



Fresh Start on the Third Coast

Alejandro Escovedo's past includes the Nuns, Rank & File, True Believers—and a lot of learning the hard way. In his new incarnation he's a solo artist with a bright future

BY JOSEPH MITCHELL

Who the heck is Alejandro Escovedo? And why should this mag's young and rambunctious readers, clearly infatuated with the burgeoning creators of Armageddon's cacophonous soundtrack, give half a rodent's derriere about what he wrenches from his **forty-one-year-old singer/songwriter (uughhhh!)** heart? Come on man! We can't smell the teen spirit!

Well, to put it simply... **Escovedo was at the point we are now back when most of us were still in diapers tryin' to do a little shakin' and jiggin' to our older sibs' New York Dolls records without spilling shit everywhere.**

While many of his generation have atrophied into relics or parodies of their younger selves (Mr. Lydon, are you listening?), Escovedo has refused to stagnate, undergoing an adventurous, rather eclectic, sometimes painful seventeen-year metamorphosis. He's traveled a long path from all-out new-waver/punk in the late seventies (the Nuns, Judy Nylon), who barely knew how to hold a guitar much less play it, to early-eighties cowpunk (Rank & File), to mid-eighties semi-mega-success New Sincerity shooting star (the True Believers), to where he is now: a singer-songwriter of the utmost maturity and skill.

Oddly, this native San Antonian never really wanted to be a musician. In fact, despite his many musical escapades and his recent prestige after winning the *Austin Chronicle* Readers' Poll "Musician of the Year" award in spring 1993, Escovedo's childhood dreams revolved around filmmaking.

"I've always been more of a visual person," he says. But a funny thing happened on the way to film school. The Escovedo clan shipped west to Huntington Beach, California, where Alejandro, still in his teens, witnessed the stewings of what would become the hotbed of American punk: where X and Black Flag would be born and make one hell of a beautiful noise.

"We went to see the Stooges as often as possible," Escovedo says of his days before leaving southern California for film school at San Francisco State. And we're not just talking about the Stooges playing live weekends at Hollywood Boulevard clubs. Escovedo and his friends were so enamored of Iggy and the boys they spent much of their time hanging around the Stooges' practice space in Hollywood.

The music bug stayed with him as he moved on to school in San Francisco. Then necessity became the mother of invention. In need of a soundtrack for his first student film,

Escovedo did the old Devo trick and formed his own band to do the dirty deed. Despite coming from a musically talented family (Santana drummer Pete Escovedo is his brother, Sheila E., therefore, his niece), Escovedo had never picked up a guitar. He recruited a group of equally inept friends to join the band which became the Nuns. There may have been a lack of developed skill, but talent certainly was not lacking; the Nuns soon made a hell of an impact on what was still virgin punk territory.

It was 1976 and the punk spirit was contagious. The Pistols were raging into the US for their soon-to-be infamous tour, the Ramones were picking up velocity on the exploding New York scene. The punk spirit of adventure and anyone-can-do-it hit the West coast like a monsoon; the Nuns were on the leading edge of a storm that would eventually wash up the Dead Kennedys, Flipper, and Pop-O-Pies, among others. Virtually overnight they became leaders and darlings of the early San Francisco punk scene. Escovedo and his fellow Nuns were so musically green they couldn't even tune their own instruments. At gigs, audience members would be invited onstage to help. Could such tolerant communalism exist today? I wish.

Escovedo's film never got made and he left school after the Nuns became top priority. Over the next two years, the band put out two singles—both now collectors' items—on 415 Records. Around 1978, Escovedo's interest in the Nuns began to wane. During an extended tour, he met Englishwoman Judy Nylon at a club in New York. When the Nuns returned to SF, Escovedo stayed in New York to become the newest member of Nylon's band, Snatch.

