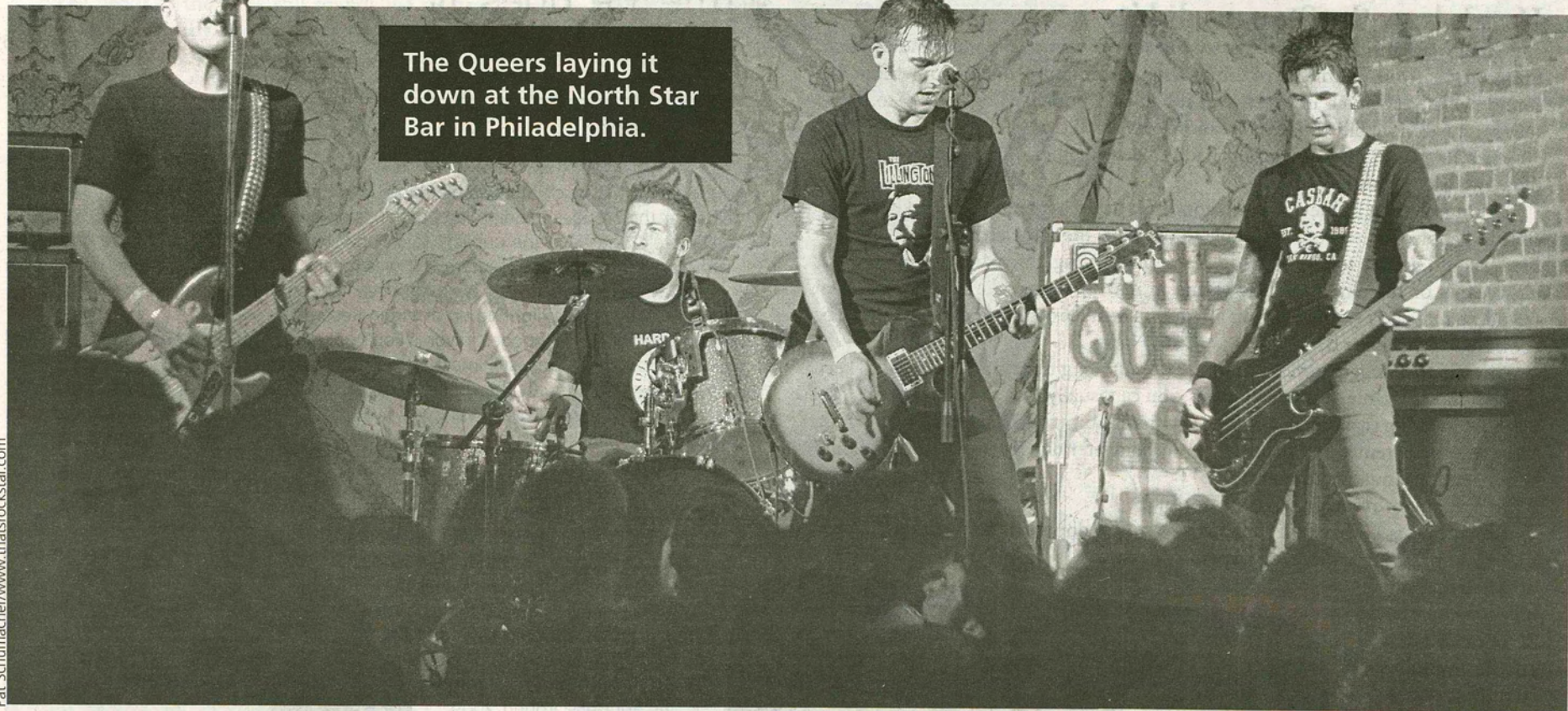


# A million stories to tell

Leader of The Queers looks back on 25 years of pop-flavored punk rock

By Peter Lindblad

The Queers laying it down at the North Star Bar in Philadelphia.



Pat Schumacher/www.thatrockstar.com

**N**o matter how scathing a review of a record is in print, it's nothing compared to what critics at the Rat did to bands they hated.

Joe Queer, leader of the veteran pop-punk unit The Queers — still going strong after 25 years — remembers the gritty old Boston club fondly.

"When I started at the Rat, I saw bands getting bottles thrown at 'em," laughs Joe, whose real last name is King. "I saw bands get punched on the way out the back door with their gear 'cause they sucked so bad. I mean, that was an instant review, like, 'Don't quit your f\*\*king day job pal. You suck' ... I've seen people walk on stage and just unplug the amps and then the guys in the band would look at him and then the other dude would say, 'You want to do something about it? F\*\*k you.' I guess the set's over."

