

"When Joy Trumps Ineptitude: Silver's Do You Wanna Dance"

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I suppose the "magic moment" of hearing this record impacted a very special few upon its release in 1980. Personally, my record collecting mentality was undeveloped in 1980, the highlight of that year being for me, the discovery of the Young Marble Giants. Another reason was the distribution of this single in the United States was nil. My hunt for this single was prompted by a short review in reknowned collector Chuck Warner's 1995 *Throbbing Lobster* catalog: "Finnish teen's '80 roar into the 60's-via -Ramone's classic and leave every teen incompetent from Tampax to Shonen Knife in the dust. (B-side) does the same to Einsturzender's and/or Suicide. Astounding noise." By the time I responded to Chuck, he had already sold it. (My theory is that Johan Kugelberg was the buyer). In 1997 or 1998, while perusing the adverts in the back of the British publication *Record Collector*, I happened upon a list of Finnish records being offered by a collector in Helsinki. I wrote away for his catalog, and soon thereafter, I started buying the occasional Finnish punk rarity at premium prices (in British pounds) from him. It must have been the second or third catalog I received, that the item of my obsession appeared. Mind you, this guy did not believe in the internet (it was still early in that game.) So the velocity of these transactions was quaintly turned back to pre-1994 "snail mail", which of course only added to the feeling of longing. When this was listed in Chuck Warner's catalog, he was offering it at \$115.00, so to see the same record priced for only 20 pounds sterling struck me as a bargain in the distorted world of record collecting. That was the hunt.

The band Silver only released two singles on Finland's Black Label Series—one in 1979, and this their second in 1980. The outer cover of their single, which could provide a detective with some tracking information, is a collage of rock guitarists that seems to be inspired by Kurt Schwitters. It has been reported that the band is made up of 12 year olds. Varying sources, which to me, is a non-random sampling of record collectors I know have reported that anywhere from 100 to 300 copies were pressed of each single. A focused search on the internet yielded nothing in terms of background or biographical information, and

the one web site that appeared to have a Black Label Series discography listed, was entirely in Finnish. And my ability to translate Finnish is coincidentally non-existent.

For most listeners of music, the notion of competency in association with creativity is a given when evaluating a piece of music to be enjoyable. The feeling of rapture in the musical listening experience is commonly associated with mastery of some sort of technical or emotional skill that resonates deeply with the listener. But one of the most liberating consequences of the explosion of the punk and DIY movement in the late 1970's was that the decision to be part of the "music industry" was no longer exclusively the domain of a label, nor determined by some label executive and/or A&R scout that evaluated talent in the above mentioned conventional ways. It was self-determined. By extension, (and this should come as no great surprise) the world was flooded with bands who had taken up the call to arms—the manifesto first suggested by the Desperate Bicycles: "It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!" Initially, this was primarily a British phenomenon. Bob Stanley (St. Etienne, Caff Records, and most recently the author of "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! History of pop music), writing in the on-line arts journal frieze.com estimates at least 900 recordings were released just in the UK during this time. All in pressings of 500 to 1000 copies—most all of them in cheap covers. One band, the Puritan Guitars, even itemized the production costs as part of their artwork on the back sleeve. The International Discography of the New Wave, Volume 2, is a written testament to this—and at least until 2007, scores of collectors refer to this 736 page inventory of almost every independent release as "The Bible". In 2007, Mario Panceira unleashed his 870 page tome, "45 Revolutions", which immediately became the most comprehensive survey and buying guide to the UK underground c. 1976-1979 around. There's still an unofficial update of this—which are the Chuck Warner catalogs that he printed between 1988 and 1999. I hope that someday he decides to reprint them just for the wealth of information they provide about underground releases of that era. I am repeating an old history lesson when reminding you that for the most part, when you think of the first wave of punk – Blondie, The Ramones, Patti Smith, Television, The Buzzcocks, The Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Jam. The Dead Boys, Talking Heads and even X-Ray Spex, all were still part of the major label system. The Modern Lovers first LP on Beserkley maybe the exception that proves the rule, but even in this case, the album was first pressed up by that avatar of quality music, Playboy records (Home of the hits!). The DIY phenomenon spread from

the UK to obviously the US—SF band, Crime, put out their first single in late 1976, and on to Australia, Switzerland, France, Japan, Belgium, New Zealand, and the object of my affection, Finland. Specialty compilations of early punk scenes from all these countries exist. Further, any time spent scouring the internet will reveal want lists of collectors filled with hundreds of wants of the original version from this era. If you want to have a little fun, go to eBay, punch in “kbd” in the search field and see what results you get. If you want to see how fetishistic this sub-genre has become, then choose the “highest priced” option for your search results. The amount of money that changes hands is rather astonishing. I’m embarrassed to say how much I’ve paid for a couple myself.