This stint lasted about a year. Escovedo then hightailed it back to Texas, settling down in Austin, still at the time only a country and blues music mecca. The Big Boys, D-Day, and Standing Waves were either still in the garage or just ambitious ideas waiting to make a splash. He hooked up with Kinman brothers Tony and Chip (of Dils fame) and bassist and former Clash DJ Barry "Scratch" Myers to form the tri-coastal (yes, Texas folks think of themselves as the third coast) NY-Austin-LA cowpunk sensation Rank & File. The Kinmans soon moved to Austin and Rank & File hit the road for the first time in November 1980.

Rank & File recorded several albums for Slash. But Escovedo only served on the first and most acclaimed, *Sundown*, whose title track was the first song he ever wrote.

His next band was True Believers, formed with his brother Javier. It was 1985, and the Troobs, as they are still referred to by Austin hipsters, were the spearhead of a local musical renaissance mixing folk, blues, roots rock, and

driving guitars. Involved were artists like Zeitgeist (later renamed the Reivers after a copyright dispute), Poison 13 (former Big Boys Tim Kerr and Chris Gates doing chainsaw blues), Doctors' Mob (a '70's revival band), and Daniel Johnston, a funny, shy guy who got up and did two or three songs about marching guitars and Casper the friendly ghost, shaking the whole time like he was about to be shot. This scene somehow got called "New Sincerity."

The New Sincerity bands put Austin on the musical map. They attracted the attention of a growing, affluent national college-radio crowd—and of label reps. A documentary on MTV's *Cutting Edge*, plus salivating articles in *Rolling Stone* and elsewhere, marked the new scene's national prominence.

Austin music was ablaze and ready to scorch the ears of the nation. But somehow, within a couple of years, it dwindled to a smolder. The Reivers got a shot with Capitol, but missed the target. EMI picked up the Troobs, but their first effort failed to capture the triple-guitar magic of the band's live performances. Critics raved about the New Sincerity's offerings—but critics don't buy records.

Still, True Believers' debut album moved enough units to warrant a second project for EMI. Georgia Satellites producer Jeff Glixman was brought in, and members of Los Lobos, excited by what they'd heard, helped with backing vocals. The record sounded strong. Glixman, the Troobs, and EMI bigwigs were jumping out of their pants. The release date was set and the promotional big guns took up their positions, ready to fire on the masses. The True Believers were gonna be a hit!

One night, a month prior to release date, after an energetic Austin gig, a happy band was greeted backstage by their manager. For some reason, he did not share in the celebratory mood. He had bad news. The merger mania of the eighties had eaten up EMI like a chocolate drop. The new Capitol/EMI/Manhattan megaconglomerate had to drop a total of thirteen bands from their rosters. Among the droppees were Brian Setzer, the Del Lords—and the True Believers. The band looked high and low for a new label, but the legal baggage bestowed by EMI was heavy. To this day, the album remains in limbo. In a few short months, the Troobs unraveled and the New Sincerity went south.

Escovedo, dejected, continued working on songs, but with much diminished enthusiasm. Five years passed before his friend and former New York neighbor, publicist Lisa Robinson, introduced him to Stephen Bruton, known for his guitar work with Dylan and Bonnie Raitt and production work with Texas troubadour Jimmie Dale Gilmore. In spring 1991, Escovedo went

into the Hit Shack studio in Austin with Bruton, the Alejandro Escovedo Orchestra (a thirteen-piece string section), the Cappuccino Choir (vocalists with, you guessed it, too much caffeine in their system) and the Screaming Me Me's (one of Escovedo's daughters plus a friend) to record his first solo LP, *Gravity*.

The session, lasting nine days from first rehearsal to final mix, brought trouble in its wake. Tragedy struck when Escovedo's estranged wife, Roberta, committed suicide, leaving him in a state of shock and the four children they'd had together, motherless. The album, which he managed to finish, is dedicated to her: "It will never be the same without you."

Though the songs were written before Roberta's death, the LP feels tinged with pain and second thoughts. Since the days of the Nuns, Rank & File, and True Believers, Escovedo has become quite reflective. Songs like "Broken Bottle," "Home by Eleven," "Five Hearts Breaking," and "She Doesn't Live Here Anymore" are filled with a realization of mortality and a sober reevaluation of what really matters in life.

