

# Going to a-Gogh-Gogh

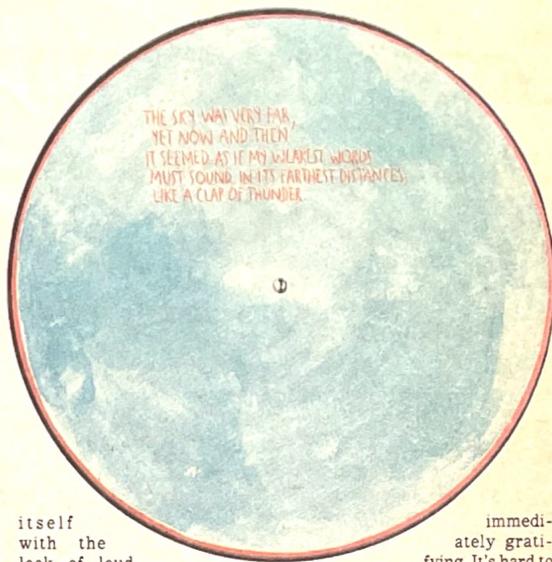
Many L.A. artists have pop music credentials; they make albums to support their artworks and performances or to launch separate careers as musicians

By HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

**M**ulticolored laser lights raked the cold mist produced by an invisible fog machine. Backstage at a Megadeth concert? No, it was the opening-night party for the Mu-

seum of Contemporary Art's exhibition "Helter Skelter." The grinding pump of industrial music by Ethyl Meatplow and the hundreds of people still lined up to get in at 10 p.m. reinforced the feeling that this was less about high art than raving rock 'n' roll.

Fitting, because many of the artists in the show have borrowed the imagery of underground clubs, motorcycle enthusiasts and tattoo and comic book artists. As contemporary art has become ever more polite and well-educated, there is a cadre that aligns



itself with the look of loud, raunchy, abrasive subcultures.

The aesthetics of alienation have been common fodder for contemporary art and for pop music since the 1960s. It is small wonder that so many art students have detoured down the long hard road of rock 'n' roll—David Byrne, Bryan Ferry, Adam Ant, WIRE, the Buzzcocks, Brian Eno, John Lennon, members of Sonic Youth, Jane's Addiction and Nirvana, to name a few.

In the early '80s, young artists often found their interests overlapping with the Los Angeles or New York punk scene. Performance art had evolved in a theatrical direction and students trained in the visual arts often found themselves making records and performing music. Laurie Anderson is probably the best-known crossover artist, one who began playing her now-trademark violin on the streets as performance art. Multidimensional performer Ann Magnuson, who was at the "Helter Skelter" opening, later remarked on the scene: "The whole insane atmosphere reminded me of the New York art events of the early '80s. All that was missing was Andy Warhol. But Crispin Glover was there—maybe that's enough."

In the early '80s, Magnuson took her nightclub act to the New York alternative space the Kitchen and gained a reputation as a performance artist. Although she has gone on to star in movies such as "Making Mr. Right" and in the ABC TV series "Anything but Love," she has maintained a parallel career as lead singer and writer for the rock band Bongwater. Shimmy Disc has recently released its critically acclaimed fifth album, "The Big Sell-Out." Magnuson, who has lived in Los Angeles since 1987, points out: "Everyone wants to be a rock star, right? It's probably because we grew up with it and love it. It's

immediately gratifying. It's hard to articulate the pleasures you get from music.

It's fun."

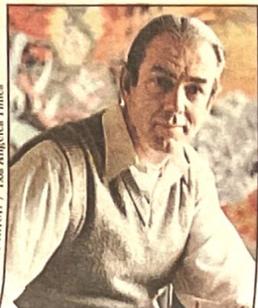
In Los Angeles, a number of visual artists have released records either as singular events or parallel careers. This crossover of rock music, performance art and visual art has attracted its own audience, and the attention of an independent record company based in London and New York—Blast First.

Blast First commissioned a series of picture discs by visual and performance artists who include Gary Panter and Jay Cotton, Joe Coleman, Robert Williams and Raymond Pettibon.

The artists' graphic imagery—amazing last-gasp examples of the visual virtues of vinyl—supports the artists' music, performance or, in the case of Williams' "Chrome, Smoke & Fire," a compilation of hot-rod music on a record lavishly decorated with big-bumpered cars and blondes. The ironically titled "Torches and Standards" by Raymond Pettibon With Super Session" features the artist's trademark drawings with text on one side of the record, an image of powder-blue clouds with red text on the other. This album includes a book of the artist's drawings, all in the circular format of the record. (These records retail for about \$30 and in L.A. can be found at La Luz de Jesus Gallery on Melrose Avenue.)

Reyne Cuccuro of Blast First explains that the disciplines of art, music and performance "all grew up together organically in the late '80s because the artists respected one another's work. That's why Sonic Youth put Pettibon's art on the cover of its last release, 'Goo,' though Geffen [Records] nearly had a heart attack. There is no reason an independent record label can't produce something that recognizes

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ROSEMARY KAVIL / Los Angeles Times



MICHAEL LAVINE



JIM MENDENHALL / Los Angeles Times

Left, visual artist Robert Williams, who compiled an album, below; performer Ann Magnuson with Kramer, also of the group Bongwater; right, visual artist Raymond Pettibon, whose disc is at top, right.

## CHROME, SMOKE & FIRE A COMPILATION OF HOT ROD MUSIC BY ROBT. WILLIAMS



# Art Rockers

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 es these interrelationships."

