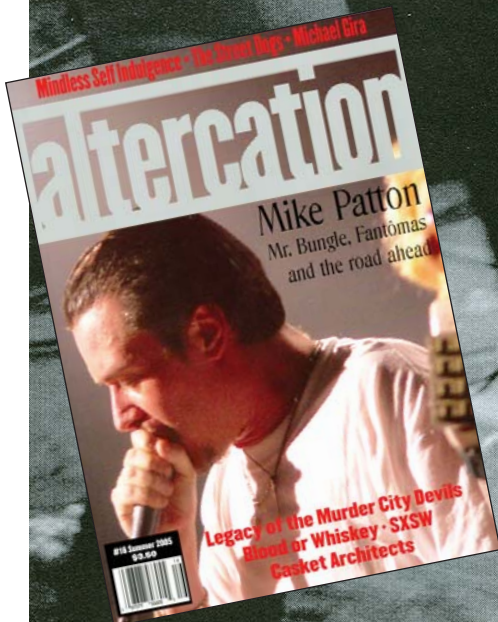
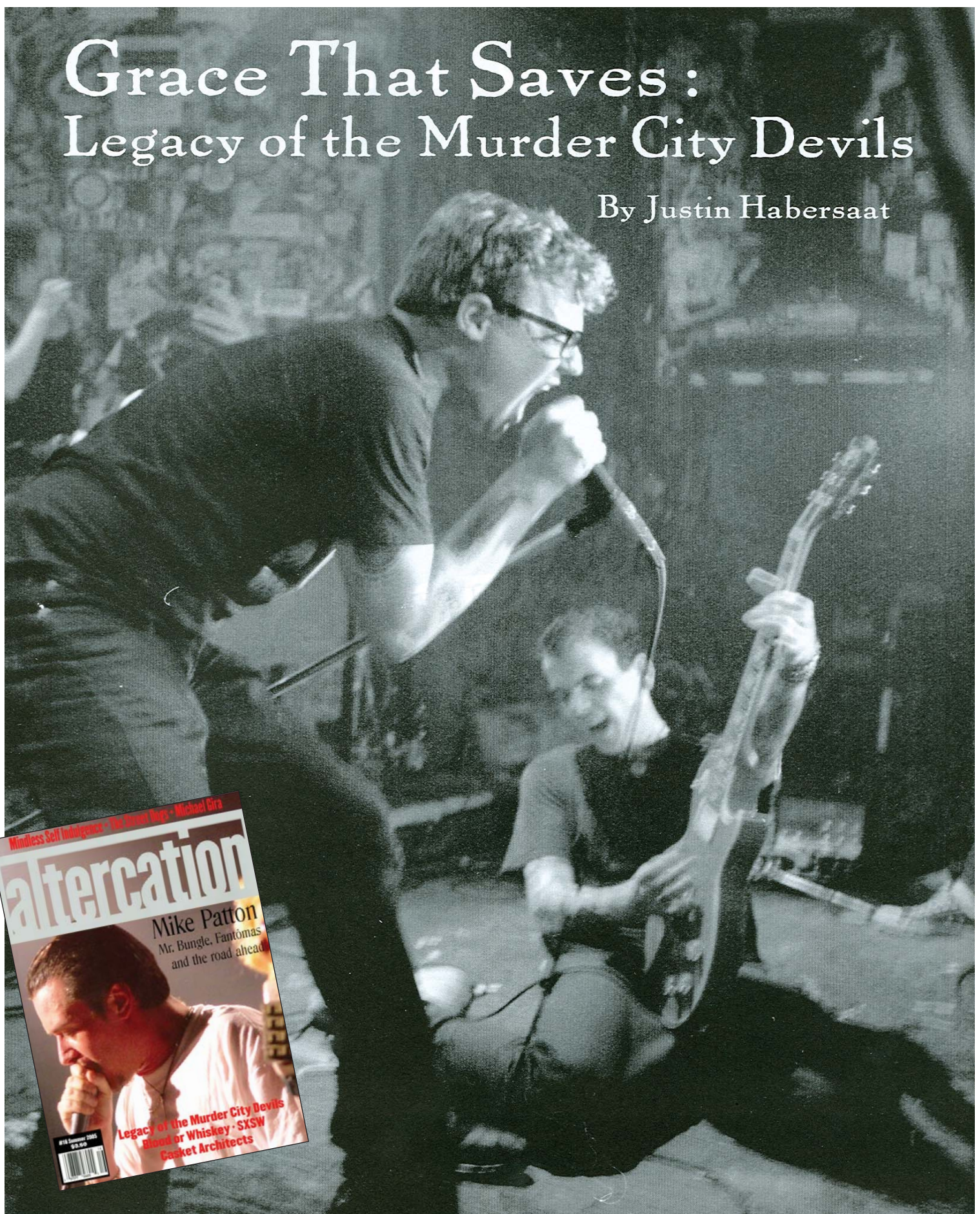