The raucous sound of bands past is gone, too. Escovedo plays acoustic guitar most of the time. Cello and violin dominate the mix. Vocals are tense and pensive. As he sings on "Bury Me," "If I should die before I turn 46/Lay me next to old Saint Chris/Dress me in a shirt of blue/and my favorite picture of you," you'd swear Escovedo was busy digging his own grave out behind the studio between takes.

The release of *Gravity* (on Watermelon) brought critical accolades, but the general public has yet to catch on. Escovedo told me Johnny Cash has expressed interest in a version of "Bury Me," which could help build a wider audience.

Escovedo's second solo effort, *13 Years* (also on Watermelon), continues the somber mood of *Gravity* but has more upbeat moments too. He's still thoughtful, but the struggle that began with *Gravity* seems to have come to some degree of resolution. Instead of anger at the changes that push life onward, there is now celebration. He no longer wants to be buried, he wants to "Try, Try, Try." "I try so hard/but I'm gonna get it right," Escovedo moans mockingly, as if thinking, *stop posturing and live*. "Ballad of the Sun and the Moon," a paean to the passing of time, quietly commences the LP and sets the mood after a string interlude of the motif from title track "13 Years," which recurs several times throughout the LP. "The Way It Goes" sounds resigned, but it isn't. It's more a signing up in the college of life, a willingness to learn from life's hardships.

"Losing Your Touch" is the hardest—and one of the most interest- / *continued on page 73*

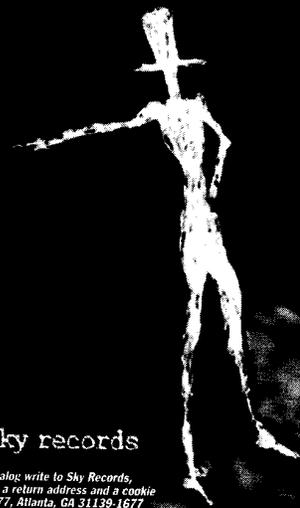
FIVE-EIGHT BIRDO



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— Philadelphia Inquirer

"...punko nitro mix of musical psychodrama"
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looming loss of his dog, the wear and tear of peril and ennui.

Homeless, Eighner was regarded as barely human by more prosperous citizens. But his point of view, which grows more confident and persuasive as the story goes on, is that other people are a daft minority, while he possesses the vantage point of true common sense, making him into a philosophical majority.

You can see why this book has been hailed as a classic on the order of Defoe's and Thoreau's most famous books, and of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the most enjoyable, perhaps, of Orwell's nonfiction works. The chapter on dumpster diving is a comprehensive survey of not only the risks and rewards of food finds ("home leftovers, as opposed to surpluses from restaurants, are very often bad"), but nature ("city bees harvest doughnut glaze") and the aesthetic (finding the "horribly" stitched needlework of "sorority girls," he pulls out their stitches and works a new and original design).

Lars Eighner admits he loves his dog. But as he does not claim to know what she thinks—or that she thinks—he doesn't assume she feels the same towards him. It's attention she loves, "whencesoever it comes." The quaintness of that "whencesoever" suggests a personality distilled onto the page with such savor that Eighner will not be able to remain equally unsure as to how his readers feel. This book is already being widely read.—*Leslie Traveller*

PRAGUE /continued from p. 66

wall and a Chinese lampshade in the corner make up for the fact that we are the only customers. The menu: beefsteak, pork, chips, salad, chicken—all served with almonds. Not a grain of rice, a noodle, or an American in sight. The owner thoughtfully turns the television to MTV Europe for us.

The Czech-Slovak split hasn't affected everyday life that much. Not beyond the quaint stamps that adorn the bank notes so you can tell they're not dud notes from Slovakia. Nor the debate over what the country shall be known as abroad (the Czech Republic, Czesky, Czechomoravsky, or whatever is today's front-runner in newspaper opinion polls.). The most difficult thing is explaining your nationality: "Well, I am actually *Czechoslovakian*—my mother is Czech and my father is Slovakian. So!" The Slovak jokes have dried up too.