The Finnish DIY explosion was relatively short-lived; Briard is generally considered the first band to record, in 1977, with its first single “I Really Hate Ya”, and their subsequent claim to fame involved guitarist Andy McCoy moving on to Hanoi Rocks. And the initial burst continued until roughly 1981. Some of the better known bands were Eppu Normaali, Ratsia, Sensuuri, and Pelle Miljoona. For purveyors, most Finnish punk was more melodic than some of the other regional variations. Even within this fairly hermetic environment populated by bands on (to me) the big three Finnish punk labels, Poko, Love, and Johanna, the Silver still remained a mystery.

So what is it about this recording, one of the hundreds of the genre characterized by the rickety, even skeletal guitars, the wheezy thrift-store keyboards and drums that might as well be made from cardboard. (Note: I compiled several tracks for a CD for distribution at the conference in 2004) It starts when the singer invokes the mantra that every punk rock singer longs to repeat – the clipped “1, 2, 3, 4” followed in somewhat random succession by the drums and bass, struggling to present a united front of rhythm before surrendering to their individual and internal metronomes. Cymbals are being pummeled in a mysterious pattern. No regard to the rudiments of keeping a beat – musical arrhythmia on the verge of a rhythmic infarction if I may indulge myself a strained cardiologic metaphor. Then, the singer’s pre-pubescent vocals re-enters the fray – and it’s a voice who had cleverly stayed away from voice lessons—a voice that sounds devoid of any of the longing implied in the lyrics. And still a voice untouched by the hormonal ravages of adolescence. I wonder if the IDEA of dancing with someone had been considered by the singer. Or memorizing the lyrics. This lapse in continuity occurs while the songs chugs along, albeit on a very flimsy chassis, attempting to

command the one chord necessary to resemble the original and befitting a band that obviously spent minutes rehearsing this song. Then, at about 90 seconds into the song, the singer pleads for the band to stop—whether it's to catch their breath, to figure out what they're doing next, their homage to James Brown, I don't know for sure, and the singer just erupts into the most joyous cackle I've ever heard—a cackle by the way that I think the character of Bart Simpson would be proud to possess, and this is the moment when this record entered my personal pantheon. I'd like to believe that at this particular moment, they thought that they had NAILED this take in spite of a complete lack of technical competence or emotional understanding of their material. The fact that they were blithely impervious to any conventional notion of musical harmony, and thoroughly expressing a glee, and maybe even wonder that they made it through two minutes and seven seconds of what they must have thought to be their favorite Ramones song was enough for me to place this moment on a pedestal—a standard by which other moments of punk primitivism should be measured. I believe that part of its beauty is the unintentional aspect of its primitivism. We all know examples of bands that offered a more studied version – the Cramps and the Ramones immediately spring to mind. More pointedly, Dave Pearce, aka Flying Saucer Attack, intentionally “ruined” his cover of Suede’s “The Drowners” on his 1993 debut LP, by overamplifying the guitar sound into metal machine territory. Supposedly, this was done as an expression of animus toward Brett Anderson. He also succeeded in having the BBC unofficially ban the song from the radio due to “production values” I’m making the assertion that the Silver heard this via the Ramones on its first LP, as opposed to the Bobby Freeman original. I’m basing this on the substantial number of other Finnish bands of the era that covered “established” punk hits by the Buzzcocks, Stiff Little Fingers, the Sex Pistols and the Stooges.

