

Interviews: Blag Dahlia (The Dwarves)

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The Circle of Life: The Dwarves

The Dwarves always seem to be a little late or a little early for the party. When they released the self destructive *Blood Guts & Pussy*, a savage 12 track album that had about a 13 minute running time, punk had died out, replaced by grunge. While *Blood, Guts, and Pussy* was certainly influenced by earlier hardcore, it was singular in its dedication to annihilation and its gruesomely comedic take on what Kurt Cobain took so seriously. The album was also notable in its incorporation of sound samples, something that had rarely, if ever, been done in punk, but would later become a staple of the genre. Still, although they never got the adulation of their plaid-clothed contemporaries, they remained in the back of alt-music consciousness, due in part, to their penchant for putting naked girls covered in blood on their album covers, fist-fighting with fans, and for spray painting, "Sub pop owes us \$" on the lobby of the Sub Pop offices.

Some twenty odd years later, they are releasing *The Dwarves Are Born Again* after their longest hiatus to date. The new record features musicians from throughout the Dwarves history, that, while incorporating their earlier viciousness, also utilizes styles from across the musical map.

Staff writer John Gentile recently sat down with Blag Dahlia, the band's lead singer and ringleader, to talk about both records and what it's like showing up at a bad time to a party that he wasn't invited to in the first place.

***Blood, Guts, and Pussy* was very much a hardcore record. But, before the release of that LP, the Dwarves released several garage rock revival records. Was the transition of the band's sound intentional?**

I think it was intentional. I think what happened, we had our garage stuff that we liked, but there wasn't a very big scene of that, then. When we made it out here to San Francisco, what was taking off was speed metal- bands like Corrosion of Conformity, D.R.I., and I looked around at our Beatle boots and Paisley ties, and it didn't feel like we were delivering with both barrels. A return to the Misfits, Minor threat, is what I wanted to make.

Since the release of *Blood, Guts, and Pussy*, many, many bands have co-opted that style. Do you feel that this complementary?

Bands have been biting on my dick for years. There's a new Transplants song that bites on the Dwarves so much. No one ever credits us... but... Well, it is complimentary in the sense that people like what you did. It's insulting in that they don't acknowledge where it came from. It's nice to know where people where it comes from. I mean, I've stolen from Chuck Berry but at least I say so.

How did the actual recording of *Blood, Guts, and Pussy* come about?

What happened was, we went up to Seattle to play some shows. Our first show up there was a festival with Mudhoney. It was before the Sub Pop explosion. We went up there and did a single for the Sub Pop singles

club. But, we did like another ten songs while we were there. I think Jack Endino said to sub Pop, "they have half a record already so you might as well record them." So we slammed it out. We recorded it in Reciprocal Studio in Seattle. I think it was like two days.

I was already starting to develop a record with samples. You didn't call it samples then. We would just use sounds from cassettes that seemed interesting for a sound effect. We mixed it all in like two days. So, it was a slam-it-out punk rock record for sure. I like to say that the sound samples were something that had never been done before in that context. I was introduced to it by Frank Zappa, and I always wanted to put elements of that and to juxtapose that with punk to make it more creative. As far as I can tell, we were the only punk band doing that kind of stuff. Later you would get all sound collages. But, as far as I know, no one was a Misfits/Motorhead punk band which then threw in sound effects and it made it more three dimensional. At the time, all the critics ignored it.

The characters in *Blood, Guts, and Pussy* are in some rough straits- living in cars, being addicted to drugs, and cutting themselves. Why is it such a nihilistic record?

I think what it was, we always had a nihilistic negative perspective for the people who got the joke. It wasn't misogyny, it was misanthropy. We didn't just hate women, we hated everyone! The hope was that people would see that it was a joke, that was so over the top. That was what made us different. In punk, you're supposed to throw shit out there and frown about it, isn't it funny? I was dating a real fucked up junkie at that point and the world was nastier back then around the edges. It was before the new self empowered, healthy rock scene.

Especially then, when we would play, we would get attacked at shows. People thought that we were insulting them just by our existence, just by having our attitude. People almost had an attitude of, "How dare you?!" Every band on Sub Pop got a major deal except us. It was really only us and at the time it was a real drag, and now I wear it like a badge of honor.

Artists, such as Ian MacKaye, often espouse the concept that artists aren't truly free to pursue their true expression while under major label contract. In retrospect, are you know happy that you never signed to a major?

I'm certainly happy now, and I recognize Ian MacKaye's position. However, I think at the time, I wanted the deal because I needed the money. A label like Sub Pop didn't pay you anything, so how was I supposed to live? At the time it would have been nice to be acknowledged.

The grunge scene was a mid-tempo [scene]. The Dwarves were hardcore. So, we were the token hardcore band and people weren't responding to that. At the time, I thought major labels were avoiding punk, which they managed to avoid for 20 years. I thought that the genre needed to be acknowledged.

I needed money, so at the time it would have been real nice. But the Dwarves were never invited to, and never joined, any reindeer games.