# Grace That Saves: Legacy of the Murder City Devils

By Justin Habersaat





There's a scene in the newly released concert film *The End* that captures the heart and soul of the Murder City Devils. It's an intangible moment, one that cannot be surmised by a single action or word; what the gossip columnists refer to as 'the it factor'. The 'it' manifests during a final rendition of the song "18 Wheels", a song that many would come to consider the band's calling card - a complex, howling ode to lost love filled with emotional conflict, set amidst backdrop imagery of sailors and lonely stretches of highway. From the opening guitar chords the band melds as one, a seething, drunken entity completely lost in the moment; the separation between crowd and performer blurs, and for a brief splice in time nothing matters. Ten minutes later, the Murder City Devils would be no more. It was Halloween 2001.

## Part I: Murder City Riot

"We all knew each other beforehand," says guitarist Nate Manny. "We were all in bands that broke up at the same time."

The Murder City Devils were crafted as if by the hand of fate itself, an inevitable example of the creative cream rising to the top of the post-grunge Seattle scene. The area's limited talent pool lead to some incestuous band crossover; by the time they 'officially' formed, most of the Murder City crew had already played together in some previous incarnation or another. Vocalist Spencer Moody had made a name for himself performing alongside "Boom, Swagger"-collaborator and future Pretty Girls Make Graves singer Andrea Zollo in Area 51, who herself had been in the screampcore band Deathwish Kids with future MCD guitarist Dann Gallucci. Manny had even toured the west coast in a group called the Cleavers, featuring future roadie extraordinaire Gabe. The implosion of these bands may not have been in complete unison, but they coincided enough to lay forth a creativity breeding ground.

"As friends, we had all been hanging around talking about a new type of band that we wanted to start," explains Manny. "We all just got together and did it."

From the beginning, there was something special about MCD. Even in their roughest, most fetal recordings (a skeletal version of the band dubbed the Hookers recorded several 'in-progress' songs that would eventually flesh out as MCD staples), the band had an intangible charisma that was as primal as it was eerily accessible.

Comparisons within the Seattle scene were to be expected, and the band was spared no exception. The group was often lumped in as coattail riders to Mudhoney and, later, revivalists of the Stooges.

"I think out of any bands you could compare us to, those are two good bands," says Manny. "I'm not ashamed to be compared to those bands. I don't think we sound like them very much, but attitude-wise, and occasionally musically, I can see it."

Not so amiable was Moody to early comparisons likening his vocals to that of Black Flag-era Henry Rollins.

"I don't like it," says the singer. "I was one of the few punk

kids growing up that didn't really like Black Flag, and I dislike what Henry Rollins does very much."

While the band would do their best to downplay the media-driven finger-pointing as they picked up steam (bassist Derek Fudesco speaks at length about his aversion to comparison in the MCD documentary *Rock-n-Roll Won't Wait*), high-profile covers of Dead Boys' track "Sonic Reducer" and the Iggy Pop tribute "Broken Glass" would make it difficult for the band to disregard their influences completely. Still, there probably hasn't been a band in the history of music that couldn't have its origins traced to a predecessor of some sort, and the fact remains that most of MCD's influences were more stylistic and performance-based than an actual 'sound' (the commentary track on *The End* finds Moody explaining that he was never completely comfortable performing "Broken Glass").

