

## Dead Boys: When Cheetah Chrome attacks

Gritty, dangerous and filthy, New York City in the 1970s was no place for the meek. Bored of its hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, the Dead Boys, though — being the self-described “gutter rats” they were — weren’t at all scared of the nightmarish urban decay eating away at the Big Apple. They found it ... charming.

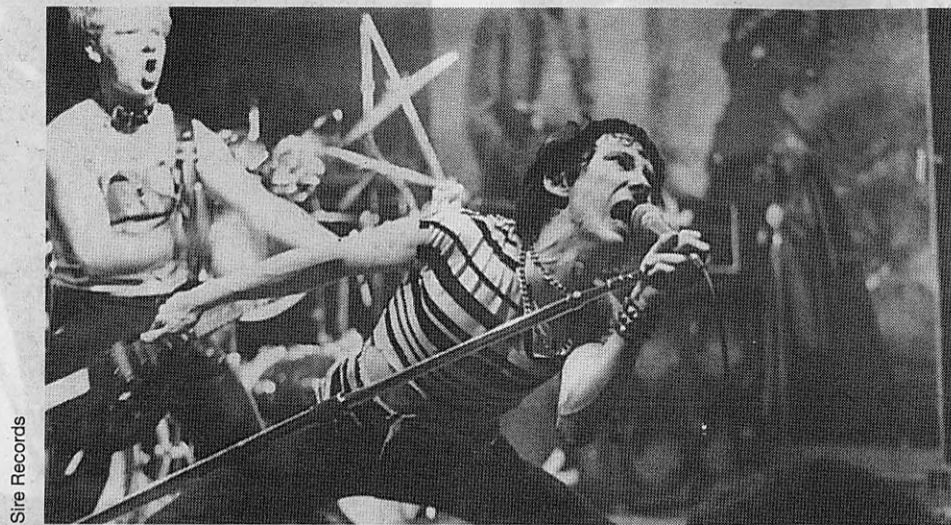
A punk-rock splinter cell that broke off from Cleveland’s early-’70s cult heroes Rocket From The Tombs, the Dead Boys — consisting of Cheetah Chrome (aka Gene O’Connor), Johnny Blitz (John Madansky), lead singer Stiv Bators (aka Steve Bator), guitarist Jimmy Zero (aka William Wilden) and bassist Jeff Magnum (aka Jeff Halmagy) — were originally called Frankenstein.

A three-chord ball of punk fury that failed to impress the locals, the group languished; meanwhile, from a distance, they could only watch as a thriving New York City’s underground punk scene burned hot. The turning point came when they met Joey Ramone on a Ramones’ tour stop in Cleveland. He kicked down doors for them in New York City, helping them land a gig at CBGBs. The legendary club’s owner Hilly Kristal would become their manager.

There was no turning back. Changing the band name to the Dead Boys, they hit New York City like an atom bomb. Churning out tough, intense punk anthems like the classic “Sonic Reducer,” the Dead Boys opened eyes with Bators’ riotous onstage antics and their explosive sound.

Their scum-encrusted, Stooges-influenced 1977 debut, *Young Loud & Snotty*, produced by Genya Ravan, was a heat-seeking missile that’s still considered one of punk’s finest moments. Then, it all fell apart. Here, Chrome talks about the rise and fall of the Dead Boys.

It’s been 22 years since [a] reunion show [featured in the recent MVD Video DVD release “Dead Boys — Night of



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▲ Stiv Bators (foreground) and guitarist Cheetah Chrome (background) pull out all the stops during an incendiary Dead Boys live show.

**the Living Dead Boys: Halloween Night 1986”]. What memories does that bring up?**

**Cheetah Chrome:** Just kind of brings back that period, which was a lot of chaos. Being onstage for those shows was very distracting. There were so many stage divers and all that. I pretty much just had to keep my head down and run, you know?

