

# Live Queer or Die!



## NEW HAMPSHIRE'S PUNK ROCK SURVIVOR MAKES HIS STAND IN DIXIELAND • BY GREGORY NICOLL

**I**t's late on a school night, and a smoky little Georgia rock club is packed shoulder-to-shoulder with an eager all-ages crowd. Hundreds of white teenagers bop deliriously to the beat of thundering double-timed drums and the chainsaw roar of over-driven punk guitars. On the stage, a row of average Joes wearing baseball caps furiously flail their instruments. When they lean toward their microphones for the song's shout-along chorus, the whole roomful of kids goes berserk.

"We! Are! **THE QUEERS!**"

Everyone in audience -- gay, straight, or in between -- stabs their fists in the air together, punctuating every syllable of the speedy anthem.

This feat of audience engagement would be impressive from an arena headliner, but for an obscure combo founded a quarter century ago in coastal New Hampshire, the youthful enthusiasm of the audience is total magic, a testament to the appeal of funny, uptempo songs about such universal teen concerns as homework, training bras, making out, and passing gas.

For all the electric fuzztone rage in The Queers' power-punk sound, many of their harmonies and arrangements evoke the sweetness of The Beach Boys, whose material they occasionally cover. Due this month from Asian Man Records is the group's new

album, *Munki Brain* (the title is a nod to The Jesus and Mary Chain), which includes musical tributes to Beach Boys maestro Brian Wilson and surfing legend Duke Kahanamoku. Other selections across the pleasingly diverse disc range from the retro doo-wop of "I Can't Stay Mad at You" to the blisteringly political "Monkey in a Suit." There's even a guest appearance by Rick Miller of Southern Culture on the Skids.

The man behind The Queers is Joe King, a.k.a. Joe Queer, who despite his stage name is as straight an arrow as ever flew out of the "Live Free or Die" state. Bearing a natural physical and vocal resemblance to Beach Boys frontman Mike Love, King is rarely seen without his trademark baseball cap. Like a kid who never grew up, he's been successfully composing his clever, sometimes snotty teenage ditties for multiple generations of young fans.

"It kind of surprises me to be honest," King comments on The Queers' ability to attract new listeners, "and we still have a good cult audience that comes to see us. There aren't many jobs where half-naked 17 year old girls throw their bras at you and beg you to sign their breasts."

Queers-mania hits another milestone this season with the long-form DVD *The Queers Are Here* (MVD Visual), featuring music videos, unabashed interviews ("Don't go to a punk rock show to learn about poli-

tics," King advises) and concert clips from assorted decades and continents. Many of its songs are adroitly edited together from numerous performances, resulting in amusing mid-verse changes of outfits, instruments and lineups. Also, due this summer from Sony Pictures Animation is *Surf's Up*, a movie about surfing penguins with the voices of Jeff Bridges and James Woods. The Queers are slated for its soundtrack, with an intense reading of the instrumental classic "Wipeout" culled from their 2003 CD *Acid Beaters*.

But the biggest upturn in Joe King's life hinges on his relocation to Atlanta.

"I had to move out of my apartment in NH a week before a tour, which ended near Atlanta," he recalls. "I stayed with my girlfriend here...and just ended up staying. It wasn't a conscious decision to move, but it's all good. I've played Atlanta so many times, it's strange," he adds nostalgically, "to drive past that clothing store where The Point was and remember playing there. The Queers had some awesome shows at The Sombre Reptile and The Wreck Room as well."

King's roommate, Mimi, is a petite first-generation Japanese immigrant with a master's degree in sculpture from Georgia State. "She doesn't have a firm grasp on the language, and us trying to communicate at times could be a good reality show," King chuckles. "When I was in the depths of my

drug addiction, she called me a 'chunky,' causing me to have the first real laugh in many a moon. God love her, she stuck by me, though, and saw me through that stuff." The couple was married last October at the Fulton County Courthouse.

