

FLIPPER PLANTS ANOTHER 'SEX BOMB'

Reviled by some, beloved by others, '80s West Coast punk legends reignite with ex-Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic in the fold

By Peter Lindblad

Trying to find hidden meanings in Flipper's "Sex Bomb" is a monumental waste of time.

There is no socio-political agenda swimming beneath the surface of the post-hardcore punk classic's only lyric, "She's a sex bomb, baby! Yeah!" And those who try to make it out to be a disguised commentary on women's rights issues are just wrong.

Nothing more than a ridiculously juvenile, simplistic ode to the "hotness" of a certain member of the female sex, "Sex Bomb" might just be the greatest punk party anthem of all time, and that one dark, droning riff it's built on — not to mention all the found sounds laid over the top and the groin-clutching screams of singer Will Shatter — has a hypnotic pull that's as strong as any current.

"A rock critic from the Boston Globe was writing a review of Flipper and the *Generic* album, and he mentioned 'Sex Bomb' in particular, and said — and I'll never forget the way he put it — 'Sex Bomb' is like 'Louie, Louie' burnt down to a black pot," laughs Flipper drummer Stephen DePace.

In its own sludgy, gutter-trolling way, "Sex Bomb" — which could morph from the LP's seven-minute version into a 17-minute, sloppy pile of self-destructive, atomic waste live — was a "Louie, Louie" for whole new generation of fun-loving '80s punks. And, like The Kingsmen's slurred, barely comprehensible cover of Richard Berry's fraternity-party favorite, it gained a certain amount of notoriety.

Once, a Boston-area radio station planned a two-hour marathon of "Sex Bomb" covers sent in by other bands. Two hours was not enough. "They got so many versions, hundreds and hundreds, that they did a full weekend marathon," recalls DePace.

In explaining the song's primitive allure, DePace says, "It's a no-brainer. 'You're my sex bomb, baby! Yeah!' That's the entire

lyrical content. You know what I mean? There's nothing complicated about that. She's a hot-looking chick. She's a sex bomb, baby! Yeah! (he yells) And the bass line is so simplistic, and the song is so simplistic, but ... on the single, we added all kinds of sound effects — sirens, breaking glass, girls screaming... all this crazy stuff — to it that made it work, and then, on the album version, we had a whole horn section going. I don't know, man. All I can say is, people related to it."

And how, since it was virtually a rite of passage for would-be punk bands that tried to learn the song in their garages before going out to conquer the world. "I can tell you that countless, literally countless, thousands upon thousands, of kids growing up and playing in their first bands played that song," says DePace. "Any bass player with four fingers could play that song. And I'm talking about bands that grew up to be Nirvana. All sorts of bands covered that song."

There was an interactive quality to "Sex Bomb" that sometimes manifested itself in the strangest ways.

"We had one episode, I think it was in Detroit, where we were playing 'Sex Bomb' at a club, and Flipper was always big on audience participation, especially during 'Sex Bomb,' and the kids would jump onstage and jump around and scream 'Sex bomb, baby! Yeah!' into the microphone," says DePace. "And this punk girl and punk guy kind of slam into each other onstage right in front of the drum riser, and the girl fell down and the guy fell on top of her, and they just started screwing. And the audience was egging them on, saying, 'Go, go, go.'"

Odd things always happened at Flipper concerts, and that was the attraction. One time, at The Rathskeller in Boston (also known as The Rat), bassist/vocalist Bruce Loose and a girl in the audience were antagonizing each other with playful insults. "He sort of loved that," says DePace of



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▲ Flipper, from left: Ted Falconi, Bruce Loose, Krist Novoselic and Steve DePace.

Loose. At one point, Loose wandered over to the drum riser with his back turned to the crowd.

"This girl jumps up onstage and comes up behind him, and he didn't see her at all, but she's wearing combat boots, and she kicked him as hard as she could right between the legs, right?" says DePace. "And I saw his face, with that instant pain, you know? It was beyond description, and his face turned as white as a ghost, and she ran back in the audience, and in a nanosecond, he collected himself and jumped into the audience after her."

A riot ensued, and the show was over. "I mean, it was like a cowboy movie, where a brawl starts in a saloon, where everybody's fighting and breaking chairs over each other's heads," relates DePace.

That was the second-to-last live performance Flipper had with Will Shatter, an original member who shared bass and vocal duties with Loose. Shatter would die of a heroin overdose in the late '80s.