As with any punk band worth their salt, the Devils eventually released a series of 7-inch singles and a self-titled album. Murder City Devils found a home on Die Young, Stay Pretty Records, a fledgling imprint distributed by (and rumored to be owned by) Seattle powerhouse Sub Pop. While the album was rough around the edges production-wise, the band's manic delivery of cuts like "Dance Hall Music" and "Get Off The Floor" were contagious. As the buzz started to build locally, Sub Pop officially signed the band.

"We had a friend in Seattle who booked shows, and he got a job at Sub Pop," says Manny. "He told the owner about us, they came to see us and signed us."

1998's *Broken Bottles, Empty Hearts* was the explosive result - a riotous, raw and dangerous affair that would yield numerous Devils' classics, including "18 Wheels". The album also shined an increased visibility on two key components that would later prove crucial to the band's success - Moog organ (played by Gallucci and Fudesco) and un-official sixth MCD member and roadie Gabe.

On the road in support of their early releases the band found slim pickings - group interviews from *Rock-n-Roll Won't Wait* hilariously paint a portrait of the band performing to a handful of people under the marquee 'the Murderous City Devils'. Attempts to call their booking agent to complain reveal that he's in jail. Cue *Spinal Tap*.

Slightly higher-profile outings with indie rockers like the Make Up and At The Drive In garnered the Devils some cred and buzz among the college crowd, and Sub Pop's increased visibility offered the band some additional footing.

"The band paid for itself," explains Manny, "but when it comes down to buying a van or getting tickets to Europe, it was usually 'hello, Sub Pop!' Of course, we end up having to eventually pay it all back. Nothing's for free."

Indeed. The guitarist's words would prove eerily foreshadowing in the years to follow.

## Part II: Rum To Whiskey

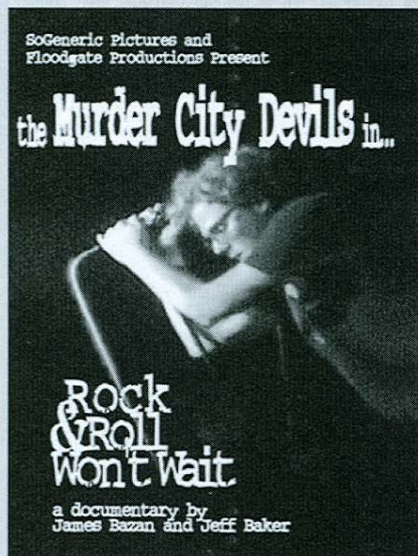
"Everyone picked their own death scenario."

Nate Manny's explanation to the liner art gracing the group's

**"People ask me where Murder City is, I say that it's in my heart."**



## Essential Viewing



**Rock-n-Roll Won't Wait • Directed by James Bazan • MVD**

A sixty-minute documentary that combines tons of live performance footage with behind-the-scenes drama and one-on-one interviews, *Rock-n-Roll Won't Wait* captures the personalities behind the band and the high and lows of life on the road. Fights, laughter and an on-stage collaboration with Pearl Jam are all presented in the detailed film, which was originally intended as a ten minute short.

"There was no way we could keep the film to ten minutes, so we pushed it to an hour," says director Bazan. "It was about a year of filming all together."

Despite some initial misgivings by the band, the film does an excellent job of capturing the Devils off-the-cuff.

"At first it was tough for the band to get used to having two strangers with video cameras following them everywhere," says Bazan. "After a while though, I think they got used to having us around. We followed them for a week on the west coast and it was amazing to see how crowds outside of Seattle reacted to them."

