

If you remember the '80s at all well, you'll recall the shocked thrill of hearing the out-of-hardcore-into-who-knows-what of *Meat Puppets II*, the confusion and delight of the country-fried *Up on the Sun*, and—if you hung in there long enough—the more robust pleasures of *Monsters*, and a lot more in between.

Since the band's formation in Phoenix, Arizona, at the start of 1980, brothers Curt and Cris Kirkwood (guitar/vocals and bass, respectively) and Derrick Bostrom (drums) have issued a steady stream of often wild, usually wonderful, and always weird records, and periodically unleashed even wilder live shows. They've thrived, too, although their odd-ball image and frequent shifts in musical style have kept them from the wider audience now granted to peers such as Sonic Youth or the Replacements. But their recent signing to London Records means the Meat Puppets will have major-label muscle behind them when their next album is released in late spring. Curt Kirkwood, while pleased at this turn of events, is nevertheless not about to lose any sleep over the prospect of fame and success:

It's not something we sit around and hope for, after *this* long. You can't hope for something like that for longer than about three months. And after you've

A FIRE IN THE DESERT



Hopefully people will like our next record—the people who buy it, that is. The people who don't can go on watching *Twin Peaks* or whatever they do, and we'll keep on making our records.

Flashback to a sultry April night in Houston in 1984. A thousand or so skinheads and spiky-locked, bleached-blond surf-punks have poured themselves into a cavernous makeshift art gallery owned by the University of Houston. They await the arrival of their heroes, macho-anarchist wonder boys

they're not hitting each other with any great force, they're kind of popping around like bursting popcorn kernels. It's a pit unlike any I've seen before. The participants are actually looking at the band. They're not slamming for the sake of proving their punkdom. They're doing it because the music is *on*. The band has sliced into the confined and jaded consciousness of the crowd like Leatherface's chain saw ripping into the guts of a yuppie, and we're all much happier idiots for it.

is dangerously long for such a setting—gleefully hop on the stage and start to shred forth some of the most mind-whirling music and verge-of-insanity vocals ever to hit the fickle ears of the boys in the throng. Skins, surfs, and everyone else are stunned. This isn't the sludgy, boom-boom thrash-and-kill they've come to hear. Many befuddled looks. No one is exactly hitting it off with these guys. This stuff is alien. This stuff has *energy*.

Finally, after several songs (including a couple of adrenalin-laden-to-the-point-of-incoherence Hendrix and Grateful Dead covers), some action starts in front of the stage. But not the swirling-down-the-sink, plowing-over-everyone-in-your-path kind of slamming. Sure, a lot of guys are bouncin' around like they're having seizures or something. But

meat puppets

INTERVIEW & STORY BY JOSEPH MITCHELL
WITH REMINISCENCES BY
PATTY STIRLING & LOIS MAFFEO

gone without a pot to piss in for 8 or 9 years, you think, "Who gives a fuck?" Then all of a sudden you get signed! I don't know what to think.

Obviously, it's never been a goal of ours to have anything that could be construed as a normal style of success. We always wanted it to be a little different, even if it just meant staying in Phoenix.

Black Flag, who'll soon be playing on the rickety stage hastily thrown up at one end of the room. But before they get the slama-rama they're salivating for, they're going to receive a huge slap in the face of their current musical taste.

Three guys in white jumpsuits—the guitarist and bassist both sporting hair that is colored a blinding fluorescent green and

Who were those guys who ripped apart all our punk preconceptions? I found out later they were the Meat Puppets—a term often taken to be a penis reference, but which is also a colloquial term in the deepest Southern United States, meaning just plain hard-workin' folk.

Of course, there was—still is—nothing plain about the Meat Puppets. Back in 1984



CURT KIRKWOOD, JUNE 1984. PHOTO, KATHERINE SPELMANN

I seemed like every five minutes during high school I looked at my watch to see how much time was left before I got out of there. Xavier High. Stupid Catholic school. Nothing going on. And true to everyone else's punk-rock Cinderella story, music came along to sweep me off my feet.

Phoenix didn't have much of a scene, but it was funny and eclectic. Rockabilly and artsy types shared their already dug-in hideouts with the hardcore kids who were suddenly showing up everywhere. Into this doofy scenario, the Meat Puppets arrived and threw everyone for an absolute loop.

