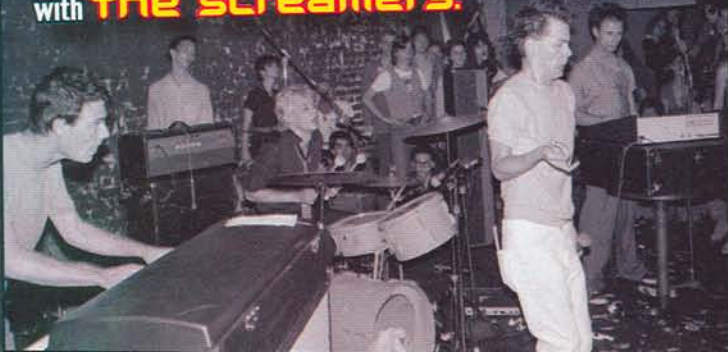


# SCREAM THY LAST SCREAM!

One of the best bands in the history of West Coast punk had no guitars and, frustratingly, no official recordings. Nearly three decades after their demise, punk has finally caught up with **The screamers.**



## WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT

the early years of West Coast punk and hardcore, guitar-throttling icons like Black Flag, Dead Kennedys, Circle Jerks and Germs immediately come to mind. What you don't think of are guys hammering on synthesizers and distorted electric pianos while an art student with vertical hair shears his throat lining. That's why the Screamers were the art-damaged stuff of legend.

"I was 18 when I joined them," says keyboardist Paul Roesler about his tenure in the band. "And when I say they were great, it's honest. Because they were great *before* I joined. You could not stand in front of them and think, 'Hmm, this is new wave.' It was *soooo* punk rock."

"They were aggressive with electronic music in a way that nobody attempted for years afterward," says Jello Biafra, the former Dead Kennedys frontman who saw the band frequently in their heyday. "After I read about them in *Search And Destroy*, I went to see them and they weren't what I expected. But what was I supposed to expect? This was a punk band that didn't even have a guitar."

Formed in 1977, the band—charismatic frontman Tomata DuPlenty (Richard Xavier Harrigan), drummer KK Barrett, and keyboardists Tommy Gear and Roesler (who replaced Dangerhouse label owner David Brown in 1978)—were West Coast punk mavericks that created as much racket and energy as their six-stringed brethren. During their song "Eva Braun," the Screamers would set their synthesizers to run continuously and leave the stage, while Geza X, their then-soundman and unofficial fifth member, would loop them from the mixing board. After a few minutes backstage (or by one account, driving around the block outside of the venue), the band returned to the stage and finished the song. Factor in the commanding expressiveness of DuPlenty (who studied mime) and the chemistry was remarkable. "His was voice was so expressive," Roesler remembers. "He never actually hit the notes, but his voice just takes you inside the song, which is what good singers are supposed to do." "He had such amazing stage presence," recalls Biafra. "He would arch

an eyebrow and the crowd would just jump. I don't think I ever saw him blink onstage."

Though the Screamers could fill clubs at a level usually achieved by major-label bands, a major-label deal eluded them. Roesler says that DuPlenty and Gear wanted to focus on the band's visual aspects, but Geza thinks differently. "Yes, they were stuck-up and holding out for the big-money deal," he says. "But none of the majors were offering *any* punk bands deals, because of a memo that [then-President] Jimmy Carter had circulated to the record companies, [that essentially said] punk was scary, creepy and freaky and that he'd offer big tax breaks if the labels didn't sign any of it." The only sanctioned document of the band is *Screamers Live In San Francisco, Sept. 2, 1978*, a video of the band's live set filmed by the pioneering video-production

company Target (currently available on DVD through Music Video Distributors). In 2003, the Seattle-based indie Xeroid issued *In A Better World*, a sanctioned collection of rough demos and live recordings.

When the major-label deal never arrived, the band hooked up with Dutch filmmaker/svengali Rene Daalder, who meddled with the band's image, turning the members against themselves and the hardcore faithful who supported them. The tensions came to a head, and the band fell apart in 1981.

"It was the perfect time, but they were a year ahead; MTV started a year later," says Roesler. "I admire people who shoot high. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

Today, Roesler has been playing keyboards with Mike Watt and punk chanteuse Nina Hagen; Barrett is a Hollywood production designer whose credits include *Lost In Translation* and *I ♥ Huckabees*; Gear worked for synth manufacturer Roland for 20 years, and Geza works as a producer, currently enjoying a Top 40 hit ("When It Comes," by the definitely un-punk Tyler Hilton). Sadly, after pursuing a career in fine arts, DuPlenty succumbed to cancer in 2000. "After the popularity of the Human League and Gary Numan," says Biafra, "I'm convinced that if they had made it across the ocean, music would be very different today." [E.P.]

