

Surveying the distinctly weird wonders of art-rock provocateurs the Residents.

By
Marc Masters
, April 4, 2012



[Underscore](#) is a feature that surveys undervalued artists, scenes, and eras of the past.

Anonymity is a paradox. In theory, it should deflect attention and create distance, but in practice it's a beguiling curiosity, stirring interest through deliberate mystery. By pushing people away, it pulls them in. [The Residents](#) are famous for being anonymous. What most people know about them is nobody knows who they are.

Maybe that's intentional. Maybe the Residents hide their identities to get more attention. (We'll probably never know, since the band doesn't give interviews and has only spoken through representatives at their label, [Ralph Records](#), and their aptly named management company, [The Cryptic Corporation](#).) If their plan is to get people interested, it's worked-- but the anonymity has also overshadowed their music.

Consider all the other conceptual ideas the Residents engage in, and their music moves even *further* from the spotlight. Perhaps you've read about their [twisted covers of Elvis](#), [the Beatles](#), and [the Stones](#), and figured they were artier cousins of "Weird" Al. Or you've seen their pioneering pre-MTV videos and labeled them forefathers to the Buggles. Maybe you've heard about their elaborately costumed, highly choreographed concerts and assumed they were an older version of the Blue Man Group. Whatever the case, for anyone who's heard a little about the Residents, it's easy to file them under "that weird band that hides behind eyeball masks," and assume the music is just a cog in a vast multimedia wheel rather than something worth experiencing on its own.



But before the Residents even had a name, they made music. And throughout four decades of intricate concept albums, groundbreaking short films, Broadway-caliber performances, and enigmatic dealings with the press and the public, music has remained the core of their idiosyncratic vision. They've combined tape collage, sound effects, playful electronics, confrontational noise, arty surrealism, pop-culture satire, abstracted takes on traditional music from classical to blues to country, and, perhaps most importantly, an ever-present, animalistic beat. And they've had influence-- the work of alternative icons from [Devo](#) to [Talking Heads](#) to [Sun City Girls](#) to [Animal Collective](#) bears traces of their singular, inspiring sound.

The Residents' story begins in Shreveport, La., where the members supposedly grew up before moving to the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1960s. Once there, they lived together and began making primitive sounds with little technical know-how, inspired by the [Sun Ra Arkestra](#) and [Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band](#) (two groups that also co-habited while making their music). Soon they sent a demo tape to Warner Bros., which resulted in one of the most well-known bits of Residents lore: Executive Hal Halverstadt returned the anonymous tape to the attention of "residents"-- the group had found their name.

What's less well-known is that there has been a philosophy behind the Residents' music from the start. As Ian Shirley details in his 1993 biography [Meet the Residents: America's Most Eccentric Band!](#), they follow the ideas of a Bavarian composer named [Nigel Senada](#) (who might just be a figment of their imaginations). Specifically, they espouse his "Theory of Phonetic Organization," which values sound over meaning and structure, both lyrically and musically. Cryptic spokesperson Jay Clem explained the theory to Shirley this way: "If you can't read music, you don't know what it's supposed to sound like, so you structure it according to how you feel it should sound. It's a more natural way of playing music."

That untrained, outsider-ish bent is certainly evident in the Residents' work, but there's another description of their approach that gets closer to the heart of their sound. "The two things they really enjoy doing," Cryptic's Homer Flynn told the *Berkeley Barb* in 1978, "are creating music that nobody has ever heard before, and then taking other people's music

The Residents' fascination with re-working other artists' music quickly got more sophisticated, as they invented a brand of pop collage later echoed in the "Plunderphonics" of [John Oswald](#) and the mash-ups of [Girl Talk](#). 1976's [Third Reich 'n Roll](#) parodies 60s culture with two side-long pastiches of 30 classic songs, including "Light My Fire", "Gloria", and a monstrous album-ending hybrid of "Hey Jude" and "Sympathy for the Devil". Clem claimed the record was "an attempt to treat Top 40 rock and roll from the 60s as if it were avant-garde material as performed by early 70s progressive German bands," which helps explain why the cover art shows Dick Clark dressed as a Nazi.



The band nailed this collage approach even better on two early singles. 1977's ["The Beatles Play the Residents and the Residents Play the Beatles"](#) splices 30 Beatles songs into a complex commentary on the way pop music incessantly repeats itself. Most famous was [their 1976 cover of the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction"](#), a vicious deconstruction that sounds like the original melting in a fire. Somehow, that single became a modest hit, selling over 30,000 copies when it was reissued in 1978.

As great and pioneering as those collage records are, the best Residents albums are the ones that refer to no one else. The first of these, and perhaps the most innovative and accomplished of all their albums, is 1979's [Eskimo](#). Inspired by (and perhaps even using) field recordings Nigel Senada had made at the North Pole, it's supposedly a literal attempt to document and represent Eskimo life. But the six tracks actually carve out a bigger, more amorphous landscape of the mind-- a dense, evocative place where synthesizers blow like cold winds and voices moan like the stubborn ghosts of ancient tribes.