They talked about acid and philosophy like hippies; they shared their bills with the most atrocious performance artists (at their own request); they played the weirdest music, faster than anyone could have conceived.

The Kirkwood brothers were a few years ahead of me in the Catholic boys' school, Brophy College Prep—but they were held in high regard in the pot-smoking, chess-playing, Gentle Giant-listening egghead clique I sometimes hung out with.

Through my acquaintance with these brainiacs, I heard about shows and parties where the Meat Puppets would play, and finally I went along to see what the fuss was all about. Egad! I almost died, it was so great.

They screamed so loudly! They sang so incomprehensibly! They played so fast, honest to God, their hands were blurs.

The best thing was that they never seemed to align themselves with a particular look or sound. They always looked sloppy, and played whatever they felt like. I remember how surprised people were when they "went country," but it just seemed to me the big mistake was to call them a hardcore band in the first place. They wanted to freak people out, that's all.—Lois Maffeo

they transcended every punk convention, and they still baffle the pigeonholers of the musical world today.

Perhaps their musical idiosyncrasy results from the fact that Curt didn't start out with any clearly defined musical agenda, as he confesses when talking about his earlier bands.

I wanted to play guitar, but I didn't know what kind of music I wanted to do, or how I wanted to do it. I jumped at the opportunity to play with anyone back then, in the late '70s. I was in a funk band, the "Walking in Rhythm" kind, then a heavier rock band, with two lead guitarists. And Cris and I were in a band called Eye, for which I wrote all the material. We had about 14 songs. It lasted a couple of months. The Meat Puppets was my fourth band.

By this time, punk rock had really hit home, and early Meat Puppets recordings, beginning with their "In a Car" single in 1981, show how much they were energized by the music of that time. Their self-titled debut LP followed in 1982; it seemed a little rough and generic, but beneath its of-the-time yowls and guitar fury lay more than a few individual traits (remember "Tumblin' Tumbleweeds"?). And they began to soar off on spirit-liberating, sonic/psychedelic excursions on their next release, *Meat Puppets II*, the LP they were promoting when they supported Black Flag's *Damaged* tour at the above-mentioned show in 1984.

Meat Puppets II signalled a transition towards a highly distinctive musical identity. Elements of hardcore were still present, but the band's burgeoning new style was represented with equal presence; it also incorporated and transformed some not exactly fashionable influences (Roky Erickson, the Grateful Dead, ZZ Top). Despite some enthusiastic reviews, the band nevertheless remained relatively obscure throughout most of the country, playing to handfuls of cult admirers when they did their own tour to support the LP. About ten people witnessed their Houston show in February 1985 in a small, freezing warehouse space, during which the band remained bundled in their coats and ski masks, nonetheless generating enough musical heat to inspire half the crowd to go topless.

The spring and summer of 1985 not only brought warmer venues for the band,

but made it clear that their muse had finally gotten a firm hold on their creative sensibilities. *Up on the Sun* issued in a more relaxed and meditative Meat Puppets. The tempos were slower. They kept the drums restrained and simple, concentrating on the licks and melodies, while pulling off enough brain-sticking guitar and bass riffs to lull a restless mind into happyland.

The imagery projected in the band's music had changed, too. No longer were jittery, confused suburbanisms mixed like oil and water with mystical incantations. *Up on the Sun* portrayed the pastoral landscape of a Piscean wet dream, an island with briskly running crystal-clear streams, spring-fed swimming holes, and countless rivers flowing into a big blue ocean.

The band had hooked into something that set them apart from their SST labelmates and fellow forgers of the normal-guys-can-rock-too school, Hüsker Dü and the Minutemen. Instead of relying on beat and

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tempo to separate themselves from the pack, the Meat Puppets used weird, ear-catching melodies and a sound akin to a country band well acquainted with LSD and amphetamines. And unlike those bands, they weren't urban, politically conscious, or even on the same planet as angry. Their developing sound was born of the sunny deserts of southwest Arizona (maybe the watery images arose from wishful thinking). It didn't hit on an intellectual or even an emotional level. It landed somewhere beyond consciousness. Like a Pueblo Indian peyote pow-wow with the ancestors, if it was anything, it was spiritual. They continued in this direction with *Out My Way* (1986); though the imagery lacked the awe-inspiring splash of *Up On the Sun*, the sound was just as memorable.