The cover of *Blood, Guts, and Pussy* is as striking as it is iconic. Who is the gentleman that has been featured on that release, as well as other Dwarves LPs?

That is the great Bobby Faust. He's a thespian from New York and I guess way back in the day I would get weed off him. That is how I came into contact with him, and he became my muse. The cover shot was taken by Michael Levine, who just did the cover of the new album, *Born again*.

The first track on the new album is called "The Dwarves are Still the Best Band Ever". Do you truly feel that the Dwarves really are the best band ever?

Well, yeah, I do. I just can't think of any other band that has so little support that has actually managed to stay good. Even the bands that do last, they still sound the same. We managed to evolve despite that we

really never got support. The Dwarves are just a real independent machine. Not independent in the idea of building a label with friends, but just being a weird little group. But somehow, we managed to keep making records without getting commercial and sellout. The Dwarves really are the band ever.

On "15 Minutes", you seem to attack newer, upcoming bands. Why the vitriol?

I think that I intended it as a shout to the upcommers. I'm just an old guy combining the Andy Warhol concept of, "everyone gets 15 minutes" and then saying, "because that's all you're worth." You come along with your manager and label, but you are mediocre and uninteresting. Even if you become really big, make a lot of money for you and your handlers, you come and go because there's nothing behind you.

It's also a shout out that the Dwarves have been around for 25 years. I've always heard about people that were better than me, but here we are! After twenty five years, all the bands that are, "better than us" are all scooping ice cream and doing whatever the fuck they're doing because their band is lame and couldn't live without the subsistence of major labels. They sucked and then they got dropped and were gone.

This is what someone who is in a band like us that has to listen to the new parade of idiots comes around. Every once in a while something that is good falls through the cracks. But, if you look at it, it's sort of a monolithic state. The music gets more generic. The scene gets more generic. The labels are falling more apart, so now they are getting bands' t-shirt, publishing... its' cannibalism. The industry that we are in... one of the best explanation is in that Motley Crue book. They're tied to a machine that people get tripped up in the gears of. I'm' just so proud to avoid all of it, not even because we consciously tried to.

***Blood, Guts, and Pussy* was recorded as a band, but it seems on *Live Again* you really took the reigns of the project. How was it different recording this way?**

It was definitely different from *Blood guts*, but ringleader is what I am. A lot of times, I get more credit than I deserve. The band can really play, and wrote songs, which people don't know. [Long time guitarist] HeWho wrote a lot of Dwarves songs, even from earliest days. Saltpeter, and now with the Fresh Prince of Darkness, Rex Everything, Wholly Smokes, they all contributed and I tied it all together. This record is a real extreme example. Five or Six guitar players, four drummers. I wanted to bring back all the spirits of the Dwarves. That was how we played it.

This whole process started with [our previous album] *The Dwarves Must Die*. I don't know if the fans liked it as much as this. *Must Die* became this really deconstructionist thing. For this album, we had to bring in all the people from the band. One guy can do surf, and one can do country, one guy can do garage. That's what production, especially on the new album, was all about.

***Blood, Guts* was kind of a singular attack stylistically, but *Born Again* features a wider variety of styles. How did this come about?**

That's a good question. It comes down to songs. It expresses the right things. I had a bunch of the tunes I had written. When I heard certain songs, like "You'll never take us alive," that was brought in by the Fresh Prince of Darkness. Josh Freese kind of brought in "I masturbate me" and made sort of a Stooges record. Things got made in a deconstructivist way, which is much different than *Blood, Guts*. With that album, we were listening to the Ramones, Motorhead, and Misfits, and it was us going with that.

You've repeatedly stated that you don't get the credit the band deserves, but to be fair, you've gone rock legends like Nick Olivieri, Josh Freese, Dexter Holland, and many others all over your previous records and this one. Certainly, someone is giving you props.

What it comes down to, we didn't get a lot of credit from the radio and industry people. I thought we got a fair deal from rock critics, guys who actually look at the records, but, for the most part, the industry didn't give us credit. It was always that kind of thing- we always got recognition from musicians. To musicians, the hand was a very freeing thing. You can jump off the stage, scream "fuck" put naked chicks on the record.

band was a very freeing thing. You can jump on the stage, scream fuck, put naked chicks on the record. Bands would come up to us at shows that we were opening for, where the crowd liked them more than us, and say, "Man, I really liked that!" We picked up waves of fans. Krist Novoselic gave the, "I'm-not-worthy." Ultimately, it comes down to a liberating thing. "Wow! You can do whatever you want!" Most bands are coloring in the lines.

The Dwarves just didn't do those things. This band is great in that we see ourselves for what we are. If you to make fun of Lemmy, you can, but he's still Lemmy- the conservation of Lemmy is a part of what Lemmy is and does. We don't have to play by the rules or worship Social D. We blow a hole in that kind of thought.

Again, Bobby Faust appeared not the new album's cover. What is it like when you call him up and ask him to pose naked surrounded by nude women, yet again?

About every five years, I'll hit him up, and he's still a cool guy. He still likes to do it. I don't know how much the girls like it, but they're getting paid too, so I guess they have to suffer.

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