

YOU WANT

ALTERNATIVE

Tired of the latest generic alterna-sensation? Hanker for something truly different? Try some real outsider music: bent tunes by “artists” so far gone they make perfect sense

BY IRWIN CHUSID

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT ARMSTRONG

“Originality cannot be a goal. It is simply inevitable.” —Harry Partch

Genius? Forget it. Talent? Beside the point. Welcome to the world of outsider music, a mutant strain of twisted pop that’s so wrong it’s right. Outsider music can be the product of damaged DNA, psychotic seizures or alien abduction; medical malpractice, incarceration or simple drug fry. Or chalk it up to communal upbringing, demonic possession or bad beer.

What these often self-taught artists lack in conventional tunefulness, they compensate for with earnestness and heartfelt passion. Harbor no doubts about their sincerity: They mean it. Duke Ellington said, “If it sounds good—it is good.” Well, if it sounds bad it’s even *better*. NRBQ’s Terry Adams, a connoisseur of dodgy styles, admits, “When music gets too perfect, I don’t want to hear it. When everybody’s in tune and the rhythm is perfect and there’s no mistakes, I find myself not really interested.” Hence his fascination with the Shaggs (*see below*). Outsider fetishists prefer a

genuine if misguided Gump to a megaplatinum cretin like Alanis Morissette.

Some musical outsiders have achieved brief commercial success, e.g., acid casualties Syd Barrett and Arthur Lee. Others have enjoyed respectful careers: Captain Beefheart, Daniel Johnston (major label deal!) and Prince of Dorkness Jonathan Richman. It hasn’t charted yet, but Charles Manson has a recent album.

This shadowy realm has a long tradition in the visual media. It was championed in the 1920s by the French, who called it *art brut* (raw art). Over the century, figures have emerged in painting (Howard Finster, Bill Traylor, Jim Shaw’s book *Thrift Store Paintings*); film (Ed Wood Jr.); literature (Henry Darger, Adolf Wolfli); and architecture (Simon Rodia).

The biggest-selling outsider in music history is Brian Wilson. Many of his 1970s and ‘80s unreleased demos, long circulating among tape swappers, certify his outsider status. Hell—dig some of

the loopy post-*Pet Sounds* stuff (e.g. *The Beach Boys Love You*) that’s been released! Wilson has much in common with everyone in this article: obsessions, delusions, and emotional volatility; he’s tormented, drug-addled, and spent years under the “care” of Dr. Eugene Landy. Real damaged goods.

What follows is an overview of the gallery’s more bizarre exhibits. They are for the most part likable—though you might exclude Jandek from the A-list of your next cocktail gathering. Many, such as the Shaggs and Lucia Pamela, have a childlike exuberance that goes over well with kids; try them as an alternative to that gutless blancmange, Raffi.

Finally, there’s a simmering moral debate about outsider art that fingers the audience: Is this a freak show? Are these guileless souls being exploited?

For readers tinged with guilt, the reassuring answer is: These people are *happy* making their music. They want it to be heard. Some of us are listening. Are you?

“Folklore is the arts of the people before they find out there is any such thing as art.”

—Zora Neale Hurston

THE SHAGGS

Any study of outsider music starts with the Shaggs: three sisters from the remote, culturally disconnected backwater of Fremont, N.H., where—according to one visitor—everyone looks vaguely related. Dorothy, Helen and Betty Wiggin, encouraged by their father, formed a band featuring two guitars and drums.

In March 1969, these sibs recorded an album titled *Philosophy of the World*. This monument of “aboriginal rock” was produced by proud papa Austin Wiggin Jr. and released on the fly-by-night Third World label. Legend has it that 1,000 copies of *Philosophy* were pressed, but 900 were stolen by the man paid to release it. Few original copies have surfaced.

The Shaggs are a touchstone of unpretentiousness. Given half an ear, what they’re playing sounds

like a mess. The arrangements are so uncoordinated you wonder if they’re riffing off their common genetic code. Terry Adams, who in 1980 reissued *Philosophy* on LP (Red Rooster/Rounder), compared their cross-eyed arrangements to early Ornette Coleman. Lester Bangs wrote that Dorothy’s guitar playing was “sorta like 14 pocket combs being run through a moose’s dorsal,” and that Helen’s drumming sounded “like a peg-leg stumbling through a field of bald Uniroyals.” As a major influence, the Shaggs have cited Herman’s Hermits.

In a mid-’70s *Playboy* poll, Frank Zappa named *Philosophy* one of his Top 10 essential albums—at a time when no one had heard of it. Upon its reissue, *Rolling Stone* named the Shaggs “Comeback Band of the Year”—doubtless to the perplexity of its readers.

Austin Wiggin died in 1975, after which his

daughters disbanded and sold their instruments. A second LP, *Shaggs’ Own Thing*, was compiled out of later—and unfortunately more proficient—recordings. A Rounder CD collects both albums with two unreleased tracks.

JACK MUDURIAN

Mudurian was a resident at Boston’s Duplex Nursing Home when David Greenberger (editor of *The Duplex Planet* fanzine) worked there. Mudurian, then in his early 50s and mentally unstable, had for years been drifting in and out of institutions. One day in 1981, the chatty Mudurian mused, “I wish I knew as many songs as Sinatra.” Greenberger had a cassette deck cued to the beginning of a C90. He asked if Mudurian would sing for 45 minutes. “Sure,” replied Jack. Greenberger hit the “record”