

Surveying the distinctly weird wonders of art-rock provocateurs the Residents.

By

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, April 4, 2012

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Anonymity is a paradox. In theory, it should deflect attention and create distance, but in practice it's a beguiling curiosity, stirring interest through deliberate mystery. By pushing people away, it pulls them in. [The Residents](#) are famous for being anonymous. What most people know about them is nobody knows who they are.

Maybe that's intentional. Maybe the Residents hide their identities to get more attention. (We'll probably never know, since the band doesn't give interviews and has only spoken through representatives at their label, [Ralph Records](#), and their aptly named management company, [The Cryptic Corporation](#).) If their plan is to get people interested, it's worked-- but the anonymity has also overshadowed their music.

Consider all the other conceptual ideas the Residents engage in, and their music moves even *further* from the spotlight. Perhaps you've read about their [twisted covers of Elvis](#), [the Beatles](#), and [the Stones](#), and figured they were artier cousins of "Weird" Al. Or you've seen their pioneering pre-MTV videos and labeled them forefathers to the Buggles. Maybe you've heard about their elaborately costumed, highly choreographed concerts and assumed they were an older version of the Blue Man Group. Whatever the case, for anyone who's heard a little about the Residents, it's easy to file them under "that weird band that hides behind eyeball masks," and assume the music is just a cog in a vast multimedia wheel rather than something worth experiencing on its own.



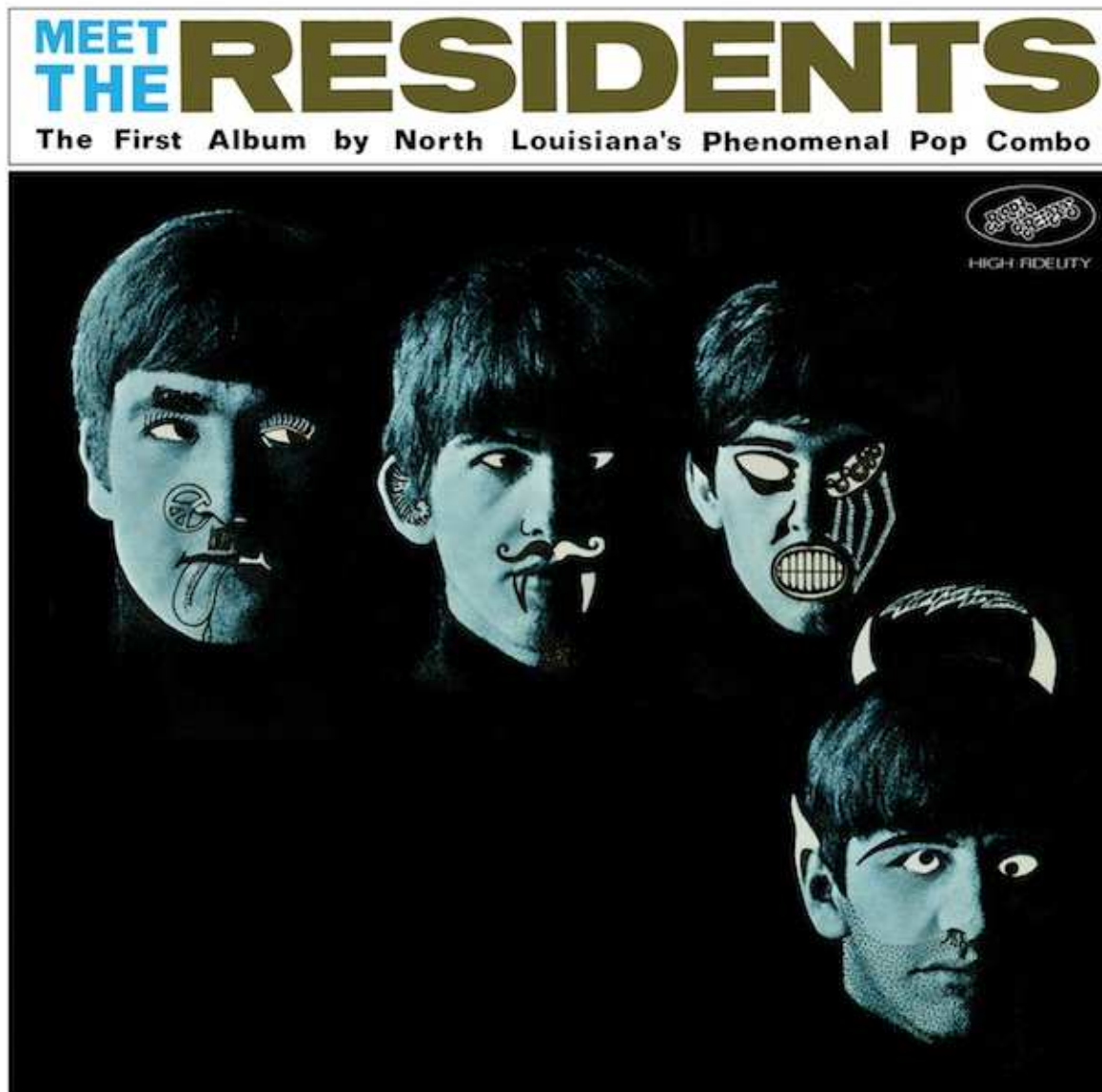
But before the Residents even had a name, they made music. And throughout four decades of intricate concept albums, groundbreaking short films, Broadway-caliber performances, and enigmatic dealings with the press and the public, music has remained the core of their idiosyncratic vision. They've combined tape collage, sound effects, playful electronics, confrontational noise, arty surrealism, pop-culture satire, abstracted takes on traditional music from classical to blues to country, and, perhaps most importantly, an ever-present, animalistic beat. And they've had influence-- the work of alternative icons from [Devo](#) to [Talking Heads](#) to [Sun City Girls](#) to [Animal Collective](#) bears traces of their singular, inspiring sound.

