

IGGY POP

You twist around the mic stand
like an epileptic cat's tail

A guitar swings around your
waist like a hula-hoop,
thrashes against your
cling wrapped leather thighs

Your eyes bulge
as your mouth curls and spits
like sizzling meat fat

Your face is beaten and tears
through notes like a hatchet
as you convulse like a madman
painted like a hooker clown

Your penis falls down your left leg
like an animal,
as you throw your body
into the crowd like a spear

A sea of open mouths
screams for you, cries for you
reaches out to touch your flesh,
as they jump up and down
like heads of salted popping corn

Volts of blue
thunder through
the swollen veins on your torso,
as sweat cries from your pores
like a child

You are wild and beautiful

A perfect catastrophe.

KATE MCKEE

[E S S A Y]

SUBTROPICAL ROCK

ROSS GIBSON REDISCOVERS THE SAINTS AND THEIR POWER TO EVOKE
THROUGH SOUND THE LANDSCAPES OF HIS (AND THEIR) YOUTH

IN the BBC-TV history of rock'n'roll, *Dancing in the Street* (1996), Iggy Pop tells a story about how he hit upon the Stooges' sound. It was the late 1960s. A loner kid from trailer parks outside Detroit, he'd started out wanting to play the blues. But as soon as he k-tchang-ed the first notes, he understood how the noises made by the likes of Robert Johnson and Son House had been invented in a landscape completely different from his own. Iggy could tell there was no point mimicking the field-gang calls, the river-flat reverbs, tracker-dog howls and train whistles that defined the Negro South. Instead, he needed to build his sound from the landscape that had made him, the landscape he knew and could rightfully invoke.

Back at the mobile home, Iggy checked his coordinates, tallying the noises that defined his world: the endless, whipping swoosh of trucks speeding past on the freeway; the polyphonous, keening burr of engines arrayed across the Midwestern plains, gearing up and torquing their thoughtless, productive momentum; enormous percussions firing off a hundred times per minute all over Michigan in every one of the car production plants. From such a motorised landscape he could construct his soundscape, distilling music from the brutal yet exhilarating thunderdome that working-stiff America attended every day. Dynamos and kick-

arse hammer-presses. Cam-shaft aesthetics. Iggy tuned into the cranked tempo of his own frosty landscape and set about marshalling the forces he needed to grab his share of the loot, to climb on top of ‘the machine in the garden’, as Leo Marx famously defined mechanised America in his book of that title (1964). This is what you can hear in albums such as *Fun House* (1970) and *Raw Power* (1973): the celebration and exploitation of generated and generative American energy.

Isolated and freaky as he may have felt, Iggy was not the only one breaking into that Midwestern forcefield. A formidable Michigan group, Detroit’s MC5 (the MC’ stands for ‘Motor City’), had emerged too, with their industrial-scale noise and an urge to transform everything around them, even to the extent that they fantasised for a while that they might be the harbingers of a White Panther party. Energy sizzles my glands every time I play the MC5’s great anthem and hear Rob Tyner name the song as he howls: ‘Kick out the Jams ... Motherfuckerrrrrr!’ Seeming never to weary, the band then pulls down the levers and ... scccreeeeech ... ker-bbooom!

Separately, Iggy and the MC5 realised they had to make music from their everyday experience, music imbued with the genius loci. It was energy, motors, electricity that made their place, so they made raucous, rousing art from the Great Plains power grid.

When I first heard Iggy’s music, I thought, Yeah! He really means it. He’s telling about something he knows, something he’s lived through that’s got into his pores and tendons. So I decided that any piece of music had to be tested against Iggy’s standards, that I’d always have to ask: how many watts does it take from the world and give over to your own nervous system? This is how I formulated my ‘Stooges Test’.

SHIFT now to east-coast Australia. In 1977 EMI issued a debut album called *I’m Stranded*. Emerging from my teen years, I listened to it avidly, only half understanding it. A great 37-minute squall of electricity runs through the Saints’ masterpiece. I understood that immediately. But it would be a decade before I heard all its nuances and registered at last the sly, local ingenuity signalling through the noise.