But I'm not passing any judgment. I'm just having a look. It's clear enough that November 1989 is history. For now, ask and you shall receive—generic, back-packing, in-your-face Eurodom beckons for the Czech capital. This is the roller-coaster reality.★

POSSUM DIXON /continued from p. 14

melody also equals Petty's. Thus (one suspects) their talents will insure that they have all the time in the world to spend on that celebrity staircase.

Right now, as 1994 kicks to life, Possum Dixon happily ascend those stairs: their singles "Nerves" and "Watch the Girl Destroy Me" presently garner national P-1 radio support, and they'll spend January and February opening shows for Dead Milkmen. But what's next? Of course Rob Zabrecky has plenty of ideas. One sees them sprinting up and down, riding the bannister, mucking up the peach-colored carpeting. You see, they trust their goofy sense of fun. And goofiness eventually will satisfy them with its own breed of dangers.★

ALEJANDRO ESCOVEDO /continued from p. 63

ing—songs here. It sounds a lot like the Faces with its Ronnie Wood-style guitar and high-pitched, pushed-from-the-gut vocals. Backing vocals by Austin singer extraordinaire Malford Milligan round out the chorus and give it grit.

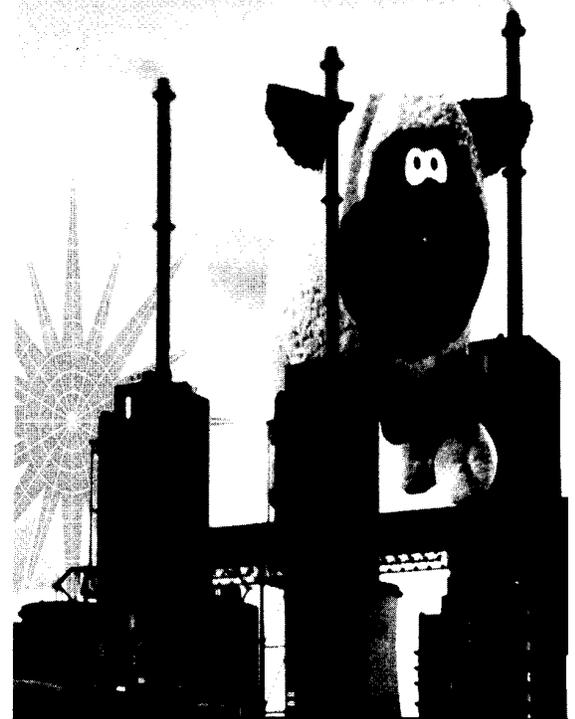
The standout is closing track "The End," written by Escovedo and Bruton near the end of the session. Former Poi Dog Susan Voelz's violin threads in and out, neither distracting from other things in the song, nor leaving it empty when her ethereal lead is needed. It's an impressive team of players, and Escovedo manages to give everyone a shot without fragmenting it into individual show-offs. *13 Years* is a coherent, intelligent album that belongs alongside works by Daniel Lanois or Todd Rundgren.

Alejandro Escovedo has come a long way on his musical journey since his days as an inept twenty-four-year-old guitar-player in San Francisco. There have been incalculable twists, turns, and outright breakdowns along the road. Now it looks like he has finally arrived. Although Escovedo would love to make a bundle in music so he doesn't have to go back to clerking at an Austin record store, he is quietly pleased at the respect he receives from his peers, and from critics, producers, and fans like me who adore a finely crafted song.

And there's always the future. After returning from the Trans Musicale festival in France where he'll be performing along with Björk and Jesus Lizard, he'll prepare to record with his side band, Buick MacKane, under the guiding hand of ex-Big Boy Tim Kerr. He'll do more solo touring and begin recording a third solo LP in the fall. He'll also be getting married, around mid-year, to his musician girlfriend, who plays in a band called Pork and with whom he has a child. Not bad for a grandfather of forty-one. I don't think he'll be buried for a while.★

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