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The Mooney Suzuki

By [Erin Broadley](#)

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When landmark, New York City music venue CBGB was shut down in 2006, [reporters on the scene](#) noted the smell of the deconstruction site was ripe like no other. As layer after layer of the club was torn apart and carted off, years of punk history gave way to an odor so rank it made the disassemblers dry-heave. Those on the scene [likened](#) the smell to a combination of “Sprite and shit,” although those who considered CBGB home might remember it otherwise, fragrant like the smell of a lover’s unwashed skin the morning after. In the club’s prime, the Ramones could probably lick the wood stain off the walls to satisfy their nicotine cravings.

Before CBGB closed its doors for the last time, the Mooney Suzuki was one of the many bands that let loose a sweat-drenched set within its walls. Like the venue itself, the Mooney Suzuki provokes those who might take themselves a bit too seriously. Recorded live on a stiflingly hot, New York summer night in 2001, “The Mooney Suzuki - CBGB OMFUG Masters: Live June 29, 2001: The Bowery Collection” is the only recording that captures the band in true, alive and amplified, ass-shaking rock and roll form.

“There are plenty of bands that didn’t hit their stride in their career until their quintessential live album,” says the Mooney Suzuki frontman Sammy James, Jr. SuicideGirls got Sammy on the phone to chat about CBGB, coaching loners into guitar gods, and why he can’t stand earnest rock and roll.

Get your copy of the live CBGB album exclusively through MVD Entertainment Group [here](#).

Erin Broadley: So, you recently mentored some young rockers for that MTV series “Made”, right?

Sammy James, Jr.: Well, not some, just one, and he was enough [laughs]. He was a lot of work; a handful to whip into shape.

EB:

Tell me a little bit about that show and the importance of mentoring younger musicians and helping loners become rock gods, so to speak.

SJ:

Yeah, it was a crazy experience. We’d just got off of a year of touring and I was looking to take the rest of the year off and not do anything [when] we get a MySpace message from MTV casting [asking] if anybody was interested in helping a kid win his school Battle of the Bands.

EB:

[Laughs]

SJ:

I played sax in elementary school in the orchestra, but why I started playing rock music was to play in my high school Battle of the Bands. So a day later I’m meeting with the casting director and two days later I got the gig.

EB:

What did you put him through? Any examples of how you whipped him into shape?

SJ:

I would love to give you details but we’re not supposed to talk about the episode ‘till it airs. What I can say is that he didn’t know how to play so I had to teach him how to play guitar. He couldn’t sing a note; I had to teach him how to sing from scratch. He was incredibly shy and self conscious and inhibited...

EB:

Perfect frontman, right? [Laughs]

SJ:

Exactly. And I think that’s the point of the show...

EB:

I think I saw an episode where some jock wanted to become a ballerina.

SJ:

Right. Exactly. There was a lot of training involved. Also, the kid didn't own a CD. He had this little mp3 player with, like, 40 songs on it that were all the music he'd ever heard in his entire life that didn't come with a video game.

EB:

Wow.

SJ:

You know what I'm saying? He just didn't know. So there was education on every level going on. A lot of the qualities like being completely anti-social and socially awkward are common for a musician and were easily transformed to what was necessary. We had to put a band together, hold auditions... dealing with a band is very emotional; you need a lot of diplomacy and tact. You need higher social skills to run a band.

EB:

Were you happy with the results?

SJ:

I was *very* happy. [Laughs] It's like anything else, whether you win or lose isn't as important as how you play the game. I shouldn't tell you whether he wins or loses, but I can tell you that I thoroughly enjoyed it, I'm pretty sure he enjoyed it, and I think he played a good game.

EB:

Along those same lines, the Mooney Suzuki had a cameo in *School of Rock* with Jack Black a few years ago and you wrote the title song for the film. Do you think that music education is something sorely lacking in schools these days? That "Made" episode is a perfect example of how music education in schools is going down the drain.

SJ:

Yeah, well, I would definitely agree. Obviously, *School of Rock* was great. All these things sort of got intertwined because when I wrote back to MTV I was like, "I wrote 'School of Rock'; I know a little something about high school Battle of the Bands." [Laughs] That probably helped me get the gig. Then out of that gig, through someone at MTV, I started doing this other charity called [Education Through Music](#), and they were doing a battle of the bands like actually based on *School of Rock* with real kids in real schools to raise money for New York City arts education. So I'm doing that gig which is going to be great. I'm working with a bunch of kids from the Bronx -- these are younger kids, like 8th grade -- and I haven't had a chance to meet with them yet but I've been talking to their teacher and we're gonna pick a song and we'll perform it in the city with a bunch of other [groups]. They have other musicians training the other kids' groups; Moby is doing one, the guitarist from Twisted Sister is doing one [laughs], so I'm excited. It's going to be really cool.

EB:

Do you have children?

SJ:

Say what?

EB:

Do you have children?

SJ:

As in spawn?

EB:

Yeah, as in spawn.

SJ:

No [laughs]. I look forward to that but not anytime soon.