I grew up in the same fibro-house flatlands of Brisbane and at the same time as the Saints. Ed Kuepper and Chris Bailey—engine and petrol of the band—went to nearby Oxley High. My older sisters had gone to Corinda High (next train stop along from Oxley) two or three years before future temporary Saints Ivor Hay and Jeffrey Wegener turned up there. A messy white-trash affection fizzed

between Corinda and Oxley folks, but when it came time for me to go to high school, I would catch six trains per day back and forth through Corinda station on the way to a ‘better’ institution, since my folks had been freaked by the girls’ tales of all the stoner fuck-ups at Corinda and Oxley. Even so, I hung out on weekends—posing as a fuck-up—with buddies of the band. We were legends in our own car parks years before the album came out in 1977.

What I understood from *I’m Stranded* was the famous, eponymous single. The rest of it I pretty much let go, thinking it strange (and good, therefore) but too tricky to tag. The trouble was, you had to think about the rest of the album. It had some weird sequences in it. And thinking was the last thing we wanted to do amid all the humid heat braising the Ipswich train-line as we ticket-dodged our way across the south-western suburbs in lax quest of something worth encountering. So I just fixed all my attention on the three minutes of electrical energy and uppity posing that scorched the single. It was the theme song that I thought I needed, an acrid anthem that made sense to a kid who’d spent a lot of time lolling on breezeless verandahs reading music magazines imported from colder parts of the world, parts where it makes good sense to get up and pulsate like a machine.

On that first Saints’ album, the song that I really couldn’t comprehend was a six-minute thing called ‘Messin’ with the Kid’. (I listen to it often now.) It had a lethargic lope, lacked the right choppy sonics for pogo-ing, and was flattened by scouring belts of drone. If you’d been bouncing off the walls during ‘I’m Stranded’, well, ‘Messin’ with the Kid’ just sat you down and made you feel like you couldn’t move much at all, except in slow motion. So, at the time of its release, I decided it was a dumb wrong note, that it failed the ‘Stooges Test’. Eventually it would be revealed to me how ‘Messin’ with the Kid’ *ignored* and *replaced* the ‘Stooges Test’.

I was in London from 1978 to 1982—the cold, gloomy years that brought Margaret Thatcher to prominence—and went to every Fall and Gang of Four concert I could get to. Because they had it—the energy! You could make your own warmth by meshing into those amped tempos, getting buzzed by all that screeching friction, all those angular collisions. With the Gang of Four, I was thrilled by Andy Gill’s guitars and Jon King’s vocal rants and startling percussions clattering against each other like theatrical thunder-and-lightning simulators. With the Fall, it was singer Mark E. Smith’s angle-grinding voice amped high above the Hanley brothers’ racket. Sure, I also listened to the next two Saints albums—*Eternally Yours* and *Prehistoric Sounds*—but I shrugged when I heard the tracks that failed my updated ‘Fall Test’. For example, ‘All Times through Paradise’ or ‘The

Chameleon': stonkered slow-core enigmas; comatose things that sounded like lost chances to kick out the jams—full of noise, yes, but with nothing in them to jolt the heart-rate.

So I forgot about the Saints, and about Chris Bailey and Ed Kuepper (and about Ivor Hay, Alasdair Ward and Kim Bradshaw, who were usually referred to in conversation as 'the other guys'). Kuepper went on to form the Laughing Clowns, who were stupendous, unSaints, and deserving of an entire study in themselves. Controversially, Bailey claimed naming rights and kept the Saints going as an endless, ramshackle franchise that annoyed many in addition to the reliably acerbic Kuepper but also produced occasional melodic miracles such as 'Ghost Ships' and 'Just Like Fire Would'.

Then, in 1985, having retired the Clowns, Kuepper released the album *Electrical Storm*. Living in Sydney now, and reaching the end of my twenties, I first played the album late one oppressive summer afternoon. The title song was another one of those lopey things. But this time, hearing it amid all the enervating heat and not feeling obliged or able to be wired like a nineteen-year-old, it struck me as a revelation. Lying on the sticky lino floor, yearning for airconditioning, dreading the exertion of getting up in twenty minutes time to rescue the vinyl record from the malfunctioning needle arm, I heard a wondrous paean to electricity, but nothing like the kinetic jags of Iggy Pop or Mark E. Smith.