The Residents' story begins in Shreveport, La., where the members supposedly grew up before moving to the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1960s. Once there, they lived together and began making primitive sounds with little technical know-how, inspired by the [Sun Ra Arkestra](#) and [Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band](#) (two groups that also co-habited while making their music). Soon they sent a demo tape to Warner Bros., which resulted in one of the most well-known bits of Residents lore: Executive Hal Halverstadt returned the anonymous tape to the attention of "residents"-- the group had found their name.

What's less well-known is that there has been a philosophy behind the Residents' music from the start. As Ian Shirley details in his 1993 biography [Meet the Residents: America's Most Eccentric Band!](#), they follow the ideas of a Bavarian composer named [Nigel Senada](#) (who might just be a figment of their imaginations). Specifically, they espouse his "Theory of Phonetic Organization," which values sound over meaning and structure, both lyrically and musically. Cryptic spokesperson Jay Clem explained the theory to Shirley this way: "If you can't read music, you don't know what it's supposed to sound like, so you structure it according to how you feel it should sound. It's a more natural way of playing music."

That untrained, outsider-ish bent is certainly evident in the Residents' work, but there's another description of their approach that gets closer to the heart of their sound. "The two things they really enjoy doing," Cryptic's Homer Flynn told the *Berkeley Barb* in 1978, "are creating music that nobody has ever heard before, and then taking other people's music

and making it sound like music that nobody has ever heard before." Basically, the Residents have spent 40 years doing those two things.



They do both on 1974's [Meet the Residents](#), one of the most representative debut albums in rock history. Unlike other singular artists-- say, [Tom Waits](#), or [the Flaming Lips](#)-- who began in more conventional modes and gradually developed their own voices, the Residents pulled their never-heard-before sound from the womb fully-formed. Throughout the album's 12 tracks you can hear all the basic elements they still play with today: murky atmospheres, odd time signatures, bouncing beats, skewed classical figures, and simple melodies that sound both child-like and eerie.

Especially distinctive are the vocals of someone first referred to by fans as the "lead" Resident (he would become known as Mr. Skull after he traded his eyeball mask for a skeleton head, and lately has been referred to as "Randy"). His pitch and phrasing neatly encapsulate the many moods of the band's music. He can be funny, creepy, nerdy, cartoon-like, surreal, and terrifying (especially when he growls in a gravelly low register), often all at the same time. His signature is strongest on "Smelly Tongues", wherein his wry croon sounds like the slow-motion cry of a somnambulant ringmaster.