EB:

Well, in another [interview](#) you were asked if there was a garage rock capitol and you replied, "There is no capitol of garage rock. Garage rock means people trying to be a British rock band, but not being good enough to pull it off." I thought that was funny. That interview was done a few years ago but people are still hyping this garage renaissance with bands like the Black Lips and such. Do you stand by that statement?

SJ:

Yeah, I one hundred percent stand by that. With anything, you gotta call something by a name, we have to use language to discuss things... when somebody was on the receiving end of a man-on-man relationship in prison,

he was termed a “punk” ... that’s what that word meant. And then when it slipped into the junkie community of the Bowery in NYC and it was used in regard for music was coming out of that same scene, then it meant “punk” as we knew it then. But for kids today, Hot Topic is punk. Is that wrong? Well, if that’s the word that they know to describe what they find inside of Hot Topic store, then it can’t be wrong.

EB:

Originally the word “dork” referred to a whale penis.

SJ:

Right. Well there you go, hey [laughs]. Of course, the music and culture in Hot Topic that the kids call punk has very little to do with what may have been going on at CBGB’s in the ‘70s, but both are called punk. So with garage, every new band that has a guitar in it is called garage today unless the haircut dictates that they’re emo. That’s why I personally like to go back to the actual etymology of the word itself. Garage first started being applied to a music form when suburban Americans inspired by the British invasion set up bands in their garages and started emulating them. That’s where a phenomenon of something that was going on was happening that had a sound and, because it was happening in garages, that’s what they called it. So for me, that just makes the most sense.

EB:

Let’s talk about the role of theatrics in rock and roll for you. How much is too much?

SJ:

Well, you’ll hear a lot more of this if you see the “Made” episode but what makes rock and roll music different than any other type of music is that it should be as much about the theatrics as anything else. I don’t want to see earnest rock and roll. That’s bullshit. Rock and roll is shtick. And even if it *isn’t*, then its shtick is some kind of mock-earnestness. Like I don’t care how many fucking interviews Kurt Cobain would say, “You know I’m just not like Freddie Mercury,” he is that.

EB:

He worshipped Queen and Bowie!

SJ:

Right, exactly. So instead of putting on a flamboyant outfit and jumping from a trapeze, his shtick was wearing a frumpy sweater and staring at the ground. Not in a contrived way, but it’s crafted the way a Michelangelo statue is crafted, [laughs] you know? It’s a great thing. It’s an art just as much as anything else. Crafting an anti-image is, to me, as valuable a self-expression as crafting a melody or a lyric. So we always thought about what the band would look like, what the stage experience would be like and then we just tried to come up with music [laughs]. Maybe it would have been a better idea to do it the other way around but that’s what we did. I never woke up one day with a burning desire to write a song. But I did wake up with a burning desire to make this explosive performance happen, so by default I had to start writing songs.

EB:

In an older interview you did with Furious.com you said, “In an age where the current musical climate is about sweating from frustration and/or constipation, the Mooney Suzuki music is about sweat from celebration and rhythmic elation...”

SJ:

At the time, what I was referring to was those seven string guitar, rap metal [bands]... fortunately my mind has been washed clean of what those bands were all about, but unfortunately it’s transformed into the music they call “emo” these days where you have these kids just wallowing. It’s unbelievable. This whole idea that I’m helpless against the pain you, or the world, or my parents are inflicting on me... just get over it. I think you should handle your problems on your own time and then [laughs] when you get on stage you should enjoy yourself. But that just shows how out of touch I am because apparently these bands are striking chords. It’s like the chicken or the egg... Are these bands so popular because our society today with so much digital isolation strips you of whatever tools you might have to overcome emotional obstacles of adolescence and that’s why they’re successful? Or is it because the kids are listening to this music that they’re not developing the tools needed to navigate the emotional minefield of adolescence? Is this music turning the youth into these wishy-washy, wet noodles? All these bands are trying to shoot pool with rope.

EB:

Ooh, that’s a good one.

SJ:

[Laughs]

EB:

Being in a band that has built a reputation with its live show, how does that translate onto a record?

SJ:

Our first two records, we nailed the songs live in the rehearsal space and then we went in [studio], hit play, and just documented what that was. Then the next two albums were a lot more [about] putting things together in the studio. Then, of course, there's the live CBGB's album that came out March 18... that's us live at CBGB's in 2001. That's another route to go through; you can just do live albums. There are plenty of bands that didn't hit their stride in their career until their quintessential live album.

EB:

Have you ever been frustrated by in-studio sessions and the sound that you get compared to how you're happy sounding on stage?

SJ:

Definitely. I've been recording other bands as part of developing my studio and audio skills so that the next recordings that I do with my own music can *adhere closer to my personal sonic vision*. Those first two records, before you have any money, there's no budget, there's no label, you're not looking for a "producer" or a mixer, just someone that has a studio. So by default, you produce yourself. Our last two records seemed to rile or upset our fans the most and those are the ones that had other producers than the band itself, you know. And I wanted to do that; I think I it was a great learning experience...

EB:

Sometimes it's healthy for fans to get riled up; it reminds them that they have opinions on music in the first place.