Mirage, in 1987, heralded the start of a second transition for the Meat Puppets. The mysticism took a back seat as the band's image shifted from that of a wondering dreamer to something more like a well-oiled

machine. The flavor was still appealing—things were just a lot tighter. This trend has continued on their two most recent albums, *Huevos* and *Monsters*, which have taken the Meat Puppets further towards the status of a rock band with commercial viability. They still retain much of the spice that made them so delectable in the mid-80's, but they're clearly moving on again.

It's not that common for a band to be able to change so much, and I asked Curt Kirkwood if he could explain how they could do this:

Other people went ahead and carried the flag of their own particular style—like some of my old heroes, they always sound like themselves. But we weren't ready to do that—ever.

I consider it to be integrity on our part always to have done what we wanted to do, and not to have pandered to a style. Even though it often confused people. From the beginning, we've always played



DWIGHT YOAKUM'S BUDDIES: DERRICK, CURT, AND CRIS IN 1987. PHOTO, JOSEPH CUTICE

to people so that they wouldn't forget the album before. If they got into us with *Up on the Sun*, we wanted them to be able to go back to *II* or the first record and go, "They did that stuff too? Cool." Or whatever.

We've always been into a lot of different kinds of stuff, and we never wanted to limit ourselves to one style. When people keep playing the same kind of music, they're just doing it to become famous. Or they're stupid, and that's all they can do. Or their record company makes them do it. We just put out what we wanted to. We consider ourselves the ideal—perfect examples of humanity!

With hindsight, it seems obvious that the Meat Puppets' music makes most sense when seen as a distinctive outgrowth of the Southwest, rather than trying to force it into any "post-punk" context. From the heyday of the International Artists label in Austin in the '60s that released Roky Erickson's band the 13th Floor Elevators, and

Red Krayola, to the present day, there's something that sets the music of the region apart. Kirkwood confirms this:

Though we've lived a big part of our lives in Phoenix, my brother and I were born in Amarillo, at the Air Force base. I've lived in the Southwest all my life, and most of my favorite music is from Texas. The Butthole Surfers are one of my favorites. And I've always loved ZZ Top—since my teens, my pre-punker days.

Then we got into punk rock and stuff. It's weird—a lot of those bands aren't together any more, but ZZ Top and the Grateful Dead, which we were into before that, *are* still together.

Generally I've embraced everything that's been around. I get into it all, and my favorites tend to be the ones that I've seen live. I don't really like to listen to recorded music that much. And I like to see almost anything live. There's not much that really bothers me.

While we're talking about the Southwest, the subject of Arizona voters' narrow rejection of proposals for a Martin Luther King, Jr., state holiday comes up. Kirkwood is clearly upset by the outcome, and at a loss to explain it; he also resents the impression it might give about what Arizona is like:

I don't understand why they didn't vote in the holiday. We don't really know who voted against it. We voted for it, and in our town it *is* a holiday.

If you want to see racism, go to Texas. And it's nothing like as bad here as in the New York City area, or in Boston. I've travelled around enough to see that.

But I have a basic lack of respect for state boundaries—international boundaries too. It's all horseshit. And I don't recognize any racial boundaries. I wasn't brought up that way.

Their involvement in the early days of the punk rock movement brought the Meat Puppets into contact with Black Flag, and through them to the SST record label set up by Flag guitarist Greg Ginn and original bassist Chuck Dukowski (Ginn still runs the label). The association does not seem to have been a particularly happy one for the Meat Puppets, even though it lasted until very recently. It's a long story, Kirkwood explains:

Black Flag asked us to open for them on that tour. And we were supposed to go with them to Europe, until we insulted

At fifteen I packed a suitcase and started hitchhiking down that long lonesome highway. The woods had been bulldozed, leaving me without a future, family gone. So it didn't really matter where the highway led. There's only one logical way for a road to go, and that's towards death.

Hardcore shows at the Mab. I knew I was on the right path with the Meat Puppets. It was obvious they were gonna die soon, because they were the fastest and the craziest. I knew they weren't a San Francisco band; they were from out there somewhere, the suburbs, or out-of-state. They had long hair and were insane, and it wasn't an act because they weren't political. It wasn't just drugs, either, because their lightning hardcore jazz was dead accurate, precisely synchronized. It seemed like way too much for a mind to handle.