Much of *Eskimo* is abstract and atmospheric, but there are spots where chants and rhythms take over, especially during spellbinding closer ["The Festival of Death"](#). Those moments hint at something the Residents would develop throughout their career-- a peculiar take on nature, wildlife, and the environment. In perfecting that approach, they tapped into something primal and elemental that more literal representations of nature rarely touch (the most vivid example being 2005's [Animal Lover](#), an album about humans told through the point of view of animals). They would also predict the woolly tribalism of bands like [Boredoms](#), [No Neck Blues Band](#), and [Gang Gang Dance](#). Listen to *Eskimo* and 1978's [Not Available](#) back to back, and Animal Collective's [Here Comes the Indian](#) makes a lot more sense. All of which makes the Discovery Channel's choice of the Residents to score their 1995 series *Hunters: The World of Predators and Prey* a supremely logical move.

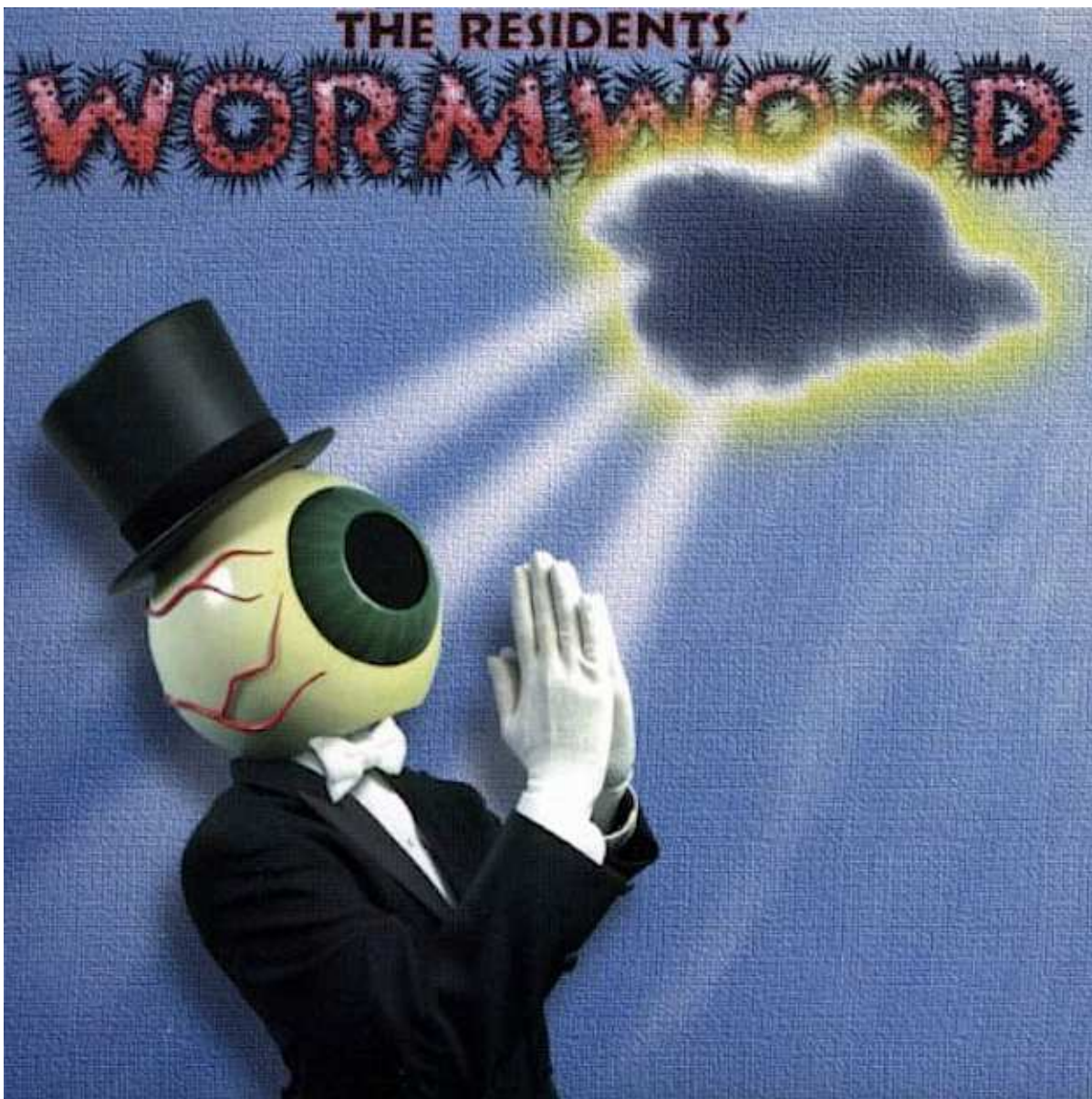
The Residents' music is a perfect fit for film, video, and mass media in general. Something about their weird mesh of sounds evokes colors, shapes, and images the second the needle hits vinyl. And in fact, before they even completed *Meet the Residents*, they worked on a feature-length movie called [Vileness Fats](#), shot on reel-to-reel video inside their two-story building in San Francisco. They abandoned the project in the early 70s but eventually released a version called [Whatever Happened to Vileness Fats?](#) in the mid-80s; filled with disturbing sets, inscrutable plots, and inhuman characters, it's a precursor to musical dream-state movies like Animal Collective's [ODDSAC](#), [the Flaming Lips' Christmas on Mars](#), and even [Matthew Barney's Cremaster series](#).



