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The Queers

interview by *Eric Mitts*

After talking with Joe King, the founder and sole remaining original member of old-school punk band The Queers via cell phone as he drove home to New Hampshire for the holidays, Recoil got a good feel of what it would be like on the road with him. Nervously passing cops while talking about the sorry state of punk rock and having long conversations reminiscing what The Ramones really meant to America, the guy is clearly someone who's quick to make friends. Friendship and the music that went along with it has helped King get through some horrendously tough times, including the passing of longtime Queers drummer Hugh O'Neill in 1999. It's obvious that the band still tours in honor of keeping the true punk rock spirit of the 1980s alive for another generation. How music can mean that much to someone and how it can motivate such a long and trying career is simply inspiring. So with the turning of the new year now making The Queers a punk rock cornerstone for a quarter century, and their new label Asian Man reissuing nearly all of their back catalog, as well as their new album, Munki Brain (due out in February), it's time to just let King tell us what he's learned.

This year marks The Queers' twenty-fifth, have you found that a lot of your fans have kept with you throughout their life? Or do you get more people who are discovering you for the first time?

Joe King: A little bit of both. I'll be honest with you; a lot of our audience has grown up and gotten older. So I noticed the last few years, if and when we do a bar show, which we don't do too often, always whenever we played a bar before it wouldn't go good and now we're starting to get some big, big crowds. We sell out bars when we play [ages] twenty-one plus because a lot of the guys and gals have grown up and they don't want to be around all the stupid kids. But basically it's been all-ages [shows]. I don't want to go and do the Warped Tour and all that bullshit. So that has hurt us as far as visibility, but to me, a lot of the people who go to the Warped Tour, not all of them, but a lot of them, are just into what label the bands are on and it's all promotion. If they say the name, they think the band has to be good. So I choose not to go that route. Yeah, we'd sell more albums if we were on the Warped Tour, but I think most of the bands there suck, a lot of them, and the people, the kids, they're idiots who will buy anything, I think. That affects us at all-ages shows sometimes. We usually do pretty good though. We're lucky because we've been an influence on a lot of bands like My Chemical Romance, Taking Back Sunday, a lot of those bands that got big, they opened up for us. Fall Out Boy, even Billie Joe [Armstrong] from Green Day was on MTV a few months ago and they were talking to him about influences and he said, 'We wouldn't be anywhere without The Queers,' but I think they'd be just fine without us [laughs]. But it was nice of him to mention it. The drummer from Taking Back Sunday showed up in L.A. last time, so we've been able to influence a lot of the bands, so that's cool. We've got a big enough name to go out and tour and not have to do the Warped Tour.



So for you, were you mostly influenced by the Beach Boys and pop music like that from the fifties and sixties before you discovered punk?

I always liked the late fifties and sixties pop. Stuff like The Turtles, The Beach Boys, Del Shannon, Chuck Berry, The Rolling Stones, The Beatles. I wasn't a Beatles freak, but I certainly liked them. Dick Dale and The Ventures and all that stuff. So the punk thing was just an extension of that to me. The Ramones were just a good Beach Boys sounding band to me, with 'Rockaway Beach' and all that stuff. So I always had that bubblegum mentality, where two minutes of bubblegum music can save the world, and then the punk thing is kind of an extension of that. It all made sense; it all fell into place for me.

You've said in other interviews that a lot of punk bands right now don't put The Ramones in their rightful place, which is at the top. Why do you think some younger punk bands or fans are starting to overlook The Ramones' impact and importance?