When the Mab became a place for hardcore shows, from Die Kreuzen to the Cheetah Chrome Motherfuckers, the more melodic bands moved upstairs to the On Broadway. Fresh new local trio X-tal opened for the Minutemen and the Meat Puppets. Who still played so manic and fast and crazy I swore they'd soon be dead, or at least institutionalized. No one's allowed to be insane for real like that.

In the summer of '83, Katherine and I rode her motorcycle to Berkeley for the *Maximum Rock'n'Roll Day* in the Dirt festival, an annual political hardcore event full of positive skinheads and message and stuff. Suicidal Tendencies were headlining. The Meat Puppets played too, but only a very short set. The musical battle lines had been drawn by now, and the hardcore types couldn't deal with the Puppets. A section of the crowd threw bottles and rocks at them. Finally, they were forced to leave the stage. We thought they were great, and went and told them so. →



CRIS KIRKWOOD, JUNE 1984. PHOTO, KATHERINE SIEGMANN

A couple of weeks later they sent us a cassette of the new material they were working on. It included weird slow stuff, and covers of "Billie Jean," "After Loving You," "I Know You Rider," "Mystery Train," and "I Just Wanna Make Love to You". And it wasn't done as novelty thrash. At the time I found the tape kind of boring. My skull was thick and I needed to get pounded on to be entertained—the Dead Kennedys, Minor Threat, Flipper.

I always assumed the ones you love fall apart and die. Time and time again I'm proved wrong. Humanity isn't as easily destroyed as grass and coyotes. The Meat Puppets slowed down. It's like you're happily getting bruised and cut all over, until one day you notice it hurts. Gentler things start making you happy. Their next records were country-western music without any cowboys. Just prairie dogs, sunlight, and Indian thinking. There didn't seem to be any white people in their songs, and no bulldozer drivers.

I liked the slow records, because they were like sounds of nature—water, birds, sand. Not New Age of course, rather completely rhythmic the way African music sounds, the way mbiras and marimbas and stuff seem to imitate bird calls. And lead guitars sound like mosquitos anyway.

I had the impression that punk-rock bands had been playing so fast because they were desperately in need of more rhythm to steady their stress, to pace the panic in their hearts, and they didn't know how to distribute and layer rhythms, jigsaw-puzzle-style the way other, older cultures do. You don't have to be tense or hyper at all to fit in all those beats; it's a whole bunch of people playing their notes at the proper interval, and fitting perfectly into the melody and rhythm of the whole. It's hard to expect this kind of cooperation and creativity from young Americans, they usually end up in some chaotic mess or state of simple control, like generic MTV rock, generic hardcore, detox, prison, law office, the Army, temp work. Maybe the Meat Puppets could do it because Chris and Curt, being brothers, knew each other as well as two people possibly could. The way Chip and Tony Kinman of the Dils/Rank and File/Blackbird could harmonize together. It's a family thing.

So the Meat Puppets moved on. They got played on the increasingly commercialized college-radio stations. But I like to think they still wanted to surprise the folk who bought those records. Because when they played live, at more upscale venues like the I-Beam in San Francisco, they still played fast and crazy.—Patty Stirling

them inadvertently. There's not much to say about that, outside of the fact that they're really thin-skinned. They were always kind of faking it, I think. I liked their music, but I don't know about their commitment. And SST these days... They put out a Meat Puppets "best of" compilation [*No Strings Attached*] recently that they didn't even talk to us about.

When they kicked us off that tour, that was our initial falling-out with them. We never got along with them real well after that. There was always a lot of conflict. We just continued using them to put out our records.

They're a bunch of jerks. They pretend to be avant-garde, then they put out compilations to rake in a little extra off the bands. And it's not just us—so many bands who've been on SST have lost respect for them because of the way they did things.

There have always been difficulties to resolve, of course, over the effort to run a label in a way different from the prevailing practices, the responsibility to take care of the debts you incur towards the bands who entrust you with their records, and the need to stay financially viable so that you can keep releasing records. Kirkwood is scathing about the way that SST evolved:

The problem is that SST is run by musicians—musicians with a chip on their shoulder because, in their own eyes, they failed. It's kind of a paradox that they'd develop that attitude and see themselves as failures, when the initial goal of the do-it-yourself punk-rock movement was not commercial success. It's made them into typical music-business entrepreneurs and charlatans.