Long gone now, the Rat, for all its violence and mayhem, was an institution on the East Coast punk scene. Joe remembers seeing The Police play there circa 1978 before 47 people and engaging in some less-than-legal activities outside the venue with drummer Stewart Copeland and guitarist Andy Summers.

"They were very nice guys, wicked cool," says Joe.

It was also the place where the notorious GG Allin held court in his own grotesque, uniquely confrontational style — rolling around in feces, mutilating himself, threatening to commit suicide on stage and performing naked before dying of a heroin overdose in 1993. He could get away with it. Today's acts might not fare so well in a similar environment.

"Maybe I'm just jaded, but that's where I came from," says

Joe. "You watched your ass back then. You get on stage prancing around, like say the lead singer of AFI, you know he's sweet — (adopting a mock accent), 'I always wear my mother's makeup.' Cool, I love ya, you know what I mean? But if you pulled that shit at the Rat, you had some balls. But then there was GG Allin who didn't think anything of walking around in fishnets and high heels, but he had his reputation, so we all loved GG."

Joe Queer has a million stories to tell from his time on the road. A lot of them will probably make the autobiography he's planning to write, which will include stories on his own personal drug hell.

"Yeah, I'm not quite sure of the title. I'm either going with 'Way Past Pot' — which is when I was in the depths of my heroin addiction, my mom one day, God love her, came up and she just goes, 'Are you on pot?' and I was like 'You'd better call the ambulance 'cause I'm way past pot.' (C) I was thinking a good name would be 'Get Out of the Van,' you know like the Henry Rollins book. I've kicked so many people out, I thought 'Get Out of the Van' would be more poignant."

The book is a ways off. For right now, Joe and the boys, often mistakenly lumped in with queer-core acts like Pansy Division, are basking in the afterglow of a career-spanning DVD and a new album, *Munki Brain*, which, along with the usual adolescent, hooks-aplenty, melodic punk anthems and surf guitar rave-ups ("Duke Kahanamoku"), shows Joe moving towards classic, *Pet Sounds*-era Beach Boys' pop with the aptly titled "Brian Wilson" and "I Think She's Starting To Like Me



Joe Queer

Pat Schumacher/www.thatrockstar.com

Does that mean the critics are going to start taking him seriously?

"Nah. We set ourselves up for that by calling ourselves the Queers," says Joe. "And you can't take a band called the Queers seriously. I read some reviews of the new album and I can tell people didn't really listen to it, 'cause they're like, 'It's another classic Queers album, but they don't really stretch out and go into any new territory,' but anybody who knows the Queers will know we did."

And anybody who knows the Queers understands Joe's fascination with the Beach Boys. "Brian Wilson" was composed by Joe and his friend and longtime co-writer Lisa Marr and is "... an acoustic, alternative thing," according to Joe. "... And that to me is the great thing on the album, that stuff is fun to record and work on, and I'm really proud of it."

Also a fan of Del Shannon, Leslie Gore, Chuck Berry and The Supremes, among others, Joe understands The Queers — with a lineup that's included guys named Wimpy, Tulu, Lurch Nobody and Dangerous Dave — are a niche band. The Queers were formed in Joe's home state of New Hampshire in 1982, recording their first studio LP *Grow Up* with drummer Hugh O'Neill and bassist B-Face. "We were just hanging around after high school in Portsmouth, N.H., waiting for the Ramones to come up to Boston or New Hampshire or Maine, or the occasional show down in New York that we could get to, which was basically saying going to New York to see the Ramones back then — we went a few times — but it was like saying flap your arms and fly to the moon, you know?" jokes Joe.

The tiny English label it was released on, Shakin' Street, went out of business. Only 1,000 copies were pressed.

After opening for bands like the Descendants, the Ramones and the Angry Samoans, for a long time, nothing happened with the Queers. Joe owned a restaurant and was happy being a chef, hanging out in Boston on weekends with industry people like Rolling Stones producer Jimmy Miller. Then along came Ben Weasel and the Queers got signed to Lookout! Records. Weasel produced the band's 1993 record *Love Songs For The Retarded*. A stream of releases followed, including 1996's *Don't Back Down*, a throwback to the Ramones of the '70s and an album many consider the Queers' finest hour.

"All of a sudden, we went from just a bunch of nuts playing as the second of four bands at the Rat on a Saturday night to touring with Screeching Weasel, and then the whole Green Day thing took off and it was like, 'Wow man, we can tour and make money, and you know, it was exciting because we were playing the same music we'd always played, so it was kind of vindication for me,'" Joe says.

And, in a way, it got him in touch with his inner child.

