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The Queers [Photo: Pat Schumacher/Rockstar Pictures]

## From Love Songs to the Fake Mafia: An Interview with the Queers

[19 February 2007]

by **Matthew A. Stern**

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"Oh, Hi Mom, it's me," announces the raspy, swaggering voice of Joe King, the man better known as Joe Queer. Wearing his ubiquitous baseball cap, guitar slung characteristically low, he and the rest of the members of the Queers rip into the track of the same name off of their classic 1993 album, *Love Songs for the Retarded*. Skaters in t-shirts and hooded sweatshirts, kids dressed like the Ramones, and the occasional guy with a mohawk begin to skank exaggeratedly around in a circle. Others put their arms around each other near the front of the stage and bounce up and down, pumping their fists and singing along.

This is a scene from the new DVD, entitled *The Queers Are Here*, which features live performances from the last 25 years of the Queers' career. It could, however, be a scene from any local punk show in the last two and a half decades, which is part of what makes the DVD, a loose assembly of footage with interviews interspersed, so entertaining. For those who attended punk shows in cramped, sweaty basements throughout the '90s, it brings back memories of a time when the moniker "pop-punk" wasn't always attached to a genre of bands glossy with mainstream sheen and target marketed towards a particular youth demographic. The genre label "pop-punk" instead calls to mind circle pits, songs about girls (falling in love with them, getting blown off by them, jacking off thinking about them), and giving mix tape after meaning-drenched mix tape to those girls.

The Queers were one of the more bird-flippingly obnoxious, smug, and goofily perverted bands to born from the '90s pop-punk scene. The band has continued to tour with various lineups throughout the years, never breaking into the mainstream, never signing to a major, and never being particularly interested in doing so. Instead, their albums like *Love Songs for the Retarded* and *Don't Back Down* have become the perennial underground classics for the last few generations of kids clad in leather jackets and band patch-covered hooded sweatshirts alike.

*After 25 years, Joe Queer has opinions on sex, death, and, more important, punk, but he knows to keep it all in perspective with a sense of humor.*

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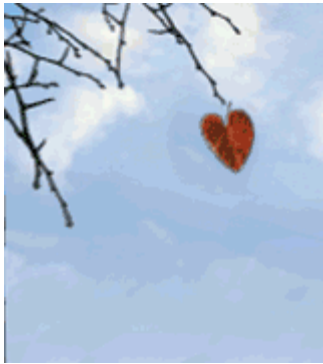
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Joe Queer has been an obstreperous critic of what you might call "corporate punk" since it first happened. In the last 25 years, he's watched a scene that he played an important part in have an unprecedented and often unacknowledged impact on popular culture. He's continued to churn out three-chord goofball anthems through changes in the scene and even bigger ones in his life. The party punk pioneer has been through a lot, and although he rarely gets through a sentence without using an expletive, there's obviously a lot more to his humorous take on life these days than what comes out in the songs.

"It didn't surprise me that it happened," says Joe of the mainstreaming of a certain watered-down brand of pop-punk. "Money comes in and changes everything." Joe saw this change happen from an important vantage point. It was, after all, a band from his scene that changed things, for better or for worse, for mainstream pop music. Green Day, a long-standing band on the Lookout! Records roster released *Dookie* in 1994, and suddenly there was money to be made in that brand of punk—in shopping malls and arenas. When Joe Queer pronounces "Green Day", he emphasizes the second word and not the first, which if he says it that way, is probably the right way to pronounce it.

"I don't begrudge them any of their success," says Joe of the first crop of radio-friendly pop-punk bands to break big in the '90s, "but to me, out of all those bands, Green Day was the only great one who grabbed me by the balls, and who really make you stand up and think. They didn't sit down to write *Dookie* and say, 'Oh fuck, if we write this type of song, we'll get big.'"

The fact that the schlockiest pre-fab punk bands imaginable routinely make it big in the mainstream is a standard gripe from fans of any variety of independent music, but Joe finds it particularly irksome. After all, he got into writing surfy punk songs because he so loved the Ramones, Black Flag, and the Angry Samoans, not because he figured he'd be able to parlay it into a career.

Even from bands on MySpace, Joe sometimes notices a different mentality regarding the chances of success. "It drives me crazy when bands send out shit like 'Vote for us!'" says Joe. "Everything's a fuckin' horserace these days, you know?"

That wasn't the case when the Queers first popped onto the punk scene. The band's earliest incarnation formed in 1982 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and released a few 7"s, but The Queers didn't release a their first proper full length, *Grow Up*, until 1990. The band has continued to tour through pop-punk's various ebbs and explosions with a revolving lineup of musicians, always centered around Joe. In 1997, at the height of pop-punk's underground popularity, Joe put together the *More Bounce to the Ounce* compilation, a seminal scene report for the era, featuring many of the Queers' Lookout! Records cohorts—smaller ones like notoriously filthy porno-punk act the Nobodys (whose singer J.J. was known for frequently telling the tale of his first sexual experience, one that involved the use of a band saw in shop class for masturbatory purposes, a timeless tale that persists as the most famous story about jacking off not told by Philip Roth) to larger acts, like the romantically silly Mr. T Experience.