Random trivia – *Altercation's* shot of Spencer and Gallucci performing at CBGB's was highly considered for the cover art of *Rock-n-Roll Can't Wait's* DVD release.

breakout album *In Name and Blood* sums up completely the band at the time – enthused, optimistic, creative. Comprised of the Devils' members in various states of murder and suicide, the artwork is at once both visceral and compelling.

"We shot it all over Seattle," says Manny, who designed the album's layout. "My death was in the basement of the bar we drink in. Gabe's was in his apartment bathroom. We did all of our own makeup and made up gallons of fake blood to throw everywhere."

Gruesomely detailed, the shoot left little to the imagination.

"The intestines we used were also used in a Tool video," laughs Moody. "We had a friend who worked on the video, he heard we needed intestines and he totally hooked us up."

In addition to the eye-catching visuals, the band added a full time keyboardist to their lineup by the name of Leslie Hardy. A dark haired beauty with a consistent 'don't-give-me-shit' look in her eyes, Hardy helped push the band's songwriting to a new level. *In Name and Blood* capitalized on the organ as a primary instrument rather than an afterthought; the results, immediately apparent on album opener "Press Gang", were stunning. The sound was layered and increasingly complex, while Moody's lyrics pushed beyond anything he had attempted previously.

"With that album, I was concentrating on more of a narrative," says the singer.

The band was clearly on to something. Gothic elements started creeping into the Devils' live sets more and more; Hardy sported lit candles and black roses on her organ, t-shirt designs featured bats and skulls, and drummer Coady Willis began to set his cymbals on fire during live renditions of "Cradle to the Grave" (a habit he abandoned after accidentally melting a snare drum one night). The album was warmly received at college radio and the band's star started to rise.

"The album did better than a lot of people expected," says Manny. "We're no Papa Roach or anything, but everyone in the band was very happy with the sales."

High profile tours alongside the Yo-Yo's gained the band even more steam. It became commonplace to spot in-the-know celebrities such as comic David Cross at

Devils' shows, and a completely sold out appearance alongside the (International) Noise Conspiracy at New York City's CMJ Festival cemented the band as a fan favorite within the music industry. The Murder City Devils' hard work was finally paying off, and by all accounts *In Name and Blood* was hard work.

"Our producer was a fucking total pain in the ass," says Moody bluntly. "He was a slave driver."

"The producer did make us work really, really hard," confirms Manny. "But it sounds like it does because we worked at least five times harder on it than we did on any other album. I had to redo guitar parts fucking hundreds of times. While we were there it was kind of a nightmare. I was never mad at anyone, or wishing I was someplace else, but I'm glad it's over."

The stress of the recording process and the freewheeling life on the road may or may not have helped the band garner a well-deserved reputation as debauchery hounds; regardless of the origins, the Devils fully embraced the drunken credo their songs alluded to. Even *In Name and Blood's* cover of Neil Diamond classic "I'll Come Running" is given the morning-after treatment, stylistically speaking.

"It was Dann's idea to do that one," says Moody, "but I'm the biggest Neil Diamond fan in the band." (*Rock-n-Roll Won't Wait* features an apparently inebriated Spencer rocking a karaoke version of Diamond's "Forever in Bluejeans")

Defying impossible odds, the Devils were tapped to open several shows for grunge royalty Pearl Jam, playing to 20,000-seat arenas and tackling Dennis Rodman backstage over a bottle of whiskey. With the band's rock-n-roll lifestyle racing neck and neck with their staggering originality and talent, the Devils' seemed unstoppable. Looks, it would soon be revealed, could in fact be deceiving.

## Part III: Bear Away

Upon its release, the *Thelema* EP proved a critical and creative success. Sadly, many of the fans drawn to the band's more urgent earlier material scratched their heads when confronted with the album's more complex songwriting and layered arrangements. *Nosferatu*-referencing track "Bear Away"



was arguably their best song to date and contained all of the vital MCD ingredients (sailor imagery, death, references to darkness and light), but brainy fare such as "Midnight Service at the Mutter Museum" had more in common with the Cure or Joy Division than Iggy Pop. The band was growing artistically, to the delight of some fans and to the grumbling of others.

