

The Bird Cage

...from Charlie to John and beyond

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 11, 2012

The Vagaries of Anonymity: On the New False Personal History of the Residents

After all these years – more than four decades, in fact – what kind of names would befit the most famously shrouded band in rock? Could they be Penn, Teller, Siegfried and Roy? Are they really the Beatles, a notion they flirted with in their early days, or are they Bingo, Bango, Bongo and Irving? What could possibly satisfy fans of the band who have long wondered about the real identities of San Francisco's weirdest denizens.



The band opened its 2010-2011 *Talking Light* tour (which came on the heels of their fantastic Bunny Boy project, during which someone who sounded like the one called the Singing Resident certainly seemed to show his face shrouded only by a thick beard and shop glasses) with a grinding dirge of a take on "Smelly Tongues" from their first record (1974's *Meet the Residents*) after which the frontman introduced himself, lacking neither pride nor drawl, as "Randy, lead singer for the Residents!" And he introduced the rest of the band! Keyboardist Bob and guitarist Chuck! At last the truth was ... was what?

The Residents haven't just hidden their identities over the course of a long and rich career, they've played with the very idea of identity. After their early toying with the Beatles, they continued perpetuating the notion of a foursome, wearing four sets of the famous tuxedo and eyeball costumes or other matching and face-concealing get-ups even when there were up to six people on stage. In a surprising spoken passage during the 2002 *Demons Dance Alone* tour, however, they gave the veil a surprise piercing, with the Singing Resident announcing a desire for a manager who could get them back on MTV and in the process admitting to being a band – or this band, anyway – for the first time.

But last time out there were only three Residents onstage. At the outset of the show (which can also be seen on the new *Talking Light: Bimbo's DVD* from MVDvisual), there were only three. Carlos, Randy explained, had quit the band and gone home to Mexico. However much truth there might be in the names and band politics, Carlos's departure is probably best seen as setting them up for another round of storytelling, or story-within-a-story telling perhaps on a scale worthy of MacBeth.

This is exciting for true believers because the Residents are master storytellers. Despite the image they project, it's not all that helpful to think of them as a band. They are a storytelling troupe the likes of which has never been seen before. The *Bunny Boy* story was told through YouTube videos, live appearances and CDs, and the protagonist (a

ABOUT ME



Bird Cage

Music isn't old or new. It's not acoustic or electric. It doesn't know words

like "jazz," "classical" or "rock." And really, it doesn't care if you like it or not. We're here to talk about it.

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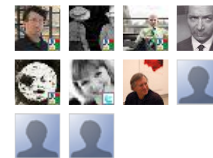
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possibly fratricidal recluse) was even available for direct interaction through email and instant messaging. The Carlos story is just beginning to unfold, and true enough may never come to pass (leaving projects unfinished seems to be a part of the Resident aesthetic). But the liner notes to a CD available in limited numbers on the last tour added a little to the tale. The mostly instrumental (and fairly invigorating) record, which bears the mouthful title *The Residents' Talking Light Presents Dolor Generar – Una Noche Lost en Van Horn, Texas: Pre-Show Music for the Talking Light Tour*, contained a brief story in the notes. After Carlos quit the band, Chuck (or Charles, as he calls himself there) had apparently followed him to Texas where they met up at a bar. Carlos put something in Chuck's drink to pick him up after the long drive, and then a waitress gave Carlos a small box with rocks inside. He doesn't remember much else. He ends the short note by saying that he never figured out why Carlos quit the band.

If there is a plot, it thickens with the new release *The Residents Present Sonidos de la Noche: Coochie Brake*. The album concerns the kids who grew up to become the Residents exploring the backwaters of their native Louisiana, and is sung almost entirely in Spanish. But more surprising than the language is the fact that it isn't the Singing Resident doing the singing. Vocal credits go to drummer Carlos this time with Chuck on keyboards and Bob on guitar. Songwriting and performance credits go to "The Residents / Sonidos de la Noche" and Randy is thanked, making this perhaps the first album where Singing Resident Randy doesn't appear. It also may not be. He doesn't play an instrument on stage, and there have been a number of instrumental Residents records, but this is one of the the first times they've given individual performer credits (they never had names before the last couple years) and the first time they've pointed out that the band was something other than the foursome.

Meanwhile, somewhere perhaps just south of reality, Randy Rose was concerning himself with the story of a friend named Sam. While Bob, Chuck and Carlos were recording songs about their youth in Louisiana, and while Chuck was chasing Carlos through Texas, Randy was workshoping a new production called Sam's Enchanted Evening, first in San Francisco and then over four nights in New York. On March 24 at Abrons Arts Center in Manhattan's Lower East Side, Randy – with the help of a pianist and an actress in the role of a nonverbal cocktail waitress – put on a revue of a couple dozen pop hits stitched together to tell the story of an alcoholic Vietnam vet who stumbles into a bar to celebrate his birthday by exorcising his demons. It's essentially a one-man show – the pianist and the waitress contribute to the action but don't have lines – for the Singing, or perhaps the Acting, Resident. Sam is not a warm character. He's a racist and his homophobia seems to run through a strong current of denial. Over the course of the 90-minute show, presented without intermission, Sam didn't become any more likable, but he did become a sympathetic figure. And while the only music was the piano and an occasional banged cooking pot, the songs (including "Ode to Billy Joe," "Sixteen Tons," "Windmills of Your Mind" and "Livin' la Vida Loca") came off as pure Residents. Through the strength of the Singing Resident's powerful rasp and assured stage presence, Sam's Enchanted Evening was, if not a rock show, still a Residents show.

All of this recent activity comes as the band is poised to mount another tour. The band that only toured three times in its first 25 years has come in recent years to do so almost annually, and to use the practice of touring as a tool in cross-platform storytelling. As of this writing the band is preparing for its 40th Anniversary tour and seems to have several stories underway. Is the story of Carlos's departure setting the stage? The band has only done two "greatest hits" tours; the rest have all been stageplays, operas of sorts. And there must be a reason for them to have decided to use individual names for the first time in 40 years, names which don't seem to be real. As pointed out on the Residents Lovers forum (www.createforum.com/theresidents), Chuck has been credited with the last name Bobuck, giving him the one name you can't use in the children's song "The Name Game." But there's a reason they're using names now. And there's a reason they're introducing band politics to the storyline. And whatever that reason is, it's not about revealing their identities.

Despite their newfound naming, *Demons Dance Alone* remains their most revelatory and direct work. If it's not their strongest musically, it does have an infectious, repeating theme. The double disc version released by Mute furthers the revelations, more intimately so than their current tactics. "The first thing one needs to know about about

THE RESIDENTS is that there are no RESIDENTS," according to the unsigned liner notes to the release. "It all started in 1972 when four people with little direction and less talent decided to start band.' Now the lies begin ... or do they? [...] The band not only had no faces, genders, or names, THE RESIDENTS had no personalities. [...] If no one claims to be a RESIDENT, doesn't that mean everyone is a potential RESIDENT? Don't we all get their mail?"

As their play within a play within a play reaches its 40th anniversary, we can all revel with them. For there are, indeed, no Residents. Neither Randy nor Chuck nor Carlos nor Bob. And we, we are all Residents.

Text and cell phone photo by Kurt Gottschalk

Here's a rough video from one of the San Francisco shows. It looks like there was more staging in New York, at least from this glimpse.



Posted by [Bird Cage](#) at 1:23 PM 

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1 comments:



Kurt Apr 11, 2012 03:56 PM

oh, and here's a three hour radio special i did on the band in 2008, including an interview with hardy fox: <http://www.wfmw.org/playlists/shows/29002>

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