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## [Iconic Punk Guitarist Returns With Smiles](http://www.theclevelandsound.com/?p=8768)

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“East Bay” Raymond Pepperell was recently named one of punk rock’s greatest guitar players ever (Guinness’ Rockapedia), just behind Johnny Ramone (The Ramones) and Billie Joe Armstrong (Green Day) in the list of best rebel axe-slingers. East Bay Ray appeared on now-classic works by Dead Kennedys—including *Fresh Fruit for Rotting*

*Vegetables*, *Frankenchrist*, and *Bedtime for Democracy*—his echo-laden, rockabilly style gracing tracks like “California Uber Alles,” “Holiday in Cambodia,” “Rambozo,” and “Winnebago Warrior.” His chords were slashing and energetic, his leads and fills a melodic (and at times haunting) as much a salute to surf rockers like Scotty Moore and Dick Dale as spaghetti Western filmmaker Ennio Morricone. Those who’ve heard Plastic Surgery Disasters know East Bay Ray’s style was—and is—unique, the ‘50s-rooted sound machine that gave Jello Biafra’s politically-charged satire an extra bite.

East Bay battled Biafra in court for rights to (and royalties from) the DK back catalog in the ‘90s. At the turn of the century, he hit the road again with bassist Klaus Fluoride and drummer D.H. Peligro, playing all the smart-assed classics with stand-in singer Brandon Cruz. Ray’s first solo effort, *Labyrinth*, was a psychedelic ambience album that surprised fans accustomed to the guitarist’s feisty licks.

*East Bay Ray and The Killer Smiles* marks a return to form for the 52-year old DK icon. Produced with Paul Leary (Butthole Surfers) for MVD Audio, the eponymous release by the guitarist’s new band is a throwback to both the Dead Kennedys’ early days, as well as the cruisin’ doo-wop sounds of the Eisenhower era. Showcasing the rhythm combo of Greg Reeves (bass) and Steve Wilson (drums) and the nasally vocal stylings of Ron “Skipster” Greer, the disc is a welcome dose of raucous rock and streetwise smarminess in a market saturated with manufactured Biebers and Gagas.

If *Killer Smiles* has an overriding motif, it’s the condemnation of poseurs of precisely that ilk. Without naming names, Skip observes how people “hide in their own way,” but there’s often no one “behind that pretty face” (“Lipstick Cherry Red”). He challenges celebrities and civilians alike to own their behavior: *These days it’s fashionable to act rash and call it rational*, he comments on “You’re Such a Fake.” Kanye West should be taking notes. “The Last Time You Failed” smashes through the façade of perfectionism with big guitars, upending the status quo of “giant robots” living for success at all costs—only to settle for *illusions* thereof. It’s irreverent rock, to be sure. But *Killer Smiles* is decidedly *nonpolitical*—which couldn’t be said if the acerbic Biafra were still at the microphone. Skipster has *ideas*; Biafra always wrote with an agenda.

Bloozy, alt-country ballad “The Heart is Something” reveals another side of the band—that of emotionally sympathetic *artistes* who recognize how things can “get awkward” when passion runs amok. On The Clash-tinged “Hardest Part,” Skip acknowledges that the downside of breaking up with someone is repeatedly “almost making up.” Hey, this romance thing sure can get messy.

Reeves and Wilson indulge a reggae groove on “Safe and Sound” while Ray noodles under the backing track of his own crisp rhythm chords. “Area 51” examines the mythos of the storied gremlin and alien-infested desert facility, while “The Runner” chronicles the exploits of a fugitive. Abrasive, distorted guitars decorate “It’s Broken” and “I’m a User,” a pair of tunes embracing—and overcoming—the “shitty deals” we’re all handed on occasion.

Ray and friends sign off with a cover of old coal mining standard “16 Tons,” a laborer’s lament popularized by Tennessee Ernie Ford in 1955. Who among us *still* doesn’t feel we’re “another day older and deeper in debt” when five o’clock rolls around, or that we “owe our souls to the company store?” East Bay feels your pain, brothers and sisters. And it sure is nice hearing that droning, Route 66 rockabilly guitar sound again.

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