With the band firmly in the underground spotlight, some members sought additional musical outlets through side projects. Bassist Derek Fudesco would team with Andrea Zollo for Pretty Girls Make Graves, an art-leaning indie rock band.

"When we first started, everything was really rushed," says Zollo. "We were all in other bands, so there would only be a week of time when we could work on things or play a show. So we would write like maniacs, and then everyone would split and hit the road again."

Once again, the road was omnipresent, although this time around it wasn't as glorious as previous outings for *In Name and Blood*. A New Jersey stop on the tour found the band in low spirits, with about sixty fans in attendance. Organist Leslie Hardy seemed particularly low-key, showing off nasty scars on her wrists (the result of recent surgery intended to offset a painful bout of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome) and demonstrating the origins behind her new nickname 'puss geyser'. Guitarist Dann Gallucci did his best to rile up the crowd, eventually giving up with a disgusted mutter of "you guys are boring" before the band ended a mere forty minute set. Perhaps it was just an off show, but the low morale was apparent to all in attendance.

Despite the low enthusiasm, it still came as a shock when the band announced that they would be breaking up following a final tour behind *Thelema*. Hardy, it seemed, had abruptly quit mid-tour due to the increasing pain of her ailments; Fudesco continued the domino-like fall by stating his intention to pursue Pretty Girls Make Graves full time. Rumors of label-band relations disinte-



**"The stress of the recording process and the freewheeling life on the road may or may not have helped the band garner a well-deserved reputation as debauchery hounds; regardless of the origins, the Devils fully embraced the drunken credo their songs alluded to."**

grating also plagued the situation.

"It's really hard being a label and being a band, you both want different things," admits Manny. "As a band you want to tour, as a label you want a band to sell records. To be able to get along and not resent each other is sometimes tough."

The group's final tour would feature friend Nick Dewitt filling in on keyboards for the departed Hardy. While her stage

presence was missed, the Devils' performances on the farewell trek were fierce; testosterone ruled the stage, and the result was a take-no-prisoners aural assault. The set list for the tour included close to eighteen songs on most nights, including two new, and ironically excellent, tracks – the drunken, swaggering "Waltz" and the set-closing testimonial "Grace That Saves". A final New York performance at the Bowery Ballroom was

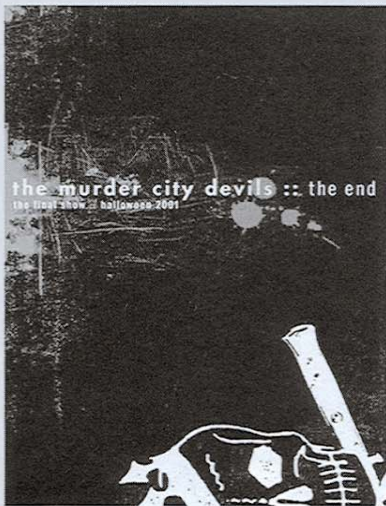
epic in every sense of the word, from the opening chords of "Bear Away" to the closing slam of the microphone stand on "Grace..." With something left to prove before their forthcoming demise, the Devils took no prisoners.

The Murder city Devils performed for the last time on Halloween 2001 in their hometown of Seattle, a sold out affair at the Showbox Theater. Sub Pop released a final, career-spanning live album of the show entitled *R.I.P.* that justly captured the band's intensity, though marred by the occasional technical flare-up. Even in their death, it seems, the Devils had a hard time resting in peace – additional bickering with the label would lead to under-the-radar tension and rumored bitterness. The documentary *Rock-n-Roll Won't Wait* caps with a firm 'No Thanks' to Sub Pop at the end, a victim of the circumstance.

"Legal and royalty fights were going on between the label and the band, and the film was stuck in the middle," explains *Rock-n-Roll...* director James Bazan. "The finished film sat in my closet for over two years while fighting and negotiations went on over its release. It was a really bad time for us."