The song opened with a slow guitar riff, repeated, no swing in it at all—deliberately 'wrong'. Then the drums joined in, as if reluctantly, but companionably. Which helped the guitar find a tempo that was not much faster but at least made a rhythm. Then Kuepper's lethargic vocals trudged in. The tune held itself together, but not with any animating impetus that seemed to come from *inside* the song. It was as if the real energy was *out there* on the other side of the music, with something as elemental as gravity or gaseous convection keeping the notes in motion. Next, a tempo change moved in via a bass-lined boogie break followed by Nick Fisher's drums encouraging the guitar to shift up through at least three changes, as if the song was not actively bringing the storm, just accepting that it would come over. Once all that new electricity rushed in, the song settled into a rapid rhythm for a minute, but subsequently there was a sudden slowing of tempo, as if exertion was no longer possible. At which point everything fell out of kilter again, lost tune and rhythm again, and then ... just ... stopped.

In three minutes or so, the song encapsulated what goes on in your own spirit and in the air when a Queensland storm finally breaks. Amid all the lassitude, there's an interlude of energy, an interlude that builds one's courage momentar-

ily and lifts the pressing atmosphere but that never fully dispels the real, prevailing condition—the condition of *enervation*. In contrast to Iggy Pop's landscape, there's no likelihood here that you'll find any way to dominate the scene and win its riches. Here in sonic form is a vivid, distilled world filled with dehumidifiers and massive refrigeration units emitting slow, stickycy cycles that help you live with some barely acceptable languor.

With its aesthetic intelligence attuned to my heat-fucked metabolism, *Electrical Storm* reflected my own memories and formative landscapes. It was music informed by the environment it came from—the environment *I* had been born and raised in, the landscapes I'd been fleeing every time I applied the 'Stooges Test' and the 'Fall Test'. It was the first time I'd heard my home rendered aesthetically as sound, the first time I'd perceived anything transcendent in the place I'd come from. True, Grant McLennan's marvellous 'Cattle and Cane' had done it already with lyrics, but Kuepper was doing it with *sound*. Playing *Electrical Storm* a dozen times, I figured the transcendence came from the way Kuepper understood and so vividly communicated the elemental qualities of the befuddling place that shaped our early years.

I then rummaged around to find the LP of (*I'm*) *Stranded*. I lifted the cartridge straight past the title track and dropped the stylus on 'Messin' with the Kid'. Yep—there it was, way back then, the subtropical rock aesthetics: the sound of thermostat-controlled compressors struggling to take charge of the scalding air; the maddening, comforting burr of gigantic electric fans; the half-hopeful, half-fatalistic tempo shifts reacting to environmental forces. As Kuepper's guitar moved through the old song like a street-sweeper stuck in low gear, Bailey slumped into the struggling breeze of a tune, and muttered:

How do you feel now that it's all over?
Your games all melted under the sun?
Just like a kid, take a trip down to the sea.
Stuck out in the middle, there's nothing left to say.

But, sometimes you get that old lost feeling.
Sometimes it hits you when you're feeling down.
It's that old feeling, honey, brings you down.
I say it makes you crawl ...

There it was in the first Saints album, less perfectly wrought than in *Electrical Storm* but sly and brilliant all the same: the revelation of a torrid but torpid teen-

ROSS GIBSON

angst, *localised*, exhausted, uninterested in looking up and focusing on productivity or big-city energy; the sonic rendition of a habitat and of a people who are never going to be at the centre of attention and who perhaps have accepted that there's something noble and true south of nowhere, at a judicious distance from the blather of graspers and boosters; a soundtrack for all the nowheresville, shorts-and-sandals country towns of Queensland.

There's a Daoist motto that tells how 'subtle and surprising instruction might come forth from the useless'. Kuepper's music is in this category. Doubtless this is why nobody from the fatter portions of the world's media has noticed these songs, why Kuepper is 'cult' rather than 'canonical'. And it's probably just as it ought to be: exiled but also completely in place; tending towards silence rather than bluster. More like Samuel Beckett than Iggy Pop. And a reminder of the displacement you have to accept when you go for centre-stage. Because, if you really looked at the world's conventional fame, if you looked at it from the place that formed you ... well, you'd have to say the fat world gives you that old lost feeling.

And you know that old lost feeling? I say it makes you crawl.