than last year's *Savage South: Best of 1992 Tour*. GG in *Terror* is fresh from prison, and he looks almost pleased to be back with his band. Dressed for work in boots, jockstrap, rubber gloves, studded collar, and bloodstained lab coat, he measures out the stage with his distinctive lumpy swagger before going predictably berserk. But there's a little less horror. Lots of bashing himself in the head, yes, and some random swinging at the crowd, but this is standard damage, just GG setting the mood. The abject, essential figure captured in *Savage South* — naked and raging, daubed in his special palette of blacks and blues and browns and smeared reds — does not materialize.

Once again, though, we ask ourselves: who the hell is this person? What happened? Can anyone explain it? Perhaps Joe Coughlin can. Coughlin — 46 years old, works in a cemetery, resident of South Boston — knows a thing or two about GG Allin. Why, he (almost) wrote the book. In 1992, during a conversation with GG's brother and bassist Merle, Coughlin was handed a document purporting to be the life story of GG Allin, self-penned. The childhood in the two-room log cabin in Northumberland, New Hampshire, the terrifying father who christened him Jesus Christ Allin (his mother later changed his name to Kevin Michael, but Merle still called him JeJe), the years spent wolfing peanut-butter-and-dog-food sandwiches in Boston rooming houses, the bands, the beatings . . . It all seemed to be there. Coughlin, a non-professional writer, asked to be allowed to work up the manuscript into a full-blown biography, and he sent a 10-page treatment to GG, who was in state prison in Jackson, Mississippi, for a parole violation at the time. "I applied for the job," he says when we meet on a dark afternoon in Jamaica Plain's Midway Cafe. "And, uh, I got it."

Coughlin is nursing a cold; he takes another gulp from one of the pint glasses of water served him by a solicitous bartender. "This guy was the most ridiculed artist in the world, but I don't know anybody that ever saw him play that made fun of him. At that point, it was very serious. Not like some hardcore show where you're worried you might stub your toe in the moshpit. This was danger in the air — real dissension. You could feel a lot of walls breaking down around you. Before a note was played, before anybody moved, it was like, 'Okay, this is where everything changes.'"

As the newly authorized biographer, Coughlin entered into a correspondence with inmate GG and took collect calls from him after getting home from his then-job in an office. "It was pretty remarkable how detailed some of his memories were for someone who basically beat the shit out of himself every day. One time he was telling me about being in a bar and seeing some blood on a wall, and as he was looking at it, he realized it was his own blood that he'd left there the year before. So I said, 'That's interesting, how did that happen?' And he said — dead serious — 'Hmm, well, let's see, I could have been bloody for any number of reasons.' And I'm cracking up, and he goes, 'What?', and I say, 'Do you have any idea how fucking funny you're sounding?' He didn't, of course."

When GG was released, in 1993, he went out on the road with his band the Murder Junkies, and in June Coughlin met his subject — first in Atlanta and then in Chicago. Less than a month later, Allin died in NYC. Coughlin attended the funeral in Littleton, New Hampshire, an event he describes as “a freak show,” and it was there that he began to have doubts about the authenticity of GG’s “memoirs.”

“I saw people up there who were mentioned in the diaries, and I’d ask them about such-and-such, and half of them didn’t know what the fuck I was talking about. It was discouraging, to say the least.”

In January 1995, it became clear to Coughlin that the document handed him by Merle Allin three years before was not, in fact, GG’s memoirs but the work of either a now-vanished fan or a fellow prisoner. And his was not the only copy — there were several in circulation. Work on the book, in his words, “slowed down massively.” Why would GG, against whom almost any lowlife calumny could be leveled and subsequently found to be true, bother to endorse a counterfeit biography of himself? Coughlin doesn’t know. “That’s part of the reason I got involved in this — it’s not understandable. There’s no sense to it at all. I mean, there is, if you want to reduce it to some word or other, nihilism, negativism, but that won’t cover it. The second time I met him, in Chicago, it’s before the show and I’m just sort of scouting around, and I hear this thumping, and it’s GG — he’s all alone in this room and he’s banging his head against the wall. It wasn’t like anybody was watching. And I just thought: Jesus, that’s gotta suck. I felt so bad — but what was I gonna do, say ‘Hey, buddy, what’s wrong?’ You know? ‘Need some help with that?’ Course not. There was nothing anybody could fucking do.”

Coughlin sighs, sips his water. As a writer, he has style, bags of it, hardnosed but sympathetic: an [article written for MetalFest](#) in 1996 describes a GG Allin show where “people are stuffing themselves through the exit like the Three Stooges.” Arrested mid book, 300 pages in, sitting on a trove of tapes and letters, he’s thinking of going the oral-history route. “People tell me its a good take. I don’t know — I hate to say it, but I think I’m the guy to do this. It’s really the one thing I want to accomplish. Other than that, I’d just like to go back to my life and stop thinking about it.”

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