



INTERVIEW

## Dwarves' Blag Dahlia

Blag Dahlia, center



By David Anthony August 19, 2011

It's been 25 years since the Dwarves began terrorizing the punk scene. Known as much for their genre-bending **Dwarves** have gone on lengthy breaks, but they have never stopped pushing boundaries. Time spent on disaffected Records didn't soften the group, and the former even released Dwarves' most recognizable album—the hard-core hardcore had become stagnant.

Through it all, Dwarves have maintained a solid core, consisting of singer Blag Dahlia and the masked guitarist (the death in the early '90s led to the group being dropped from Sub Pop's roster.) With new album *The Dwarves* **Bottom Lounge Saturday, Aug. 20** to celebrate the album's release and to commemorate 25 years of the band, Blag Dahlia about the band's early days, its struggles with being labeled a "shock rock" band, and the trouble with

**The A.V. Club: It's the Dwarves 25th anniversary. You guys started in Chicago as more of a g**

**Blag Dahlia:** My first show was at The Cubby Bear lounge in probably 1982 or '83, something like that. We Occupants, but we were like a '60s garage band, you know? We covered The Seeds, and The Chocolate Wat know that anybody else had ever heard of that. It was pre-Internet, and we just kind of stumbled onto these downtown and do a show. So The Cubby Bear lounge was the spot. Yeah, that was how it started, you know

**AVC: You've said before that the garage sound wasn't really embraced by people in Chicago :**

**BD:** It wasn't embraced by anybody, anywhere. I mean, nobody really seemed to know about '60s punk, an hardcore, so that was kind of the new thing. People didn't really see the connection, and anything that was :

**AVC: The Chicago punk scene was pretty divided back then. Did this resistance to your style tendencies that Dwarves fans are accustomed to?**

**BD:** That was always the real basic part of the Dwarves. It's funny, I mean, we moved to California in the m difference—California has always been like a scene, you know? There's 5,000 kids that are all getting into w come from Illinois there's none of that shit. There's some guy who works at a hardware store telling you to g in a different way. It's not like you get any love from the people. You just do what you do. That's kind of the more gut-level, and at least you know what you're getting.



**AVC: Did that make it easier for you to reinvent the band when you moved, since there were**

**BD:** I mean, to us, it was more like we thought the girls were better looking in California. That's why we lef early '90s is they actually got a scene for bands like **Urge Overkill**, or the **Smashing Pumpkins**, or what always locked in this war with New York [City], and it wasn't really interested in having a cool punk scene o decade to figure out like, "Oh, hey, we have people here too. And we can have bands and people that do som

became a great town, and there were a bunch of cool bands from there and a bunch of cool places to play. B like a bunch of people with new-wave haircuts trying to pretend they were in New York and failing pretty m

**AVC: Even back then you guys had a pretty combative relationship with your audience.**

**BD:** [Laughs.] That was the weird thing about the Dwarves, and that's why we're like a real punk band. Bec punk music ... I mean, what we liked was rock 'n' roll. I liked everything from the oldies station to obscure 't have much use for most punk records. I liked going to those shows because they were exciting and it was th a retro thing. But what happened was, every time we would try to play with bands like that—those sort of p fights with venues. We got in a fight at the Metro when we played with The Cramps, and they threw us out. and 007. We played with them at a place called Ruts, and we got in a fight. So it was like, even though we w like a punk band. We would get into shit everywhere we went. [Laughs.] So we just had to admit that this is

**AVC: Punk does have a lot of bands that have a very politically correct ideology. Did you deci out of people?**

**BD:** Well, it's hard for me to answer that. I would say maybe, but that was never the way I felt about it. The something real, and when we did that it pissed people off. And a lot of times shit would break out and it was just the feeling people got from hearing our music: It made shit erupt in clubs and made shit get weird. I've the Dwarves play, and it doesn't even have to be anybody's fault. It's just that things kind of erupt, you know

**AVC: Did your stage show slowly escalate, or was HeWhoCannotBeNamed getting naked ons go?**

**BD:** It evolved over time. I think the nudity started when Salt Peter started wearing women's lingerie. And, bands to do that shit. Then you started seeing grunge guys dressed up like women, and they were supposed more, like, just to freak people out. So it kind of started like that, and then I went completely naked, and th: it—that was really the visual thing. I mean, a guy with a mask on who was naked was so much cooler than tl about it worked.