I was talking to Marky [Ramone] about this when we were on tour with him this past summer in Brazil. I think the dumb kids just don't do their homework. To them, punk started with NOFX or The Casualties or Green Day or whoever and they don't go back and find out what influenced all those bands. And I think also a lot of people look at The Ramones and say, 'Oh, they didn't sing about anything smart. They were just singing about sniffing glue and I want to be sedated and I don't care and yeah it was fun, but there wasn't any big message to it.' But I think the thing they overlooked is that The Ramones were the punk message. They taught us to not take yourself too seriously, to be able to laugh at yourself, to question things. That's the punk message in a nutshell right there – very important stuff that I think is overlooked. And you've got to remember also, all the great punk bands back in the day, from bands like The Dickies and The Angry Samoans to The Dead Kennedys and Black Flag, Circle Jerks, Ramones, all that stuff, they got their

message across, some of them were quite political, but they all used humor as a tool. That was the bottom line, humor. Punk rock was a big take off of aping the big bands like Queen and Yes and Jethro Tull and Led Zeppelin and all these overblown, pompous, blowhard rock stars, and that's where punk came from, a lot of it. They were laughing at themselves. And now, I think bands take themselves too seriously. Nobody can laugh at themselves. You're center stage, you look like fucking clowns with purple mohawks and then you're bummed out when someone doesn't take you seriously. I just think the whole humor thing is a really important part of the whole punk scene and it's getting lost in the big business. Money's starting to get thrown around, everybody's starting to take themselves too seriously. I say I don't like Dropkick Murphys. I don't hate them. I'm not into their music. I'm not into the scene where people are violent. When I see stuff like that, I don't think we've learned anything in twenty-five years of punk rock. And I get death threats! Kids will e-mail me going, 'I'll kill you, you mother fucker!' And I'm just going, 'Man, I just don't like the fucking stupid little band that you like. I'm not saying that I want to kill you or that I hate you.' I just don't agree with your politics or whatever. I'm not going to sit around and say that I do. So, it's a weird fucked-up scene when you got bands like Anti-Flag who are just worshipped by so many kids. I think it's so pompous to get onstage and act like you know so much more than the audience and who gives you the fucking right? Like you have a direct line to God and knowledge? That's one thing that really bugs me about punk rock today too. But I grew up on Black Flag and the DKs and The Ramones and those bands made me and that's who I'll always be. So I can't buy a lot of the punk stuff today. People think I'm just a shit talker, but I speak my mind and I speak the truth.

You had the chance to co-write a song with Joey Ramone before he died, did you get a chance to talk to him about the importance of humor in punk rock?

I wasn't best friends with Joey at all. I knew him certainly well enough so the last couple years of his life he was calling me up. I probably talked to him twenty-five maybe thirty times on the phone, but we only talked about music a little what bands he liked, what he thought of stuff, what I was into, how we loved The Beach Boys. I don't remember talking to him too much about the humor thing. I always liked that tongue in cheek thing. They were smart dumb, you know? Like, 'We're a happy family, sitting here in Queens, eating refried beans, we're in all the magazines, gulpin' down thorazines, we ain't got no friends, our troubles never end.' That was just kind of funny, man. Beat on the brat with a baseball bat and all that stuff was just tongue in cheek and fun music. You went to a Ramones show to forget all the bullshit in the world, not to go have Joey Ramone go tell you what hand to wipe your ass with or who to vote for or whatever. But for those hour and twenty minutes when they were onstage and we're singing the lyrics to every single Ramones song and everything is okay during the chorus of 'Sheena's a Punk Rocker' or 'Rockaway Beach.' That's what The Ramones and punk rock was to me. It's a way, like Joe Strummer from The Clash said, 'It's a way to see through bullshit in the world and the hypocrisy and the smokescreen and see things for what they really are.' So as far as the humor with Joey, it was there and I didn't talk to him that much. I didn't get into really in-depth stuff. He was into really good music. He called me up and said, 'I've got enough stuff for the solo album, but I need stronger stuff. I always thought that was a telling remark about Joey, in that his solo album sold great, kids love it from start to finish, yet deep down Joey knew, and I think a lot of people who can be objective knew this too, he realized some of it wasn't his strongest stuff and he always wanted to make better stuff. So that's where I came in with Ben [Weasel, from Screeching Weasel] with 'I Wanna Be Happy,' but by the time that we finished he was too sick to sing it. So it was sad because 'I Wanna Be Happy' would have been a cool tune [it ended up on The Queers' *Pleasant Screams*, but it was thrilling for me to get to know him a little bit, to talk to him about music and realize that what got him out of bed wasn't how famous he was or how much money he had, it was, 'Gee, can I write a cool tune?'] I remember him telling me how David Bowie called him the other day or Iggy Pop. It was really cool. He was always excited about when it was time to stand and deliver, so that was a real good lesson for me.

