

Rolling Stone

Rockabilly Hero Dexter Romweber Honored by Jack White, Exene Cervenka in New Doc

Flat Duo Jets frontman talks spiritual visions and 'wreckage makers' in 'Two Headed Cow'

by: James Sullivan



The Flat Duo Jets perform at the Wetlands in New York.
Steve Eichner/WireImage

A wild cult hero gets his due in *Two Headed Cow*, a new documentary about the life and music of Dexter Romweber. The co-founder of North Carolina rockabilly band the Flat Duo Jets, Romweber later became a solo artist noted for his primitive, post-punk brand of rock and influenced famous musicians to follow, many of

whom appear in the film.

Two Headed Cow, which is released today on DVD, combines black and white footage of Romweber's romantic youth with a sobering update and interviews with his artistic admirers. Filmmaker Tony Gayton first learned about Romweber over two decades ago while he was making *Athens, Ga. – Inside/Out*, the 1987 documentary that helped bring the town's music scene to national attention. He was bowled over by the Flat Duo Jets' performance at a frat party and still holds it as one of the greatest shows he's ever seen. "They basically destroyed all their instruments. I was slackjawed," he tells *Rolling Stone*.

Though he's mellowed, Romweber is one of the few contemporary musicians who can still evoke the danger of the earliest rock & roll, says Gayton. "There are not a lot of bands that do that – maybe the Sex Pistols, the Stooges. That danger when it originally started, where people said, 'I'm not letting my daughter anywhere near that.'" Gayton, the co-creator of the new AMC period drama *Hell on Wheels*, began *Two Headed Cow* over 20 years ago but ran out of money before he could complete it. The extra timing turned out to be beneficial; when the filmmaker revisited Romweber a few years ago, the singer talked openly about his struggles with intense, quasi-spiritual visions, and it makes for moving segments of the film.

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Romweber, now 45, retains a similar bluntness about his legacy and his cult idolatry. "I've got bigger problems to solve than how many people know me," he tells *Rolling Stone*. As he explains in the film, he's always admired outcasts; he calls his heroes "heavy-duty fuckers, real partiers and wreckage makers," including Errol Flynn, the writer Knut Hamsun and his favorite rocker, [Jerry Lee Lewis](#).

Two Headed Cow opens with a testimonial by [Jack White](#), who has been acknowledging Romweber's influence publicly for years. The White Stripes frontman invited Romweber to his Third Man Studio to cut a few collaborative songs awhile back, and tells the film crew that he was inspired by how little Romweber seemed to care what people thought of him while he was performing. "He just wanted to express these songs that were coming out of him," White says in the film. "It was about energy and attitude and soulfulness – nothing fake about it."

Other musicians who sing Romweber's praises include Neko Case, Chan Marshall of Cat Power (who bought her first guitar, a Sears Silvertone, because Romweber played the same model) and [Exene Cervenka](#) of X. Cervenka tells *Rolling Stone* that Romweber's possessed combination of rockabilly raveup, surf pop, crooners' ballads and other time-tested genres can transport listeners effortlessly into any era of music. "He is classic, timeless, transcendent, pure," she says. "He has a talent few people will ever have."

Gayton says that Anson Mount, the lead actor of *Hell on Wheels*, was dumbfounded when he learned that the director made a movie about Romweber – turns out, he is the actor's favorite musician. "[Romweber has] that kind of fan base," says Gayton. "People go back again and again."

Though the Flat Duo Jets were highly touted – the film opens with a vintage *Letterman* appearance – Romweber's recent records have actually outperformed his old band's albums. His current outfit, the Dex Romweber Duo, includes his sister Sara (Let's Active) on drums; most recently they put out two records on the Bloodshot label, 2009's *Ruins of Berlin* and this year's *Is That You in the Blue?*

Romweber's only agenda, it turns out, is to keep performing. "It's been a hell of a ride – raucous, sometimes

beautiful, sometimes ugly," Romweber says . "I don't really expect anything other than to pay off my mortgage and put gas in the car. Life doesn't really owe you anything.

"I know what it's like to be free, and I know what it's like to be caged. And when you're playing music, you want to be free."

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