Since then, the band has, like most other bands from that era (all of whom were getting hosed out of money after the departure of Lookout! founder and president Lawrence Livermore), left Lookout! Records. The Queers joined up with Mike Park's Asian Man Records, since the former Skankin' Pickle singer runs it like an independent punk label should be run. They've been re-







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releasing their mainstay albums that they got back from Lookout! starting with *Love Songs for the Retarded*, recently put out a live album titled *Weekend at Bernie's*, and even more recently a disc of new material entitled *Munki Brain*, for which they're currently touring. The first track off the disc to appear online, "I Don't Get It" sounds exactly like what you'd expect from the Queers. They haven't suddenly become political like NOFX did back in the early '00s, or started writing baroque experimental excursions.

The Queers' classic shtick, though, definitely doesn't sum up the future ambitions of Joe King, whose sense of humor hasn't just helped him entertain a worldwide scene of disaffected high schoolers, self-styled fuck-ups and proud lifelong outsiders, it's helped him laugh his way through a decade characterized by some gravely serious experiences.

In his new advice column on the ReadJunk.com web site, Joe seems to have a surprisingly, if not characteristically light attitude about his one-time heroin habit. In response to a message asking how to deal with a wife who can't appreciate a man's love for shrill, indulgent prog-metal band Rush, Joe writes "There are some things I can joke about but one of them is not Rush. To me they are the musical equivalent of a chipped tooth. Bands like Rush are the reason I got into heroin."

But it's this attitude, the 'who-gives-a-fuck one,' that's helped Joe get through his addiction to drugs and alcohol and stay completely clean for three years. He hints at a side he rarely shows in interviews, and usually saves, he says, for the AA meetings and kids who seek out advice from him. "Humor really got me through rehab," says Joe. "Being able to laugh at myself and just not taking myself so seriously about that stuff. It's a serious thing certainly, but you gotta put it in its place. If I see someone really wanting to get sober I tell them more about my story," says Joe, "but my story is no different than a million other people out there that drank, did drugs, and partied too hard."

Joe elaborates a bit, "I don't miss the bullshit. It's a big game, and you just go as long as hard as you can go and pray that you don't die before you reach the fuckin' finish line, you know? We were just so far past havin' a beer and watchin' a ballgame, it was just a nightmare, Jonesing and fuckin' mailing drugs around the world in FedEx packages and shit. Fuck that."

The death of Joe's close friend and original Queers drummer Hugh O'Neill, as well as the passing of his father in the same few months in 1999 were equally hard on him. "I learned from it, you know, and you can't let grief run your life. It sucks, but there's not much you can do. I kind of grew up a little bit and learned what was the important stuff in life, friendships, you know."

The importance of Joe Queer's friendships comes through when he discusses his ambitions outside of the realm of bubblegum-meets-hardcore punk rock. At the mention of Frank Portman aka Dr. Frank of the Mr. T Experience, Joe's voice takes on an honestly touching note of admiration (this may very well be the first time anything involving Joe Queer has been described as "touching" that wasn't X-rated in nature,) one that only vaguely resembles Joe's public persona. Usually given to going on irritated tears punctuated with enough "fucks" and "shits" to make your mother's ears bleed, he sounds downright stoked not just about Portman's success with his punk-themed novel *King Dork*, but towards his long time friend's wit and intelligence.



Joe Queer [Photo: Pat Schumacher/Rockstar Pictures]

Joe has some literary interests, and like Frank, some literary aspirations of his own. Asked about the kind of books he reads, he cites Dumas as one of his favorite authors and classic British literature as his favorite genre. He's has been working on a book about his time with the band and is about two chapters into it at last count, though his touring schedule has prevented him from writing as much as he'd like. He's also got an offer from a friend in Chicago to have him star in a punk rock movie.

*The Queers Are Here* isn't the feature that Joe might end up starring in, but it works pretty well as an overview of what the band's had going on for the last two and a half decades. It's also not without its more dramatic moments—a performance of "Nothing to Do" in Genoa, Italy, depicts Joe Queer as you might expect to see him; sticking his middle finger in some dude's face.

"There was no security and he started screaming 'I'm in the Mafia,'" Joe says, explaining the situation. "I was like, 'If you're in the fucking Mafia, you don't fuckin' go running around saying 'I'm in the Mafia' and shit. He was like, insane, and I got in a big fight with the guy, and they had to hustle me out of the club after the show and they let him stay. It was fucking typical bureaucratic fucking bullshit coupled with their lack of knowledge ... it was just a stupid thing."

With that kind of excitement for so many years, it's no wonder Joe sees life on the road—a life that's all local bands the world over and an assortment of "yummy yummy punk rock girls"—differently than he did in the mid-'90s. The Queers have another new album coming out in the fall, but after that he might spend some time concentrating on other endeavors, including starting another restaurant to replace Joe's Place, the one he used to run. "It's been a while and I might move on to bigger and better things, but we'll see. I don't need the ego trip of the band to get out of bed in the morning like I did for years. Now I don't give a fuck, really. It's fun, but I put it in its place. How many people show up at your show can't be the reason you get out of bed in the morning, you know?"

Not to mention, Joe Queer just got married. Seriously. He's married to his girlfriend of four years. When asked if his wife is one of those punk rock girls whom he and Dr. Frank once famously decided that they love more than toast, he replies "No. No, not really. I met her at a show, but she's not, like, a punk rock girl."

📺 ["Houston, We Have a Problem"](#) [MP3]



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