So the Residents immediately made music that sounded new, but what about turning other people's music into something equally unprecedented? *Meet the Residents* takes care of that with "[Boots](#)", a 53-second aural nightmare of demented vocals and muffled sounds that is purportedly a "cover" of Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'". Such absurd bastardization extends to the album's artwork, a parody of [Meet the Beatles!](#) featuring the defaced visages of the Fab Four on the front, and credits to "John Crawfish, George Crawfish, Paul McCrawfish, and Ringo Starfish" on the back.

The Residents' fascination with re-working other artists' music quickly got more sophisticated, as they invented a brand of pop collage later echoed in the "Plunderphonics" of [John Oswald](#) and the mash-ups of [Girl Talk](#). 1976's [Third Reich 'n Roll](#) parodies 60s culture with two side-long pastiches of 30 classic songs, including "Light My Fire", "Gloria", and a monstrous album-ending hybrid of "Hey Jude" and "Sympathy for the Devil". Clem claimed the record was "an attempt to treat Top 40 rock and roll from the 60s as if it were avant-garde material as performed by early 70s progressive German bands," which helps explain why the cover art shows Dick Clark dressed as a Nazi.



The band nailed this collage approach even better on two early singles. 1977's ["The Beatles Play the Residents and the Residents Play the Beatles"](#) splices 30 Beatles songs into a complex commentary on the way pop music incessantly repeats itself. Most famous was [their 1976 cover of the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction"](#), a vicious deconstruction that sounds like the original melting in a fire. Somehow, that single became a modest hit, selling over 30,000 copies when it was reissued in 1978.

As great and pioneering as those collage records are, the best Residents albums are the ones that refer to no one else. The first of these, and perhaps the most innovative and accomplished of all their albums, is 1979's [Eskimo](#). Inspired by (and perhaps even using) field recordings Nigel Senada had made at the North Pole, it's supposedly a literal attempt to document and represent Eskimo life. But the six tracks actually carve out a bigger, more amorphous landscape of the mind-- a dense, evocative place where synthesizers blow like cold winds and voices moan like the stubborn ghosts of ancient tribes.



Much of *Eskimo* is abstract and atmospheric, but there are spots where chants and rhythms take over, especially during spellbinding closer ["The Festival of Death"](#). Those moments hint at something the Residents would develop throughout their career-- a peculiar take on nature, wildlife, and the environment. In perfecting that approach, they tapped into something primal and elemental that more literal representations of nature rarely touch (the most vivid example being 2005's [Animal Lover](#), an album about humans told through the point of view of animals). They would also predict the woolly tribalism of bands like [Boredoms](#), [No Neck Blues Band](#), and [Gang Gang Dance](#). Listen to *Eskimo* and 1978's [Not Available](#) back to back, and Animal Collective's [Here Comes the Indian](#) makes a lot more sense. All of which makes the Discovery Channel's choice of the Residents to score their 1995 series *Hunters: The World of Predators and Prey* a supremely logical move.

The Residents' music is a perfect fit for film, video, and mass media in general. Something about their weird mesh of sounds evokes colors, shapes, and images the second the needle hits vinyl. And in fact, before they even completed *Meet the Residents*, they worked on a feature-length movie called [Vileness Fats](#), shot on reel-to-reel video inside their two-story building in San Francisco. They abandoned the project in the early 70s but eventually released a version called [Whatever Happened to Vileness Fats?](#) in the mid-80s; filled with disturbing sets, inscrutable plots, and inhuman characters, it's a precursor to musical dream-state movies like Animal Collective's [ODDSAC](#), [the Flaming Lips' Christmas on Mars](#), and even [Matthew Barney's Cremaster series](#).

return to, a simple song that closes *The Commercial Album*. It's both wistful and joyous, reflective and optimistic, and it has the bittersweet title "[When We Were Young](#)". For me, hidden behind their ageless masks and hunkered inside their creative compound, young is something the Residents will always be.

Listen to a Residents playlist compiled by Marc Masters on [Spotify](#).

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