SJ:

I agree. That's a whole other conversation... you want to show your fans appreciation but at the same time, you're doing your fans a disservice by not making music that is speaking what's meaningful to you. So that's a whole other balancing act. I'm looking forward to spending more time on both sides of the glass, where for a long period I would just be in the live room, now I can spend an equal amount of time in the mixing room.

EB:

For your third record you guys teamed up with The Matrix, and I read that they have this whole, modern day, wall of sound technique. Did they pull any guns on you in the recording studio, Phil Spector-style?

SJ:

[Laughs] Metaphorically, yes. It's funny because the studio we recorded at, Paramount, was right across the street from where Gold Star Studio, where Phil Spector did his hits, used to be. Now it's a mini-mall but it was nice touching a little bit of that vibe. But that was just a freak out experience. I mean, honestly, you may as well be asking me about the Revolutionary War... my memories from making that record are as foggy as my memories of sitting in history class learning about George Washington [laughs].

EB:

Hey, at least you remember you were there; that's the important part. How do you feel about the Mooney Suzuki being called some of the "coolest guys in New York"? What defines cool for you? It seems like you guys have a healthy, self-deprecating sense of humor. When somebody calls you the four coolest guys in New York...

SJ:

Well, that somebody is right [laughs].

EB:

[Laughs]

SJ:

That's kind of a crazy question. All I can say is that you realize one day, you look in the mirror and you're like, "This is nuts; I am a full grown man and I now look like what I thought was cool when I was 6-years-old watching 'Happy Days' and liking the Fonz." It's awesome but it's also a little ridiculous. Here I am in a leather jacket and I'm trying to be cool because I had his shirt when I was six that had Arthur Fonzarelli on it and it said, "Fonz is Cool." So that's my reference point. That's what I thought was cool.

EB:

You also have a part in that upcoming Ben Stiller movie, *Tropic Thunder*. How was fake Vietnam?

SJ:

It was amazing because fake Vietnam is Hawaii. So we had the best fucking time. It was awesome. We had a free Hawaiian vacation and played a band at the party so we just had a party for three days.

EB:

Are you excited to see the film? Is it any good?

SJ:

It seemed amazing on set and the trailer just hit YouTube and looks outrageous so I'm very excited.

EB:

Let's talk about over-opulent, rock and roll mythology... What turns you on about it? What turns you off about it?

SJ:

Um, nothing really turns me off about it. It is a mythology and that's what I like about it. It's not even a question of liking... it's one of those things [where] you wake up one day and you realize, "Oh this is part of my psychic world, this is something I genuinely believe in or respond to." I mean, as a kid you see bumper stickers, "What Would Jesus Do?" That's how people dictate their lives. But there are plenty of kids running around on a Saturday night thinking, "What would Mick and Keith do?" And that's how they decide how they'll plot their next move. It's funny because when I was in high school, this is... well, it's not embarrassing... but when I was in high school, I was obsessed with the Red Hot Chili Peppers. All my friends, we were just obsessed. So on a weekend or at a party or some awkward situation, we would say, "What would the Red Hot Chili Peppers do?"

So years later, at a Halloween party at Tom Morello's house in LA surrounded by all the biggest rock stars in the world, I'm feeling kind of awkward and uncomfortable, walking around, and for some reason that popped into my mind like when I was a kid and I would feel awkward, "What would the Red Hot Chili Peppers do?" So I'm just kinda walking around looking at Tom Morrello's Grammys and his pinball machine, so I played the pinball machine and I'm thinking, "Shit, I'm being a loser at this party. I can't really mingle, what would the Red Hot Chili Peppers do?" So of course, ten minutes later the Red Hot Chili Peppers walk in the door and I'm like, "Alright! Let's see what they do!" [Laughs] Anthony was with his girlfriend but Flea, who was my idol when I was in high school, he basically did exactly what I did!

EB:

[Laughs]

SJ:

He looked at Tom Morello's Grammys, played a little pinball, he didn't talk to anybody and was walking around awkwardly. It was kind of sweet and ironic at the same time.

For more info on the Mooney Suzuki check out the band's [official website](#) and [MySpace page](#). Also, to get your hands on the new album, *The Mooney Suzuki - CBGB OMFUG Masters: Live June 29, 2001 The Bowery Collection*, go [here](#).

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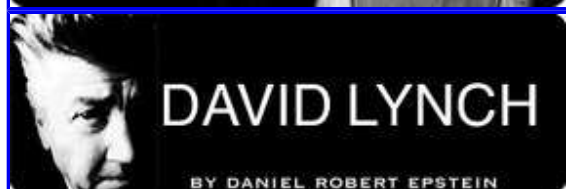
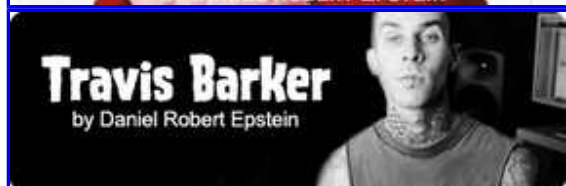
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