Settling in Georgia entailed some culture shock for the New England native. "I play up my NH accent a bit," he admits, "as a sort of subtle protest against the Southern accent. When a three-toed tree sloth masquerading as a postal employee says some undecipherable gobbledygook that makes about as much sense to me as Chinese, I go right back at them with my NH accent. Usually it's a Mexican standoff, as neither of us knows what the hell the other is talking about."

King confesses that he can't get a fix on what makes the city tick. "It seems like Atlanta wants to be some huge Mecca, a la L.A. or San Francisco or NYC or Chicago, but somehow it falls a bit short; and at times it seems like people have a chip on their shoulder. I was in rehab once with a lot of famous and semi-famous musicians, and there were a lot of attitudes going on there, as you can well imagine. One day the counselor told us to cool it because, if you're in rehab, you ain't cool -- and I sort of feel like that in Atlanta. I like it -- lots of nice people -- but, face it, we're in Atlanta. We aren't cool."

Although personally based in Georgia, King still considers his band a New England ensemble (He introduces them onstage by shouting, "We're The Queers, from Portsmouth, NH!") and regularly travels north to pick up mail, visit the old gang, and recruit musicians. Since the early '90s the group -- as either a trio or a quartet -- has rarely maintained a regular lineup.

"Having new guys keeps everything fresh," King explains. "On this tour, we have Geoff Useless from The Guts on bass, and this kid Adam from The Leftovers on drums. The roadie Jeff, from Detroit, got enlisted to play rhythm guitar, so we are a four-piece this time. As a four-piece, we can do a bunch of stuff we haven't done lately."

With a history extending back to 1982, The Queers have both a lot of material and lot of ex-members. King fondly recalls their formative phase, when he rehearsed with future infamous punk legend G.G. Allin ("I used to see him at Ramones shows, wearing fishnet stockings and high heels") and wildman bassist Don Crockford. Crockford's intoxicated rages so terrified Allin that years later King was inspired to compose a song entitled "I Knew G.G. When He Was a Wimp."

After performing in other combos, King conspired with two oddly named musical cohorts, Tulu and Wimpy, to form the first official lineup of The Queers. "We called ourselves The Queers to piss off the art-fag community."

This confrontational name also echoed a game from King's childhood. "One of our favorite tricks was selecting a despised nickname and chanting it at the person until

he was on the verge of a psychotic break," writes King's older sister Heather, a journalist and NPR commentator, in her autobiographical memoir *Parched* (Chamberlain Bros./Penguin Books, 2005). "We all called one another 'queer' -- not as in gay, but as in uncool or weak or allowing oneself to be vulnerable in any way. Childlike happiness was queer, caring too much was queer, and the expression of any feeling other than self-pity or contempt was queer squared."

Heather's book describes her eventual descent into alcoholism, with Joe as a participant in the intervention which saved her. Joe remembers his role differently ("I caught wind of that little séance and immediately called to warn her"), but later realized his own substance abuse was out of control. "You can maybe kid yourself that you are a 'social drinker,' but when you're doing speedballs all day long and stealing your Mom's credit card, you have a problem. I blew a ton of money living like Dee Dee Ramone and Johnny Thunders."

King finally hit bottom ("I was out of my skull") at a gig in Texas. Although his band finished the night's show, they cancelled the balance of tour. "About 90 minutes after we had been playing to a packed house," remembers King, "I was alone in front of the club."

He still marvels at his nearly miraculous rescue by a lone fan named Max, a total stranger who announced that God instructed him to help. "At that stage, I wouldn't have been surprised if Elvis came up and said, 'Welcome to Burger King,'" he observes, "but a kid I had never met drove me all the way back to Atlanta, 'cause I was incapable of driving. That was the first step out of hell for me. Mimi and him got me to rehab. I just think of that day, and it keeps me sober."

Nearly three years later, does he have any regrets about playing his older material, songs frequently punctuated with references to intoxicants from beer to heroin?

King chuckles. "Eh, most of our stuff is tongue-in-cheek. You can't really take a band called The Queers too seriously." ☞

*The Queers perform at The Star Community Bar on Saturday, February 10th.*

