



Photographic memories

Mission of Burma: The most influential band you never heard

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Published 01.10.2007

<http://atlanta.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=181128>

Mission Of Burma, Boston's finest and most significant punk-rock band, existed for only four years. Its accomplishments were great, however, and inspired and influenced much of the American indie-rock underground -- from R.E.M. and Moby to Hüsker Dü and Sonic Youth.

After years of downplaying the idea of a Burma reunion, the members sent shock waves through the underground in late 2001 when they announced plans for several shows to be held in New York, Boston and at the All Tomorrow's Parties festival in Camber Sands, England, later in 2002.

As one fan put it, it was "inexplicable."

The reunion occurred when bassist Clint Conley became interested in music again and started writing and playing. Guitarist Roger Miller dropped his objections, believing it was now or never. Drummer Peter Prescott had stepped away from his recent bands and had free time. Those three played together onstage for the first time in 18 years at the last Peer Group show opening for a reunited Wire in Boston; the band was featured prominently in New York music writer Michael Azerrad's excellent history of '80s U.S. indie rock, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes From the American Indie Underground 1981-1991*.

Mission of Burma formed in 1979 when Prescott quit the Molls and auditioned for a weird new project headed up by Miller and Conley, who began their careers with Boston punks the Moving Parts. The trio played their first show on April Fool's Day that year in a decrepit movie house. Eventually, the three added Martin Swope, Miller's hometown pal from Ann Arbor, Mich., to the lineup as audio engineer and "tape loop manipulator." Swope mixed sound at the group's live gigs and added his sweeping aural effects in the recording studio.

Burma's aggressive and assured sound came out of the '70s underground (Roxy Music, David Bowie, Lou Reed), '60s acid rock (Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Syd Barrett) and the first wave of punk rock (Stooges, Pere Ubu, Ramones, Wire, Sex Pistols, etc.), long before "alternative rock" and "grunge" entered the picture. The group's shared affinity for psychedelia, avant-garde improv and experimental pop led to greater achievement on the 1981 EP *Signals, Calls, and Marches* and the 1982 full-length *Vs.*, both released on Rick Harte's Ace Of Hearts label in Boston.

The Mission came to a bittersweet end the first time around, however, not because of tough times and tough tours, but because of Miller's worsening struggle with tinnitus (today he still hears a constant series of tones ringing). Burma held its last Boston show in front of a packed house at the Bradford Hotel in March 1983 ... or so they thought. In January 2002, they blasted through two weekends' worth of reunion shows to packed rooms in New York City at the Irving Plaza and in their hometown at the Avalon and at the Paradise -- performing two shows in one day. Bob Weston (of the Volcano Suns and Shellac) stepped in for Swope on sound and tape loops.

Last month, after an unexpected string of mini-tours and recording sessions, Mission of Burma and MVD Visual released a much-anticipated DVD, *Not a Photograph*, a 70-minute documentary inspired by the 2002 reunion shows. Directed by David Kleiler (Prescott's former Volcano Suns bandmate) and Northeastern filmmaker Jeff Iwanicki, the disc includes everything from archival footage from the early days in the late '70s and '80s to behind-the-scenes footage of the band in the studio during the making of its 2004 album, *ONOFFON* (Matador). Azerrad provided the liner notes.

"The thing that made me happiest was I like seeing people that were around then enjoying it," says Miller of the band's reunion events and current mini-tours. "For me, what's more exciting was seeing people who never knew the band or saw the band before getting into it and knowing all the songs. People ask about a nostalgia element, but for us, there's no nostalgia element. It's like, we're a band now and we're playing these damn songs. Just like it always was."

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info

Mission of Burma

w/ Some Soviet Station. \$22.25 (\$20 adv.). 9 p.m. Sat., Jan. 13.
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