

## Violently Happy

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***We Fun* captures the anarchic spirit of Atlanta's underground art scene** / by Sean L. Maloney

"In 2010, do we need to know what fame means to anyone? No. Does it mean anything? Probably not. Do you want to know what emotion [causes] a 24-year-old to create [art]? Maybe. But it's usually just a violent urge. Just violence."

Documentary filmmaker Matthew Robison is discussing the impetus behind his latest project, *We Fun: Atlanta, GA Inside/Out*, which is being released on DVD this month after a successful run around the festival circuit.

The film is a snapshot of a burgeoning underground scene, a yearbook for the dropouts, degenerates and bohemians that have clustered around the Black Lips and Deerhunter. The wider indie-world success of those bands has helped to spawn one of the most vital rock and art scenes of the early 21st century.

"Atlanta is a town that doesn't have a brick standing from before 1869 or so; the fucking [city] got burned down [in the Civil War]," Robison says of Atlanta's tendency toward chaos of both the good and bad varieties. In keeping with this spirit, *We Fun* doesn't resemble your average rock-doc so much as a spasm of creativity and lunacy captured on video. It's a tribute to those who use the unbridled energy of rock to satisfy their most craven impulses.

"Socially and structurally, [Atlanta] is a nightmare," Robison says. "But what's great about [the city] is that you can book a show there and 100 people will show up. They've got the population."

*We Fun* shares a producer, and a certain spirit, with the classic 1987 rock-doc *Athens, GA – Inside/Out*, which captured Atlanta's neighbor just as locals R.E.M. crossed the threshold from college-rock heroes to certified superstars. But where *Athens* was concerned with an academic, cerebral approach to art, the artists and musicians in *We Fun* enjoy a more visceral brand of expression. It would be hard to argue that the Atlanta scene is aiming for high art while Atlantan-

by-association King Khan is running around in his underwear and Mourdella's Jessica Juggz is shooting flames out of her lady parts. But it certainly makes for great entertainment.

“[The artists] opened up the city to us, basically,” Robison says of the local response when he announced his plan to film what was, at the time, still a largely underground phenomenon. “They were just excited about someone wanting to be there, to document it. If you look at what those bands are now—what that city is now—I don't know what kind of impression you would get. But at the time we were there, the impression was the same as if you and all your buddies, at 25, had suddenly found out that touring was fruitful and [your band] became an international thing and the records were being released and you didn't have to work at the restaurant as much... The personalities were all there and the beer flowed like wine.”



Robison manages to capture the fleeting glory of post-adolescent anarchy—the sweat, smoke and stale beer of house shows on a Southern summer day—without imbuing it with a false sense of importance. *We Fun* lands somewhere between the hands-off cinema verité of his previous documentary, *Silver Jew*—which followed reclusive indie rock legend David Berman and his band the Silver Jews on their first-ever tour—and the shock-sploitation storytelling style he learned while working on NBC's prison documentary series *Lockup*. Robison lets the inmates run the asylum, and they proceed to trash the grounds to great effect.

There's the late B.J. “Bobby Ubangi” Womack reading a chapter from *Moby-Dick*, Cole from the Black Lips setting off a fire extinguisher during a photo shoot for Atlanta magazine and the guys from Mastodon recounting their first tequila-fueled jam session. Throughout, the viewer gets the feeling that Atlanta's rock musicians (and fans) have decided that sanity and stability are best left to accountants and pencil-pushers. It's this willful lack of common sense, this gleeful flouting of grown-up behavior in favor of cheap thrills, that's so seductive. (Even for those viewers who know both the ugly reality of Atlanta traffic and the commitment that playing in a band actually entails.)

Not all of *We Fun*'s bands come across as complete lunatics. Tommy Chung from the sorely underappreciated Selmanaires is notably low-key during his interview, and the Carbonas seem like nice boys-next-door, even when they're talking about masturbating in their tour van. But you might miss some of the music's subtlety when the bands are busy setting off explosive devices onstage.

It remains to be seen what lasting impact the new Atlanta indie scene will have; chances are slim that the Black Lips will turn into the Top 40 juggernaut that R.E.M. became. At the end of the day, *We Fun* isn't about preserving a scene in amber, turning it into a myth. It simply tries to capture a brief—and impossible to predict—moment when a group of misfits were able to export their local own brand of weirdness around the world, regardless of whether the world was ready for it.

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