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The Residents – *Icky Flix*

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One summer when I was a teenaged hippie-in-waiting, I checked out a punk-industrial show at the 9:30 Club. The band was called Chemlab. I met the lead singer afterwards and asked him to autograph the promotional flyer. Instead of signing his name, he scratched "fuck you" with a Sharpie, smiled, and handed it back to me. I think somewhere in there he gave me the middle finger as well. I didn't know what to make of it, but I knew I liked it for some reason. Was the "fuck you" meant as an admonition of some kind or, conversely, as the secret handshake that would grant me admission into an underground world? I didn't know. Either way, there was something humorous about it, and even if the joke was on me, I didn't care. I liked it anyway.

After the show, I bought a souvenir shirt. In big black block letters it read: "Fuck art, let's kill!" You must understand that I was a 15-year-old kid, spending the summer in Washington DC with a sizable allowance and not a care in the world. I had nothing real to rebel against. I was in DC to intern for a United States Senator — a Republican no less. "Fuck art, let's kill!" I wore it in the offices of the United States Senate, as an undershirt, beneath my work clothes. That summer, I learned the meaning of irony. And I began to get the joke.

I run a risk by using this as my introduction to a review of *Icky Flix*. I'm not trying to make the cross-metaphor that you think I'm trying to make, or draw what you might think I'm claiming is an obvious parallel. I'm innocent of that charge! But nothing is straightforward in the Residents' world, so why should their reviews be any different? Fuck that, let's chill.

In the mid-90s, when I had heard enough murmurs about this whole way-whacked Residents thing enough times to make me think however faintly that maybe, just maybe, there was something going on there that I didn't know about and which I was missing out on and which once I discovered I'd feel as though I won the lottery for having actually uncovered — [You know, something I could identify with. After all, and do not forget, that, especially between the ages of 12 and so-called "adulthood," we use our artists as indicators of personal identification. It is why, to this day, I have never hesitated to admit being a Tom Robbins fan but sometimes hold out on my appreciation for, say, *Romancing The Stone* (shh!)] — I decided to buy a Residents CD. After looking at my options in the bin of the local music store that, yes, did still exist then, I honed in on what appeared to be a greatest hits collection. *Our Finest Flowers*.

Hmmm. What's this? The Residents even have enough hits to package? What's this? The band didn't care for a best-of collection? What's this? The band wrote the names of their hits on napkins, rearranged the words, and wrote new songs based on those re-arranged titles? Splendid! (Fuck art, let's kill!)

Unfortunately, I was never able to make it through that entire disc. It was curious music, interesting music, but not very engaging music. I liked its uniqueness but I just couldn't seem to find a way to have it mean anything to me. It was art in a vacuum. For me, at least. Still, I couldn't help but to feel that I just wasn't looking at it right. Actually, that was the problem — I wasn't looking at it at all. Heard but not seen, the Residents' music feels so out-of-context that it is hard to place it in the context of the individual. I mean it's hard to relate to. Not that I relate to their videos either; but I do enjoy the hell out of them. Resonance or not.



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If Pee-Wee's Playhouse had a music television channel, this is what it would be playing. All the time. (Note: The Residents actually did score some music for Pee-Wee's Playhouse before.)

That brings us to *Icky Flix*. Originally released in 2001, it was re-released last month by the aptly named Music Video Distributors, which is a veritable music DVD sweatshop if you could use that word in a positive light (my advance apologies). The Residents themselves are something like a music sweatshop — for a cult band that's nearly 40 years old AND still largely unknown, they sure do have a density to their body of work. You'll see what I mean in a minute. But first...

Icky Flix is hands-down the finest Residents flower yet. Eyeball-heads may object, urging the uninitiated to buy the Meet the Residents studio debut before all else, but fuck that man, buy this one instead. I'm right and they're wrong. Bow down before the almighty critic.

Or don't. Go buy Chemlab's CD instead and go fuck yourself. Sorry about that — back to our regularly scheduled programming: Why should you buy *Icky Flix* and why won't this so-called DVD review serve its purpose and actually talk about the DVD? You should; it will. Starting now. For those just joining us, this is a review of *Icky Flix* by the Residents. The reviewer thus far has stated in his most excellent opinion that he recommends the disc and is about to proceed to describe it. He is not being paid by word, but wouldn't that be nice. He'd take a vacation. Maybe Key West.

Look man, I don't know how the hell the Residents do what they do. Nobody knows who they are. Nobody knows what to believe. They're from San Francisco or, less likely, they're from Louisiana or, less likely, they're German. They don't do press interviews. They don't reveal their individual identity (not even faces and when they do, it's dubious and unstated). They're the type of band that is liable to spread lies about themselves and their history. They're an art project. A collective with one (and only one) identity because their individual identities are completely removed, leaving most reviewers nothing to talk about but the band and their music.

And their videos.

More than any other band, real or imagined, the Residents videos are so attached to the music that it is hard to fathom, after witnessing them, that the music ever came first or ever existed by itself. Even in light of the fact that four of these videos are new creations, paired with old songs. And they aren't lame concert clips or lamer MTV-style shorts. They're, well...hmm. They're as weird as the Residents themselves. And to make things even weirder — there are two versions of every song on this DVD. The original. And then a modern version, recorded in 2000. Why? I don't know. Is the music much different? Sure. Like everything, the original is usually preferable but the fact that they would re-record this much music, just to have an alternative option on the DVD, is absurd. And wonderful. And brings it back around to the fact that this music — the new versions if not the older ones — actually was created with the respective images embedded in the composition. They go together like ramma-lamma-lamma...

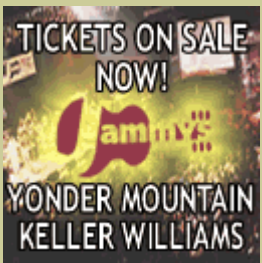
Some of these clips are mini-flicks ("One Minute Movies"), some are plain old freak-outs ("Constantinople"), and then others are art-films worthy of the MoMA in NYC (two of these films actually are, no joke, part of that museum's permanent collection). And then, for those who insist on total gross immersion and dystopic exploration, check out the soon-to-be-legendary (but doomed-for-obscurity?) concentrates "Bad Day on the Midway" and "Vileness Fats."

But now back to me, me, me: When I returned home that summer, after interning in DC, my mom offered to do my laundry while I went off to ride my bike with all the neighborhood kids. My "Fuck art, let's kill" shirt seemed to have mysteriously disappeared around that time. Let that be a lesson to all you kids out there — if your parents offer to do your laundry, don't let them know you bought this Residents DVD. (But do buy it.)

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