But again, we would pick up bits and pieces from different acts. The **Butthole Surfers** were really the bes saw them—I think it was in New York—within five minutes, Gibby [Haynes] came out with like a paper dres the whole rest of the show naked. It was so anticlimactic, and yet it was interesting. You just couldn't take y was this vibe out there of real insanity at shows, but you could only get to it if you had a crowd that was beir were always people that got real crazy backstage, but then when they were out onstage they didn't really see Dwarves, it was this combination of the more popular we got, the more people were really interested in seei But it wasn't a planned thing. It was more just like, you get this feeling at certain shows like, "Wow, that wa more, that would be what we were striving for, and the music kind of came to sum that up.

It was sort of a whole process, and we all went down into it at once. HeWho would kind of escalate things an



**AVC:** Was it the kind of confidence that the Butthole Surfers had that inspired your aesthetic?

**BD:** Right, exactly. It was different than the traditional rock 'n' roll posturing of "I'm big and strong and I v and the other side of it was like, "I just don't give a fuck; I don't care if I'm naked, I don't care if everybody k care if we get shot. We're here and we're making our statement." I think it was kind of more of an outgrowth!

**AVC:** Did these intense live experiences give you a way to keep things exciting for yourself ar

**BD:** Yeah, I think so. It made a statement. We became aware of other guys like GG Allin, and he was somet they were funny—but then you heard about his performance, and it was taking it to this other level that was pushing forward, and you had this idea that you could be part of something so chaotic and huge.

Then, in my mind, there was this other thing of making records, because I always loved records. I was fasci up this chaos live that just seemed like a complete mess, and on the other hand you could make this record Again, the Buttholes were amazing for that, because it was this sort of combination of—live it was this sort— was like, "Wow, these guys are processing drums, and they're doing all these strange things that nobody do you make amazing records that stand on their own and also make these chaotic, wild punk rock shows. Can been the work of the Dwarves all down the line.

People would get a record of ours, and think it was a great record and come check us out, and then they'd se other hand, people would be like, "Oh, man. I saw this crazy-ass band, and it was so wild and I'm gonna get the record would be some kind of interesting, poppy kind of thing. And then you'd be like, "Wait a minute, v this amalgam of what the Dwarves are.

And that's where the whole *Born Again* thing is making everybody so happy now. Everybody's reviewing th our punk rock roots. But for me, it's like, it's got everybody who was ever in the band. All the guys who were *Pussy* days, and in the poppier records in the '90s, like Rex Everything and Wholly Smokes, and the newest

records that the Dwarves have made. This record was like, “What would happen if we bring everybody together some garage songs again like we did in the '80s? And we keep making hardcore songs, but let's make some me, is like the whole thing of the Dwarves: It's the alpha and the omega. You can't just say, “Well, they're a ] all of these things.

**AVC: You've done various projects outside of the Dwarves. How important is it for you to ha**

**BD:** The Dwarves, while on the one hand it's really freeing and there's a lot of different stuff to it, it's also a huge event. But yeah, doing other things is real important to me. If you get stuck in the world of being Blag, there for years at a time. [Laughs.] It depends [on] if you want to have an existence or not, you know what I

But my mind just wanders. I think the thing that has been confusing for people is that most times when someone coming to a conclusion like, “I don't want to do punk anymore; I don't like punk. I'm going to do this.” That day I die, but I've always loved other things at the same time. Doing other things has just been essential to me where I've written a couple books, or you work on other people's records and really get pulled out of your own



**AVC: You said that you can get caught up in being Blag. How are you able to distance yourself**

**BD:** Being Blag really fucks with your head. [Laughs.] I think the more you believe it, the crazier it gets. I've know? So the Dwarves have been a great organization for me, because you don't have to believe in anything like the Knights Of Columbus or the 4-H club or something. [Laughs.] You get to be all things if you want to.