## The End King of Heart Productions MVD



A pro-shot performance film capturing the Devils' final show on Halloween 2001. Despite some microphone problems and the occasional tackled band member, *The End* does a magnificent job of documenting the band at the top of their game. The film is being distributed by punk rock mecca MVD, who also distributed *Rock-n-Roll Won't Wait*.

"I was unfamiliar with the band at first, so I went to a couple of our staff members to get an idea of what they were like," says Ed Seaman, vice president of marketing for MVD.

After a brief chat with punk rock tastemaker and MVD publicity agent Clint Weiler, Seaman had little hesitation.

"I was sold right away," he says.

In addition to presenting live takes on new tracks "Waltz" and "Grace That Saves", *The End* features full commentary by MCD vocalist Spencer Moody and the always affable Merchbot 2000. Bootleg video performances of "Johnny Thunders" and more are also included, as is a photo gallery. Highlights of the show include Andrea Zollo jumping up for a performance of "Boom, Swagger", a crowd-surfing gorilla and Moody donning a sailor cap for a final rendition of "18 Wheels".

"Our separation from them was anything but pleasant," admits Manny.

Sub Pop was contacted for this story and declined to comment.

Whatever the truth, the remaining members of the Murder City Devils would not stay dormant for long. Fudesco, as planned, pursued *Pretty Girls Make Graves* as a full time entity, signing first to Lookout before eventually scoring a deal with indie mecca Matador Records. Dann Gallucci would be scooped up by pal Isaac Brock for Modest Mouse, whose Epic-released album *Good News For People Who Love Bad News* would go on to reach platinum status. Spencer Moody, Nate Manny and drummer Coady Willis (along with Gabe) joined forces with ex-GodheadSilo bassist Mike Kunka for the brilliant yet ill-fated project *Dead Low Tide*. The band would continue pursuing Moody's increasing muse of the sea with a darker, more aggressive sound, and landed high profile opening tours alongside the Melvins. *Dead Low Tide* would end prematurely; Kunka developed a serious case of whooping cough while on the road and was sidelined for close to a year and a half. Guitarist Manny decided he couldn't wait.

"I had to choose between pursuing my design company or waiting on the band," says Manny, who currently does graphic arts for Halftone Design. "It got to the

point where I couldn't wait anymore, so I chose design and quit the band. It was hard for me to give up music, something I had worked so hard on, and had been such a big part of my life for so long. I also felt like I was letting down the other guys in the band, but I really had to go out on my own."

Kunka would go on to discuss his disappointment with Manny's decision and *Dead Low Tide*'s early breakup in interviews. The band released a lone, self-titled album on Tigerstyle Records close to a year after their split. Willis currently plays in a power-punk duo dubbed *Big Business*, which signed to the Isis-run label Hydra Head Industries. Kunka and Moody (after growing mountain-man worthy beards) formed *Smoke and Smoke*, a trio that continued to explore the aggressive roots hinted at by *Dead Low Tide*. While the band has released an album on Frenchkiss Records, *Smoke and Smoke* perform irregularly; Kunka and drummer Dan Haugh rehearse in the North West while Moody currently lives in New York. Still, for all of the posthumous projects both large scale and small, none of the bands have achieved the dynamic, awe-inspiring chemistry captured so hauntingly, so effortlessly, by the Murder City Devils.

"Being in the band, it was hard to see from the inside how we were perceived, or how much people cared about the band," says Manny. "I'll be really curious to see how we're remembered."

Story By: Justin Habersaat  
MCD Live Photos By: Travis Habersaat  
MCD Press Photo Courtesy Of Sub Pop  
Source Material: MCD Manny / Moody Quotes - *Altercation* Interview 2000, *Pretty Girls Make Graves* Zollo Quotes - *Altercation* Interview 2003, *Dead Low Tide* Manny Quotes - *Altercation* Interview 2003, James Bazan Quotes - *Altercation* Interview 2005. Thanks to MCD for being so damn inspiring.