**Was that typical of a Dead Boys show or was it more chaotic than usual?**

**CC:** Well, you know, in the early days, we always had big roadies. We made sure of that. And, like when we did the reunions, that was probably one of the earlier reunions, so that was the first time we had realized it had escalated. You know, we had not been playing together, so you know, Stiv was more used to it than we were. He was doing the Lords [Of The New Church] at that point, that explains the outfit [a shiny leather jumpsuit and a Luftwaffe hat]; ’cause that’s something that the rest of us didn’t really endorse that outfit (laughs).

**That was kind of a shocking outfit.**

**CC:** Yeah, we were all pretty much free

agents at that point, so we couldn’t really tell each other what to do. You know, if we were still a band, he probably would have been voted down on that one. He could have kept the hat. That was about it.

**There was always a lot of audience participation with you guys, wasn’t there?**

**CC:** Yeah, but we never had the slam-dancers and stage-divers before that period. You know, with the punks, it was dodging spit and dodging bottles. They didn’t really want to get up there and be part of the show. That came along with the hardcore thing. So, when we came back, all of a sudden we’ve got these just dumbasses wanting to come up and wanting to run past and jump off, you know? The one experience we had had with that in the past, the guy had run behind us and unplugged all our guitars. So, we weren’t that for it. So, we were like, “If you see anybody coming for us, that’s our stage. I don’t care how you get ’em off, just get ’em off.” And so, they pretty much had orders to kill, and that’s what they did. They’re just picking up people and throwing them. It was hilarious.

**You led off that show with “Sonic Reducer,” which has one of the all-time greatest guitar lines in punk.**

**CC:** Tell that to Carnival Cruise Lines (laughs).

**You always hear about how some songs just come together quickly. Was that one of them?**

**CC:** “Sonic Reducer” ... That was probably the fastest song I’ve ever written in my life. I mean, David [Thomas of Rocket From The Tombs and, later, Pere Ubu] had the lyrics ready to go, you know. He brought ’em in and said, “I’ve got this idea for a song called ‘Sonic Reducer.’” And I thought, “That’s a great title, you know?” We were at the rehearsal loft, the Rocket From The Tombs rehearsal loft, and he gave me the lyrics, and I was looking at ’em and just kind of said, “Whoa.” So, I started playing, thumbed it through my head to get the rhythm of the lyrics, and it just popped out. Yeah, I mean it was just one of those times where your antenna goes out and catches something, you know? And the next thing you know, we were rehearsing it 20 minutes later.

**What caused the split with Rocket?**

**CC:** Oh, I just think it was what we were hearing in our heads. I was hearing the Dead Boys. David was hearing Pere Ubu in his head. You know, Peter [Laughner] was kind of in the middle, all those different influences, but it was kind of tearing at us. So, I had Stiv whispering in my ear, you know? He was trying to steal me away. David had Peter whispering in his ear and other guys like that from Pere Ubu, and it was kind of like it was just becoming that [they] wanted to take it in an art direction, we wanted to take it in a rock ’n’ roll direction, and it got a little uglier than it had to, I think. We’re way past it now. I mean, David and me are on the same page. It’s a good thing. We’ve been writing some new material actually.

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## What made Stiv such a great front man?

CC: Well, he was constantly thinking, you know? He wasn't one to get out there ... he would say the same stuff all the time, you know, but he would always be doing something different. He was able to always measure the audience and see what they were going to want that night — were they gonna want blood or were they kind of lackadaisical, you know. We had one time — the first time we played in Chicago — where people were throwing tissue paper at us, and we were like, "What?" Balled up pieces of paper, so we started kicking the chairs, and we're saying, "What the hell is that?" And nights like that, Stiv was kind of the leader — we were a gang and he was the leader. And he was very good at letting us know when it was time to kick ass and when it was time to retreat.

