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After 25 years, the Dwarves are still standing tall

By **Chris Parker** Wednesday, Sep 21 2011

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Sub Pop had kind of jumped the shark on us and was making boring grunge records," says Dwarves frontman **Blag Dahlia**. "They didn't really see the whole pop-punk thing coming up in their rear-view mirror."

Formed in the mid-'80s and inspired by the punk antics of **GG Allin**, the Dwarves have survived for 25 years by continually evolving their sound while always remaining entertaining. "I almost think it's a form of mass hallucination," declares Dahlia, "because by all rights, we should be done now, and yet we still exist."

The punky Chicago iconoclasts have always been shapeshifters. Their '86 debut, *Horror Stories*, leaned hard on the grimy garage-psych of bands like the Sonics, but by 1988's *Toolin' for a Warm Teabag*, they'd moved on to the atavistic punk of Allin. They even adopted many of his boundary-



Led by Blag Dahlia, the Dwarves are standing tall after all these years.

Location Info

Bluebird Theater

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pushing antics, such as self-mutilation, on-stage hummers and punching audience members, while wisely avoiding Allin's shittiest behavior.

"I was always influenced by GG, except in terms of personal hygiene," says Dahlia from his home in San Francisco. "You really want to avoid his hygiene. But GG wrote great poppy, funny songs with cool phrases that were kind of Ramones-y. I just thought he was great."

The Dwarves' outrageous stage behavior has greatly diminished over the years. Their performances now are simply those of a loud, raucous, fun-loving garage-punk band. Dahlia credits this to both age and different membership before returning to the context of their performances as a driving force.

"Back then, we were kind of new and people didn't really know us," he points out. "So if I felt like people were ignoring us, things would get kinda out of hand. They don't ignore us anymore; they just want to hear the next song. Now we're part of the establishment; we're part of the problem."

While the Dwarves' music has continued to morph across their eleven albums — running from hardcore to pop punk to rockabilly to industrial dance and garage — they've always retained the same twisted penchant for crude comic overstatement ("Lesbian Nun," "We Must Have Blood") and serial offensiveness (statutory-rape ode "Let's Fuck").

Like Allin, the band has courted controversy, from album covers featuring naked women covered in blood or crucifying a dwarf to slagging [Queens of the Stone Age's Josh Homme](#), singing words



Bluebird Theater

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Denver, CO 80206-1713

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Details

The Dwarves, with Nashville Pussy and Holley 750, 8 p.m. Friday, September 23, Bluebird Theater, 3317 East Colfax Avenue, \$18-\$20, www.axs.com.

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like these (from "Massacre"): "This one goes out to Queens of the Trustfund/You slept on my floor, and now I'm sleeping through your motherfucking record." (Homme responded by slugging Dahlia backstage at a gig.) No love has clearly been lost on Dahlia's part: "Aren't his fifteen minutes up?"

The Dwarves' most notorious stunt came in 1993, when they faked the death of longtime guitarist HeWhoCannotBeNamed. That's the prank that pissed off Sub Pop. The band sent out a press release announcing that the frequently naked guitarist had been stabbed to death in Philadelphia, and that that their third album for Sub Pop (and fifth overall), *Sugarfix*, was a tribute to him. When the truth came out that the unnamed one was quite alive, the label quickly dropped the group.

But the Dwarves weren't that easy to kill. A re-formed outfit returned four years later with *Dwarves Are Young and Good Looking*, inaugurating a new pop-punk chapter in their story aided by the arrival of producer **Eric Valentine** (**Good Charlotte**, **Smash Mouth**), who's helmed their last four albums, as well. The record proved to be one of their most enduring and beloved releases.

"We wound up going to **Epitaph**, and *Young & Good Looking* was the result. In a lot of ways, that's still our most popular record, with pop-punk standards like 'Everybody's Girl' and 'One Time Only,'" says Dahlia, before heaping praise on Valentine's contributions. "When we go into it, we either play really action-packed, wild-heavy-loud punk rock or we really do a pop song. I think most bands are kind of uncomfortably in between the two. We go all the way in one direction or all the way in the other, and Eric's really helped with that. He's just the best producer out there, and it's a miracle we've gotten him to do so many records for us."

The pop punk of *Young & Good Looking* was just a brief stop for the Dwarves. They'd go completely off the rails into an oddball fusion of punk, industrial and dance on 2000's *Dwarves Come Clean*, sounding like **Green Day** being crushed by an Atari Teenage Riot. By 2004's *Dwarves Must Die*, they'd settled on a free-ranging amalgam of punk, metal, garage and pop punk, which also provided a template for their latest, *Dwarves Are Born Again*.

"There's a unity to all that, to me — '60s punk, '50s rockabilly, hardcore, death metal and hip-hop," notes Dahlia. "It's all part of one thing, if you distill it down to its essence. It's just different beats and different chord progressions over forward-looking production style and angry lyrics about the fucked-up world in which we live."



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"That's what has always tied it together," he goes on. "Whether we were in a '60s band, a rockabilly band, a hardcore band or pop punk — whatever it was, it was always this idea of this band of miscreants that couldn't be tamed."

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