"We opened up and it was seven of us crammed into one van, and we trotted off to the West Coast from Chicago," says Joe, who squeezed in with three boxes of merchandise. "We couldn't fit our drummer in. It was either, we'd take our drummer and we'd have to roadie, or we'd take the roadie and use their drummer... I always say going on a punk rock tour is kind of like those days when you're in sixth or seventh grade and camping out behind your parents' house in the summer and you'd go out there and laugh all night and finally fall asleep... and then there's a few people screaming for their mom and they want to go home, and you know it's the same sort of thing."

Since then, the Queers have toured relentlessly, establishing a fan base that stretches from the U.S. to South America and on to the Middle East.

"We were going to go to Israel last summer, but the State Department wouldn't let us go, which in light of subsequent events was smart, but the kid over there was bringing us over there for three shows in Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and he said, 'You guys should still come 'cause really they're not mad at you guys, you Americans' ... It ain't enough man, it ain't enough (to make us go)," laughed Joe.

Fifteen years sober, Joe has a number of irons in the fire, including projects with Weasel, playing guitar with Marky Ramone at summer festivals in Europe, writing a song with Jim Reid of the Jesus And Mary Chain, a Queers tribute album featuring the New Bomb Turks and the Dwarves, among others, and a pop tour with Marr.

Joe is satisfied with the Queers' contributions. "People probably don't think there's a huge message with the Queers and maybe there isn't, but it's the same message the Ramones had, which I think is the ultimate punk message, and that is: Don't take yourself so seriously, be able to laugh at yourself, question everything — valuable lessons I learned from the Ramones," says Joe. ●

## Remembering...

# Joey Ramone

Joey Ramone didn't put himself on a pedestal. That's one thing Joe Queer will always remember about his idol.

Backstage at a Ramones show — before they'd struck up a friendship — Joe Queer, after working up the nerve, went up to Joey and asked him for his thoughts on a demo tape he'd sent him. He'd later tell Joey's mom how much that moment meant to him.

"I had a tape of four songs, and I said, 'Hey Joey, I'm Joe from the Queers, and he's like, 'Oh, I love 'Love, Love, Love,' and 'Goodbye California' — two songs on the tape — and so I told his mom how much that meant to me in 1985 when I didn't have low self-esteem, I had no self-esteem. I had to have some validate my existence and Joey was very nice."

The last two years of Joey Ramone's life, Joe Queer and the Ramones' frontman, who died in 2001 at age 49 after losing his battle with lymphatic cancer, would talk at length on the phone about music, Joey's favorite subject.

"Getting to know him a little bit towards the end, I just realized what a good guy he was and what got him up in the morning, what made him tick. I meet a lot of bands — I'm not going to name them — and they're just pompous motherf\*\*kers and ... here's Joey Ramone and he'll call me up at 10 a.m. on a Wednesday morning and start talking about the Shy Guys' 'We Gotta Go' — which is a really obscure song I told him he should cover — and Mott The Hoople and stuff, and these other guys won't give me the time of day, where they act like you're doing them a favor."

Not so with Joey Ramone.

"He'd always call me up at 10 o'clock in the morning and we'd just talk music," says Joe. "I remember a Saturday morning, I was home working on tunes at my folks' house and Joey called. He's like, (imitating Joey's thick New York City accent) 'Hey Joe, it's Joey. Can I play you a couple of tunes from the solo album (*Don't Worry About Me*) over the phone? Let me know what you think of the mix."

"Now, you can't listen to something like that over the phone, but he wanted to play me the songs and it was 'Maria Bartiromo' and 'What A Wonderful World' and I could tell he was really proud of the stuff, and I said, 'Joey, I'm past kissing your ass,

brother, but damn, you're singing as good as you ever have, and those are great songs."

Always humble, and hard on himself, Joey had another request of Joe.

"That was when he told me, 'Listen, will you work on some tunes with me? I need better tunes and the other stuff isn't as strong. I know it'll sell and kids will love it and I'll get great reviews, but I really in my heart know that the other stuff is not as strong.' And that was another lesson: Here's Joey Ramone being honest with himself. He told me always be your own worst critic and don't believe your own bullshit. 'Cause he said you'll get good reviews for crap and he said, 'I know I will and I have.'"

At Joey's funeral, Joe had a chance to relate those stories to Joey's mom.

"I told his mom about that and I'm sure she'd heard it a million times, but I said it goes past him being in a great band and all that stuff, writing great songs," says Joe. "Those are the lessons he taught me and how much it meant to me when here I am this little kid from New Hampshire and Joey knew my songs from the tape. What a nice guy. I was not best friends with him, but I was lucky enough that I got to chat with him on the phone and I remember him saying things like, 'Hey, (David) Bowie called me the other day.' He was a fan. He loved making good tunes and he was proud of what he'd done, but he was a fan too. I'm sure there were times when he had to pinch himself when Bowie called or Iggy (Pop)."



Joey Ramone

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