"I really have mixed feelings about Will these days," says Loose, who saw Shatter as a mentor and wrote lyrics with him. "Knowing him, knowing the way he created and knowing what's come out of it, and working on still anything of his, I'm just like, I really liked working with him, and it took me a long time to process his

death. I don't think I processed it until 2000. Our relationship was pretty deep on an intellectual level. It was creative, which is strange between two men."

For all of "Sex Bomb's" obnoxious, dumb fun, Flipper was, and still is, more intelligent than any of the band members would let on. Themes of disenfranchisement, loss of identity and the increasing banality of U.S. culture in a Ronald Reagan America make the band's debut *Album* — *Generic Flipper* an astute diagnosis, however tongue-in-cheek the lyrics were, of what ills the country faced.

Sonically, Flipper was out of step with the accelerated speed pushed by hardcore acts of the time. Slower and more arty than its contemporaries, Flipper tended to drink from the same lugubrious, mercury-tainted, garbage-filled water as The Stooges, though the band had fast songs like "Brainwashed," "Falling" and "I'm Tired."

"Definitely, if you listen to early tapes, we tried to do some stuff that was punky-ish, but we're doing it more as a parody, I think," says Loose. "That's definitely how I wrote some of the stuff."

Formed in San Francisco in the late '70s with members of Negative Trend and the Sleepers, the classic Flipper lineup consisted of DePace, Loose, Shatter and a guitarist named Ted Falconi.

It was a bizarre mix, with Shatter and Loose playing shambling bass lines that, nevertheless, were impossibly catchy. But the real unique aspect of Flipper was Falconi. A Vietnam veteran, Falconi had a style of playing that was completely, and utterly, original. "You cannot get Ted to play regular guitar," says Loose. "You just can't. He won't do it."

Oblivious to what was going on around him, and what the rest of the band was playing, Falconi scrawled out alien, distorted cave paintings of noisy sound.

"There is no one who can decipher what he's doing," says DePace. "You can't copy the notes he plays or the chords he plays, because he may be playing some chords that might be familiar, but he plays them in a way that no one else plays them. He plays them sort of backwards and inside out."

Not everybody took to Flipper's confrontational, abrasive aesthetic. Still, as far as the underground went, Flipper records sold well. Late 1979 saw the band's first release, the "Love Canal/Ha Ha Ha" 7-inch single. Later came the bleak, unrelenting, sonic orgy *Album — Generic Flipper*, considered a classic by many critics, with its sneering tone and ugly beauty clashing with surprisingly life-affirming lyrics.

Interestingly enough, the cover concept for *Album — Generic Flipper*, a take on the generic grocery movement of the time that mimicked the sparse packaging of those foodstuffs, may have inspired John Lydon to do the same with Public Image Ltd.'s *Album* art — only with a blue-and-white design, as opposed to Flipper's yellow-and-black scheme. "I had a bit of a thought that he copied our concept," says DePace. In response, for the double live album Flipper was in the process of making, the band chose the name *Public Flipper Limited*. The packaging, based on the game of Life, was fairly elaborate.

"You open up all four panels to a gigantic gameboard, a cartoon drawing of the U.S., with all these caricature drawings of different cities and iconic buildings and landmarks," says DePace. "It had a spinner and consequence cards and dice."

Flipper's watershed, however, was *Album — Generic Flipper*, even though the band's output through 1987 was consistently strong. That year the band broke up, and soon after, Shatter died. In 1992, American Recordings head man, Rick Rubin, convinced the band to record again, with a new bassist. The result was the uneven *American Grafishy*. Dormant since then,

due primarily to Loose's debilitating back problems, Flipper is back, playing new shows, with plans for new recordings, and a new bassist in the fold: Krist Novoselic, formerly of Nirvana, a band that was heavily influenced by Flipper.

Feeling better after surgery in the fall, Loose, whose back problems were caused

by a high-school gymnastics injury and made worse by a series of car accidents, is as good as new. And with a new DVD from MVD Visual, in conjunction with Target Video77, titled "Flipper Live Target-Video77 — 1980-81" out that collects two wildly different Flipper concerts and a 1983 video for "Sex Bomb," Flipper is anxious to

get all of its out-of-print recordings back in print and add to Flipper lore.

"People used to say that Flipper was the band you loved to hate," says DePace. "You'd see the same people who said Flipper sucks, they'd be there the next night and they paid to see it."

Chances are, they'll do it again. **GM**

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