So did hearing that from him help you make it through these twenty-five years with The Queers?

Yeah, I remember back around '86 we had sent him a tape. I got his address backstage at a show in Boston or something. And he was always very accessible. He gave me his address and I sent him a cassette tape with a little note written in pencil with four 'Goodbye California,' 'Love Love Love,' 'I'll Be True To You' and 'I Don't Want To Get Involved With You.' So I saw him at a show in the University of New Hampshire about a month or two after that, I bullshitted my way backstage, not that it was very hard, there were only two or three hundred kids at the show, and I went and I said, 'I'm Joe from The Queers' and he recognized the name The Queers. He didn't recognize me, he only knew me from backstage where there's so many people around, but he came up to me and he said, 'Hey man, I love "Love Love Love" and "Goodbye California." I want to cover "Love Love Love." I like the vocal phrasing.' And at that moment, I told his mom this when I met her, Charlotte, it made me realize that I could fucking stay in the ball game. If Joey Ramone said he liked my songs and said they were good, it gave me power and it gave me credibility and it was just, I don't know. I was so insecure with no self esteem that I needed that and it meant so much to me, man. I'll be honest with you, I meet a lot bands. Fat Wreck bands, Epitaph bands, that are just trying to make it in the business, and they're arrogant mother fuckers. Usually they're nice to me, but I see that they're just arrogant mother fuckers. They won't talk to the opening bands, they're assholes to the roadies and Joey wasn't like that at all. And here's a guy who changed not just music but the world, dude, and he was humble! And it had nothing to do with how famous he was. These other assholes in these bands, if they get to do music and all this shit and travel around and you're going to be a bigger dink after doing it than before you were, you might as well go manage a fucking Taco Bell and leave the rest of us alone, because you're a fucking asshole. That's the stuff Joey Ramone taught me.

What led to Asian Man deciding to reissue your previous albums? How many do they plan to reissue?

They're doing all the Lookout! stuff. The Hopeless stuff I don't own the rights to, so they can't reissue that right now. *Love Songs* is out, *Beat Off* and *Move Back Home* are all done, *Grow Up's* done, we're just down to tweaking artwork and stuff and I think they're going to start coming out with one a month starting in February. We just stopped getting paid by Lookout!. We hadn't gotten paid in years. Sporadically I'd get a check here and there. They just started taking money so we had put it where we would get paid for what we sell.

With all those reissues coming out, just how different will the new album *Munki Brain* be when put at the end of all that?

lines. There's a couple songs, one I wrote with Lisa [Marr], it's called 'Brian Wilson,' and there's one I wrote by myself called 'I Think She's Starting To Like,' and that's a real Beach Boys, *Pet Sounds*-ish type tune that I'm really proud of. And the 'Brian Wilson' thing I wrote with Lisa is almost an alternative-type song. So that's sort of different. I think either it's going to be *Groundhog Day* when you wake up and every album is going to be the fucking same, or you're going to move on, at least in certain areas, and try new stuff, and there's going to be people that don't hate it or don't love it, but you've just got to do what's in your heart. It's just showing a band evolve. It's a band that started doing *Kicked Out of the Webeles* and evolved through to *Munki Brain*. So I'm really proud of the fact that we're moving ahead, but I really think that our core audience that gets us will love it. We have a song about George Bush called 'Monkey in a Suit,' which I really think is great. Then Ben Weasel and I wrote a song called 'I Don't Get It.' I have a song called 'Houston There's a Problem,' which is kind of a 'I Want To Be Sedated' slash sick of the punk scene type song that's really catchy and as good as anything I've written. Some kids ain't gonna like; I don't give a fuck. I really don't.

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