By trying to run a business according to the do-it-yourself ethic, they were doomed from the outset. If they had just admitted they were a business, they could've gone ahead and gotten a little bigger. But they didn't have much business sense. Their biggest problem was that they took and sold what they could and then put the money back into bands that didn't sell. They didn't use their resources first to promote the stuff that would really sell.

Kirkwood does have some good memories, though:

They had some good bands—us, the Minutemen (one of the best bands that ever was), Bad Brains, and Saccharine Trust, who I always thought were pretty cool. A lot of cool stuff went through there from time to time. And regardless

of how things eventually went down the shitter, there were people there who really cared, back around '85. Once those few people went, the label was left to the musicians. And you need a little objectivity in there so as not to let your own frustrations get hold of your business sense.

Curt also makes it clear that he's not calling the SST owners "rip-offs," although the methods of payment have sometimes been a little unusual:

They've always paid us, pretty much. Whenever they owed us money, we'd say, "Look, just give us the money and we'll make a record with it—whatever it takes to get the money out of you." That's how we made *Monsters*.

He also states that despite the frequent antagonism between the band and their record label, "we never let it affect the way we made records." Nevertheless, it's clear that he's relieved to be out of that situation. But why did it go on so long, if things were so difficult?

At the time we couldn't get any other label deal happening. We got offers from other independents, but I didn't really see that that could be a whole lot different either.

Now that they're on a major label, they have a new problem to deal with: weird rumors, like the one to the effect that London was forcing the band to drop the "Meat" from their name. "No! They don't care!" Kirkwood exclaims. "We were signed because we've deserved it for years, except nobody could see it." He now thinks that the band's own lack of business expertise may have delayed their progress:

We've never had a manager—I manage the band—and I think I passed by a lot of opportunities; I just didn't realize when a carrot was being dangled in front of my face. And I didn't really care either—none of us did. We wanted to wait until we felt comfortable with it. We kept on putting out records and trying to get a little better sense of the business of it.

When I spoke to Curt in January, the band was planning to start recording their next album. One change is that they will be working with a producer, rather than doing the job themselves. The Puppets had been intending to do it themselves again, but after going into the studio in December to cut a few tracks, they found they were "sick of it." The most likely candidate seems to be Pete Anderson, who once opened for the Meat Puppets with his then equally unknown buddy Dwight Yoakum, but who



CURT KIRKWOOD IN OCTOBER 1985. PHOTO, PATTY STRING

since has turned to producing the country star (he also produced the most recent Michelle Shocked album). Kirkwood explains the band's thinking on this point:

We need to get outside ourselves—for this album, anyway. There's a lot of things a producer can do to make it sound... different. I can't qualify it, I'm not a producer. Well, I am, but I just produce things a certain way. I wouldn't know how to use all that money, all that equipment. I figure I'll learn a lot here.

I do enjoy production. Maybe I'll learn enough to feel comfortable doing it again, and learn how to use our money the right way. But really, we only started doing our own production because nobody would work with us.

He hopes that the forthcoming record will reflect, as far as possible, what the band does live—and performing live is certainly what the Meat Puppets like to do most:

Playing live is way more fun than recording. Recording is something you have to do—but it's what you do to document what you actually do. It's like taking a picture of a work in progress. And you have a work in progress continually, because you're a band.

It's been our goal all along to try and

record what we do live—except that we'd always get distracted in the studio. We want to pick up that live sound, with no tricks. I think the band sounds good by itself—and we add our own kind of reverberation to it.

Having survived as an independent band for eleven years, of course, the Meat Puppets are still ambivalent about their new status. When asked how they'll be marketed, Kirkwood sarcastically replies, "Sort of like New Kids on the Block." More seriously,

One reason we were signed is because AOR has opened up more, and alternative has become a commercial thing. We had some college-radio success but nothing big. A lot of our support has been more spread around, more of a cult thing. I think they'd be wise not to target it too much, outside of saying that it's rock. London obviously has some high hopes for us because they're saying everything they do is just as commercially viable as the next. And we've always thought that we're as good as anybody else, too.

And sure, we want to be bigger than God. We're already bigger than God in our own eyes—if we could only have the bank accounts to go along with our imaginations...

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