## Where did you meet Stiv Bators?

CC: I met him at a Rocket From The Tombs gig probably ... yeah, it had to be ... about this time in 1975, and we met at one of our gigs, and we started talking. Pete had met him before and introduced us, and we hit it off right off the bat and made plans to go out the next day and have a drink together. And so, he came to pick me up, and he had his guitar case, and I said, "Oh man, what kind of guitar you got in there?" And he goes, "Oh man, go back there. You'll love it." So, I jumped over the seat and went back there and opened it up and he had two bottles of vodka, a carton of milk, grenadine and something else to make pink ladies, or whatever ... no, pink squirrels, that's was it. Pink squirrels (laughs)? That was younger days, you know? (he laughs). And, you know, I'll have the straight vodka, but yeah ... it was a nice guitar (laughs).

## Arriving in New York, what were your initial impressions of the scene?

CC: Smelled like dog shit and garbage — the whole city, not just CBGBs (laughs). That was before the pooper-scooper law. The scene was really cool. I mean, you had places like the original

*"We would have killed for each other at the beginning. And we would have killed each other at the end."*

— Cheetah Chrome



▲ Stiv Bators and the Dead Boys, without Cheetah Chrome, sporting the matching suits Chrome balked at wearing.

Trash & Vaudeville [clothing store] on the corner ... it was like everything was \$2 or something like that. I mean, they had cool clothes ... it was very much a scene geared to the broke musician.

## How did you scratch out a living there?

CC: Well, at first we went back and forth for about the first six months. It wasn't until we started recording the album (*Young Loud & Snotty*) in February, or late January/early February, that we started staying there on extended stays, more than like an overnight, you know? You know,

every time we went there, we were pretty broke, you know? Had like \$20 each or something like that, you know?

The ones who were working would usually cover the ones that weren't, you know? And so, me and Bators were floating the band sometimes ... Yeah, so we got there, we'd stay in peoples' houses, and stuff, and once we started talking seriously with Hilly ... and he got us into a management contract, [we] decided to do the album, [and] he would give us a stipend or whatever. It wasn't a lot (laughs). It was barely more than we were making anyway. It kept

us going, but I mean for a while, before the record came out, we were on like \$5 a day each for cigarettes and pizza. I mean, we could go down, and we could go down and drink for free and get burgers down at CBGBs, but you can't eat that every day.

## Was it a competitive scene?

CC: New York was fairly competitive, but all the bands supported each other. Everybody went to each other's gigs. You didn't have anybody bad talking everybody all the time like you have now, you know. It was coming out of the '60s you know, The war had just ended. That's why, as I was telling somebody the other day, American punk wasn't as political as English punk. The '60s just ended. The Vietnam War had just ended. We heard all the anti-government crap for 10 years. We were sick of it. That's why disco got so big. Everybody wanted to party. They didn't friggin' want to talk politics. You know, New York had a lot of bands that enjoyed playing and had a good scene going. Max's and CBs and 82 Club — it was very healthy.

## Where did you meet Joey Ramone?

CC: At a Ramones show in Youngstown, Ohio, the first time. And you know, we got to meet all the guys in the Ramones, and they were really good... this was when their first album came out, and it was one of their first gigs outside of New York I think. And you know, we just hit it off with them, and they had to follow us back to the highway. So, they were following us, and Stiv, of course, pulled the "hold the steering wheel, and jumped out and mooned them on the roof" trick — the famous Bators trick, you know (laughs)? That impressed the hell out of everybody.

## And Joey got you a tryout at CBGBs?

CC: Well, he got us past the tryout. We would have had to have gone and played an audition night. Joey went up to Hilly and fibbed and said he had seen us, and that we were really good, and he hadn't. And he bypassed it and got us a regular

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gig, for which we made \$27 — righteous bucks for the time. It was the same as it is now (laughs).

**Meeting Hilly, what was it about you guys that impressed him?**

CC: He just liked that we were tight and professional, you know? And that we were different, and we had good songs. You know, a lot of the bands would come up, and they'd have one or two good songs, and we had a bunch of 'em. So, I think that impressed him the most. The second album (*We Have Come For Your Children*), I don't think he was impressed.