Now I can only speculate on their motivations for recording and releasing this single as I had mentioned that the trail regarding this band had long ago turned cold. A reasonable case could be made that this was a vanity project, bankrolled by their parents. I’m not hip to the labor laws in Finland regarding a minimum age of employment, but I suspect it would be surprising if their allowance money was sufficient to completely pay for this. Unlike the Shaggs, if parental influence was present, you don’t hear in the grooves (or in the background)—the kids seem unaffected by having to live up to the tweaked expectations that characterized an Austin Wiggins. It’s this spiritual notion of innocence

and naïveté that adds charm to this song, and keeps the creep of kitsch from intervening. Odds are, this band and any of its members did not continue making music, thereby insuring that the experience was likely a “magic moment” for them as well for existing just briefly enough to unleash this recording on the world. Then again, having a quartet of 12 year olds forming their own band having the wherewithal to bring a record to fruition is not unique. When the MacDonald brothers of Redd Kross formed in 1979, they were 13 and 9 respectively. Tommy Stinson joined the replacements at age 12, no doubt benefitting from the upstanding moral guidance of his older Brother Bob, this preparing for a future life with Axl Rose. Or, it could have been as simple as being caught up in the zeitgeist.

I have to say that when I’ve played this song for friends, or the one time I got to play it on a radio show, just as I’m going to do momentarily, it has without fail, generated a strongly polarized response. Maybe not as polarized as jokes about pederasts wearing clown suits, but close. Anecdotally, my reaction, which was one of joy and appreciation of their spirit is in the minority. I haven’t taken umbrage when people have remarked that they think it’s an annoying piece of garbage. Generally, most people judge music to be a positive experience when it displays harmony, rhythm, instrumental competency (or better yet, mastery), identifiable emotional sentiments—everything this single lacks. [PLAY SONG]

Primitivism is not considered accomplishment beyond the physical, political, and economic act of just releasing the music for potential public consumption. When you invert the looking glass and see this as a possible act of defiance to accepted conventions as well as an extension of the DIY ethos all the way to 12 year old kids, you start to get an idea why collectors are drawn to these outsider artists.

It probably doesn’t hurt that music obsessives easily identify with these outsiders, and rightly or wrongly, in their never-ending search for uniqueness that fuels their desire to possess as Chuck Warner would categorize it, a “museum quality” collection, this makes primitive/DIY records a preferred commodity. There’s even a web site dedicated to this aesthetic, smartly called “shit-fi.com”. Add to the outsider quality, the concept of scarcity and the complicated desire associated with obtaining an original, you have a recipe for an overheated collecting environment that often supersedes the more prosaic emotion of having the music as a means of enjoyment. I once spent an evening with two such collectors in Los Feliz (California), waiting for the presumed girlfriend of the guitarist of a very collectible punk band to show up at

work, so they could pester her as to his whereabouts. (The restaurant has sent her home early..) I also know of a collector who was obsessed with obtaining the only known studio acetate by the LA band, the Screemers, after Rodney Bingenheimer had sold it to another LA collector/dealer. This is an extreme example—and maybe one that is abstruse to the mainstream critic or journalist. Most of these original singles were pressed in quantities of 500 to 1000 copies—which was an economic reality if you were paying for these yourself (as I most recently learned), and in most cases that seemed adequate enough to distribute it to your friends, a local record store or two, a copy to John Peel (R.I.P.) for radio play on BBC1 and perhaps to a few writers. The ability to predict a future reaction to a new band still remains to me, one of the great mysteries of the field. Remember, Sympathy For The Record Industry pressed 1000 copies of the first White Stripes LP, ditto Sub Pop of Nirvana's "Love Buzz" 7" and so on. As an aside, but I can't help it—in late 1988, I'm certain Jonathan Poneman (co-founder of Sub Pop) would have bet on Mudhoney to be the label's eventual salvation. Some of you will correctly postulate that some of these records are so mediocre, OK, maybe even atrocious, that 500 copies were too many for the marketplace. I agree. But the thrill of the hunt does pay off when you hear something amazing. This is why in my post-radio DJ life, I still buy singles on a regular basis, and also why I have 25 boxes of singles I'd like to divest by the time my Daughter starts college.

What this Silver single demonstrates to me, and it is perhaps a bit polyannaish on my part, is that someone could, without intention and without pure musical skill, happen upon that ineffable spirit that can tickle the listener, without being hamstrung by expectations of competency, and enjoying themselves in the creation of music, uncontrolled peals of laughter and all. Reminding us, once again that joy often touches us unexpectedly, without regards to logic and from surprising sources. One last thing, the flipside's not too shabby either. Thank you.