But, yeah, you've got to mix it up. I think most people have tunnel vision on their art. Mainly because that's it's easier to market things that way—the music business would rather have you do one thing and come off as a one-trick pony to me, that kind of integrity just spells boredom. I'm not interested in that. I never signed up to just be one



**AVC: Was it hard to deal with getting labeled as a shock band? Did it feel like you were in a standpoint?**

**BD:** I really appreciate you asking that, because that, to me, is the essence of it. To this day, if you mention say, “Oh yeah, I saw that guy’s dick,” or, “Oh yeah, wasn’t that a punk band?” A lot of music consumers just consuming things. It’s very hard for a band like the Dwarves in that kind of context, because we change around for 25 years, so fitting into the marketing scheme of product has always been the hardest part. It’s been great. “We never went anywhere. We kept making cool records, we kept doing different things, we kept embracing influences influenced by trying to succeed in the music business.”

But along the way, it was a very hard band to be in. Between the fights, the stabbings, winding up at the hospital would say to somebody, “Hey, I really like your record. I think you’re great!” And I could just tell they didn’t record. I would say to be people that I respected—whether it was a musician, or a photographer, or a painter kind of look at my thing and be like, “But you just have a punk band and say ‘fuck.’” They weren’t able to be nice when people come around 25 years later and see that it was an art form and there was a lot in there that that, it wasn’t so much that the band wasn’t interesting, or that there wasn’t anything there, as much as it was understanding what was happening here.

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**AVC: Is it easier now that you guys aren't on labels like Sub Pop, where you aren't compared cross over?**

**BD:** I would say yes and no. Yes, because actual music fans can come out of the woodwork after 15 years, re Dwarves really were better than Generic Punk Band No. 57 that had a record deal,” and that’s nice. But it’s : more they stay the same. People are still scared to death to play with this band or, if they only consume new [they] don’t want to have anything to do with it. And we still strike fear in people who do things like book sl business are still as timorous as ever and, in fact, they’re more scared than ever to do things and stretch out least when we started there was a lot more money in it, and people were willing to take chances on us doing aren’t ever willing. It still means it might be hard to fill a venue in Pasadena, and it might be hard to get you are still as chickenshit as they ever were about this stuff.

When I signed up to be an artist, I signed up to do interesting things, and I feel really blessed that I’ve been to do, because they self-censor themselves; they put themselves in a box and they shoot for success. Whether know if they made some interesting art or not, because if somebody at the label tells them to do something commercial. We’ve just never been part of that.

**AVC: You did a Halloween show here in Chicago a few years back where a freak show opened from the ceiling as you played.**

**BD:** Yeah, this girl hung from the ceiling by her knees, and she was bleeding all over the place. She was ver many times are you going to do that? [Laughs.]



**AVC: How do you find ways to take an already infamous stage show into even crazier realms**

**BD:** We were in France last month, and there were some gorgeous girls from England doing a fire-breathin wound up stage diving into ... it's the middle of the day; it's 1 o'clock at a heavy metal festival in France, wh out. By all accounts, this show is supposed to suck. But by the end of it I'm crowd surfing over 2,000 people fire onstage. I just think, "This is the Dwarves. This is what it's about."

We can make something work in the right context. That's what I learned about original punk, like, "Tonight When you're too contrived with everything, you can no longer make that stuff happen.

**AVC: Do you ever see the Dwarves ending? Will there ever be a day when you just can't do it**

**BD:** Maybe, but look—a couple of years ago, I was in Chicago and wound up having sex with two girls whos of the day, if I can keep pulling off shit like that, then I'll keep doing this forever.

**AVC: It allows you to continue living dangerously no matter how old you get.**

**BD:** Of course! It's the only way middle-aged guys can get laid. [Laughs.]

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