

KILLER KENNEDY

When Dead Kennedys guitarist East Bay Ray recently penned a new set of tunes he was faced with a dilemma – issue them as a DK release or form a new band? Ladies and gentlemen, meet The Killer Smiles

Words: Greg Prato

BY AND large, punk guitarists of the late 70s and early 80s rarely opted to venture outside the barre chord domain. But the Dead Kennedys' East Bay Ray was an exception. The first punk guitarist to use an Echoplex, Ray's surf/garage rock riffs and chord progressions certainly stood out from the pack. And while he still tours as part of the Dead Kennedys (with singer Skip McSkipster in place of original frontman Jello Biafra), Ray's also launched The Killer Smiles, again featuring Skip. The band recently issued a self-titled debut via MVD Entertainment Group.

"Skip and I were touring with Dead Kennedys and a lot of fans were saying, 'When's new material coming?'" explains Ray. "Skip and I started writing while we were touring. The Dead Kennedys played one or two of the songs and people kept dancing – they didn't go to the bathroom or to the bar [laughs]. That gave us encouragement. I knew [producer]

Paul Leary from back in the day, from when the Dead Kennedys and the Butthole Surfers used to play warehouses in Texas. He listened to it and wanted to produce it, so we arranged for a recording." And, as demonstrated by tracks such as *Area 51*, the instantly identifiable 'East Bay Ray sound' is still very much intact.

To back up a bit, Ray's introduction to rock came via a Rolling Stones concert in the early 70s, as well as through hearing his father's vintage blues records (especially Son House and Lightnin' Hopkins). Eventually, Ray's father gave in to his son's requests for a guitar, and after successfully navigating around the instrument, he discovered a certain effect that would become his trademark.

"I wasn't really into disco music or the Eagles, so I started listening to 60s music – the psychedelic stuff. I discovered the first Pink Floyd record with Syd Barrett [1967's *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*], and I really liked that sound. So I saved up for an Echoplex. A lot of

"I wasn't really into disco or the Eagles"



East Bay Ray: that'll be Dave Grohl's favourite guitarist, then

the songs I wrote just jamming them with my Echoplex and then bringing them into the band, like *Moon Over Marin*. I used the Echoplex from day one – I had it before Dead Kennedys."

Thanks to their classic punk album *Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables* and songs such as *Police Truck*, *Too Drunk To F**** and *Holiday In Cambodia*, the Dead Kennedys (who also included bassist Klaus Flouride and several drummers – the longest-serving being DH Peligro) became one of the top US punk bands of the era. A recent conversation between Ray



and Dave Grohl confirmed this. “I ran into [Grohl] in Austin, Texas, and we talked for about a half-hour. He said he had three musical idols – John Bonham, Paul McCartney and me! I said, ‘Are you serious?’ And he said, ‘Yeah!’ Apparently, the Dead Kennedys was one of the first shows he saw, back in Washington, DC.”

Ray was willing to reel off a detailed list of amps, effects and guitars he’s used over the years. “The very first record and first singles, I used a black-faced Fender Super Reverb. I had a little preamp in front of it, to overdrive it. It never really was quite the sound I wanted, and then we toured England and we rented Marshall amps, and I ended up buying one and bringing it back. It’s the first ‘master volume’ one, from the late 70s – it has the old-style front in it, with the notch rather than all the way across. I used that subsequently, now I use the 2000 series. I like the Dual Lead one, which I don’t think they make any more. I think it’s a DSL 2000. I use that and one 4x12 cabinet.

“And the Echo unit goes in front of the amp. I use a Boss CS-3 compressor as a volume boost for solos and single-note stuff. I modified my volume control, so when you turn it down you

don’t lose the high end. I use that a lot. And in Killer Smiles, I have a Phase Shifter.

“What I originally used [guitar-wise] was a Japanese copy of a Telecaster [a Marchis], and I put Seymour Duncan pickups in it. Seymour Duncan pickups had the most soulful sound, to me. The original Telecaster has a PAF Gibson humbucking-style pickup in the bridge.

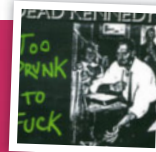
That’s my original sound – it gets the twang and surf sound of a Fender, but the pickup gives it a meatier, overdriven sound. Now I use a Schecter – an S-1 that has Seymour Duncan pickups in it; I think the JB model, which is much more overwound. It’s a heavier sound.”

Lastly, with a record released, how does it look for a Killer Smiles tour of the UK? “I’d love to tour Britain.

Dead Kennedys were always bigger and more appreciated over there. We made the Top 40 back in the day – we never did that in the States. So yeah, I’m talking with some agents. Since we’re starting out, it’s hard to pay for plane tickets. But hopefully we’ll get enough that we can get to go and play the UK.” ●

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One of the best Dead Kennedys tunes is the classic *Too Drunk To F****. And, despite its title, the song made the UK Top 40 in 1981.

“The song was banned on the BBC, so that helped sales. We were one of the first American punk bands to get on the charts in England. It’s a very uphill battle, because they had a lot of good punk bands over there. *Holiday In Cambodia* opened it up for us, and *Too Drunk To F**** – the BBC banned it, which bought us a lot of free publicity. Lo and behold, it got in the Top 40.”

Ray looks back fondly on the DKs’ maiden UK voyage. “When we went to England the first time, we had our first LP out [*Fresh Fruit...*]. It came out on an English label, so we had a tour van and stayed at hotels. Before that, in the States, we were driving our own cars, staying at people’s houses and playing smaller clubs with inadequate PAs. So the fact that we had a label in England, and they had a record they were promoting and trying to get played on the BBC, meant we could focus more on the music.”