**Talking about that second album, there were a lot of problems with the record company wanting you to go in a different direction. How did you fight that?**

CC: Well, some of us didn't, which led to the demise of the band. I was fighting for Genya to do the ... to get in the studio with Genya producing. At one point Lou Reed was actually talking to us about producing us, which would have been phenomenal. Sire didn't see it ... And, then the other one I was fighting for was to just do it live at CBs, I thought that would have been great, you know? To get it really professionally ... get a producer, just do like four nights and record, like we ended up doing eventually ... and for higher production values, we'd just record it flat and then come back and mix it, you know? Then, you know, I'm not going to name names and point fingers, but other members of the band came

back and said, "Oh, what are you talking about," and everybody got impressed with Felix [Pappalardi from Mountain] because he'd produced Cream, and that was how I'd got talked into it. It was like, 'Oh, yeah, he produced Cream [beginning with *Disraeli Gears*], and he's used to loud guitars.'" Turns out, that was wrong (laughs). Great guy, got along with him great during pre-production, and as soon as we went into the studio, we started butting heads, and it never ended.

**What direction did he want to take you?**

CC: He didn't have one. He was just pretty much, I think, on drugs most of the time. And, you know, we didn't realize what quantities until later, you know? You know, he would talk a good game, but he would turn us down, turn us down ... blah, blah, blah, turn us down, and he was trying to make a Cream album, you know?

And ... there's no way you could do that. We're not Cream, you know? And it became pretty obvious after a couple weeks — when he couldn't get a guitar sound out of a Marshall and a guitar, which I could do, you know? — we weren't getting our \$30,000 worth, you know? So, that was a big sticking point, and of course, because I argued with him, he went and called [Sire Records co-founder] Seymour [Stein] and said, "Cheetah's on drugs all the time, he's drunk all the time, being very belligerent." It was like, "No. Just because I don't agree with you doesn't mean that I'm incompetent." Let's not go there, you know (laughs)?

**With the second album, it seemed there was a real fight for control of the band. How much of a role did that play in the breakup?**

CC: Oh, well there was that, and the fact that my reaction to it was to turn into Sid Vicious or something, you know? And I just started doing a lot of dope and blocked it out, and that caused just as much of a rift as anything.

I picked the wrong time to do that, but I was very disenchanted with the way things were going and they were very disenchanted with ... you know, a couple of the guys were at a point where they really wanted to make it in the music business, and they were willing to kiss a little ass to do it. And I wasn't ... and I fought against it, and as soon as I heard about the matching suits (the Dead Boys would wear them later), I said, "They don't make those in my size," and I figured that was about the time to end it.

**How did you get to know John Belushi?**

CC: Oh, he just came down to see us one time at CBGBs and came back stage and [we] met him and we hit it off, and he was wanting to get us onto "Saturday Night Live." So, he kind of set it up where we were supposed to have dinner with Lorne Michaels and Paul Schaefer, blah, blah, blah, and then it ended up not happening, because we found out you had to play at a really low volume for television cameras, and that became kind of an issue. We wanted to play as loud as we usually do, and they were like, "Oh, no, you gotta



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turn it down ..." and they had the amp onstage — in fact I used a Fender Champ. [I said,] "I don't think I can do that." Stupid things. Been kicking myself in the ass over that one ever since.

**There was so much tragedy with the band (Johnny Blitz got beat to within an inch of his life in a mugging incident. Stiv died in France in 1990 when he was hit by a car). Did you ever feel that the Dead Boys were cursed?**

CC: Oh, I don't know. Johnny didn't die. And after the band broke up, I was pronounced dead three times and came back all three times, so I know I wasn't. Stiv was just bad luck, classic case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time — and you know, plus bad French drivers (laughs) ... but yeah, at the time, I felt horrible about it. But when you get back from it, no, I don't think we were cursed at all. I think we were very lucky.

**What set the Dead Boys apart?**

CC: What set us apart was sheer volume for one thing, sheer attitude for another. I think our mentality when we first came out was more like the five of us against the world and didn't really care what anybody thought, and there was a family feeling between us and I don't know if other bands didn't have it or didn't have it as much or whatever. We would have killed for each other at the beginning. And we would have killed each other at the end (laughs). **GM**