More immediately influential are the "one-minute movies" the Residents made for songs from 1980's [Commercial Album](#). These illustrative clips were among the first to show how the music video could be its own form-- not just a song or a movie or an ad, but something in between. That point was made all the more profound by the album, which includes a set of 40 one-minute songs that sound like concentrated extracts of larger tunes (liner notes actually suggest that each track should be played three times in a row to form a full pop song). They sound like jingles-- and to further point out the blurry lines between art and advertising, the Residents bought 40 one-minute spots on a San Francisco Top 40 station, airing the entire album over a three-day period.

That kind of maximum meta is a Residents staple. Often, if you trace a single thread in their oeuvre, you can end up hurtling down a rabbit hole of levels and layers. For instance, for their 30th anniversary in 2001, the band compiled videos onto a DVD called [Icky Flix](#). But they also created new music for all the films, treating their past as something to interpret and comment on, like the rest of pop culture. I saw the tour promoting *Icky Flix*'s release, where the band played to projections from the DVD, and I remember wondering whether I was hearing the original music, the new tracks, or some even newer re-interpretation of the re-interpretation. (That's a shallow rabbit hole compared to mid-90s CD-ROM projects like [Freak Show](#) and [Bad Day on the Midway](#), which are as labyrinthine as any current video game.)

Still, the Residents don't have to get meta to make music with multiple meanings. Some of their richest work comes from simple, easy-to-understand concepts. Take 1989's [The King & Eye](#), focused solely on the music of Elvis Presley, or 2002's [Demons Dance Alone](#), a sad but surprisingly accessible meditation on 9/11. My favorite such project is 1999's [Wormwood: Curious Stories from the Bible](#), 20 songs interpreting some of the less familiar (and, naturally, darker) tales from the Old Testament. Some fans find the music on this album generic compared to previous Residents classics, but to me there's something oddly moving in the way that these unnerving stories are told with a kind of chilly objectivity.



It helps that vocal duties on *Wormwood* alternate between Mr. Skull and Molly Harvey, a former Ralph employee who became an integral band member in the 90s (and yes, that's her real name-- like some other non-original Residents, she hasn't participated in the founders' anonymity). Harvey's voice is a great complement to Mr. Skull's, infusing even the most absurd lyrics with emotion. Her performance was what I liked most about the *Wormwood* [tour](#), an astonishing dramatization of the album that featured Mr. Skull as MC and Harvey in a long-nosed, bird-like mask. In typical Residents fashion, the band re-worked much of the *Wormwood* music for that tour and added new interludes, making the subsequent 2xCD *Wormwood Live 1999* sound like a sequel rather than a reproduction.

All of the above only touches on the daunting body of work the Residents' have forged since they released their first record, the four-song [Santa Dog](#), exactly 40 years ago. So how could anyone who hasn't heard them possibly approach their catalog? As it often seems for any question you'd ask about them, the Residents have an answer.

It's called [Our Tired, Our Poor, Our Huddled Masses](#)-- a 2xCD compilation made to commemorate the band's 25th anniversary in 1997. Like *Icky Flix*, it's not just a comp-- it's a re-interpretation of the Residents' history, and an attempt to cram reams of the work into a small digital space. That feat is accomplished through excerpts, remixes, and something they call "concentrates," five-to-10-minute sonic summaries of full albums that in many cases sound like-- surprise!-- something new altogether. It's hard to imagine many bands even considering such an idea, much less pulling it off in ways that both honor and subvert their legacy.

It's tempting to call *Our Tired, Our Poor, Our Huddled Masses* the ultimate Residents release. But even a set that wide and deep can't sum this band up. When I think of my favorite Residents music, I rarely think of single releases or projects-- I think of flashing moments across their career, little snapshots of what makes them great. There's one I always

return to, a simple song that closes *The Commercial Album*. It's both wistful and joyous, reflective and optimistic, and it has the bittersweet title "[When We Were Young](#)". For me, hidden behind their ageless masks and hunkered inside their creative compound, young is something the Residents will always be.

Listen to a Residents playlist compiled by Marc Masters on [Spotify](#).

• Artists:

[The Residents](#)

- « Previous Feature

[Wipers](#)

[An overview of the influential Portland punk band's first three albums.](#)

- Next Feature »

[L.A. Weirdos](#)

[On the glorious idiosyncrasies of three 70s West Coast singer-songwriters.](#)



-

[Wipers](#)



-

[L.A. Weirdos](#)