Cuccuro says many distributors don't seem to comprehend that Blast First presses the vinyl LPs as a rich format for the visual as well as aural talents of its artists.

"They keep asking when we're going to produce them as CDs," she says. "This is especially true of distributors in L.A. who are inundated by corporate opinion. We don't care. People who know Blast First don't listen to what other people think is important. We got a call from some auto body shop in Wisconsin for the Robert Williams record after it got reviewed in Rod and Custom magazine."

Blast First is primarily a record company, releasing albums and CDs of such rock acts as the Mekons, Lunachicks and Butthole Surfers. It considers the picture discs to be limited-edition works of art appealing to a subculture audience. "We're a record label, not an art house, but we're making the logical interface between records, performance and art," Cuccuro concludes.

If the worlds of art and music are relatively small, their overlapping orbits constitute something of a clique with many interchangeable players and factions.

Paul Smith, founder of Blast First, knew of Pettibon through Sonic Youth and initially approached him with a proposal to compile a selection of his favorite songs and have Pettibon do the visual art.

The artist felt that most of his favorite songs would be of little interest to any audience. "They certainly wouldn't be rock songs," he says. Instead, he wrote lyrics

and "delegated the music" to some friends, who spent a couple of days putting them to music. The results recall the spontaneity of earliest rock recording. Uncomplicated in structure or melody, the songs are often covers or parodies of a variety of rock genres such as the country-rock lament "Losers, Boozers, Heroes" or the surf-rock tones of "Pablo Casals (A-daddy-O-for-Strings)."

On "Torches and Standards," visual artists Mike Kelley and Richie Lee sing and play drums and bass, respectively; friends like filmmaker Dave Markey and musician Art Byington arranged the rest of the musical parts. Abby Normal, from the Rails, came up with the female vocals.

"Most of the songs on this record are parodying styles of rock because I wanted to do my own versions of songs," Pettibon says. "At least, I'm bringing something to it outside of what you'd get in rock music. It invigorates the form."

"You can't escape the power of pop music," he continues. "Even if you don't keep up with it you're likely to recognize what's on the charts. If you accept Springsteen as the highest level of rock as poetry, it debases the future of what the field can do."

Artist Jim Shaw issued a 45-rpm record to accompany his show last spring at the Linda Cathcart Gallery. His players included Byington, Kelley and Lee, as well as artists Stephen Prina on keyboards and Eddie Ruscha—who has his own band—on bass. The record, by the fictional group the Dogz, includes "It's Easter in My Brain" and "Willy Nilly." The latter—a rearrangement of a tune that was sung by Charles Manson's devotees—is performed by a number of women artists, including Liz Larner, Cindy Bernard, Martine Tomczyk, Laura Graham and Maija



THEODORA LITSIOS / For The Times  
 Jim Shaw, left, and Marnie Weber, right, are visual artists who have recorded their own music. Here they are rehearsing with musician Art Byington.

Beeton.

With its psychedelic cover design, the record corresponds to the teen-age traumas that constitute the larger theme of Shaw's episodic visual project "My Mirage," which takes its title from an Iron Butterfly song.

"I wanted to work in variations on '60s aesthetics, and doing a single seemed important in terms of those aesthetics," Shaw says. "On the one hand, rock music reflects the Angst that kids feel, and on the other, it gives temporary answers in their language. My age group listened to Dylan. Today, they listen to Morrissey."

"I'm addicted to music," Shaw admits. "For me, it's not an entirely healthy drug, because the music I like best makes me sad. It moves me in a way art rarely does. My job, that of a two-dimensional artist working mostly on walls, just isn't that moving. I try to work emotions into it through the narrative, but there are some limitations in the art world. The art world doesn't want to get too obvious or specific about anything. It wants to maintain an approach of abstraction that allows them an out from utter sincerity."

Shaw, Pettibon, Williams and Kelley are included in the "Helter Skelter" exhibition, which acknowledges these artists' ongoing associations with rock 'n' roll. Rock is still the anthem of adolescent rebellion, a posture that fine art can no longer sustain. At CalArts—where many of these artists studied—and at other art schools, the idea of art as raw self-expression has been thoroughly discouraged. Rock, less confined by critical theory, embraces the qualities of rage, sex and adrenalin no longer available to the art world's knowledgeable and self-conscious elite.

Richie Lee, who plays bass, guitar and percussion and does backing vocals on Pettibon's and Shaw's records, exhibited last fall at the Linda Cathcart Gallery. One of the paintings hearkened to his rock alter ego. It was a precisely rendered Motorhead logo surrounded by a frame of steel chain. Lee has a parallel career as bass

player in the hard rock band Spinout.

Spinout's eponymous first record was released last year by Delicious Vinyl. Two band members were painting producer Michael Ross' house and persuaded him to come hear them play; he signed them, produced their first record and sent the band out to tour nationally last summer. Spinout regularly plays such L.A. venues as Club Lingerie.

All band members are graduates of CalArts who perform under rocker pseudonyms. Lee (a.k.a. "Scooter") and lead singer-songwriter Tom Henry III ("Ronnie Joe Brown") are both painters; the drummer, Steve Hadley ("Izzy Cane"), and the riveting guitarist, Mark Lightcap ("Geezer"), both graduated from the music school.

"My first aesthetic understanding of anything was rock 'n' roll. It's the reason I went to art school," Lee says. "Music is a more physical and direct kind of high than art. The satisfaction is the same, but while doing it the rock is more immediate, the art is far more intellectual."

Lee adds a practical note: "Rock 'n' roll is cheaper. People can buy your records. You can afford to make your records. It's not that weird, specialized elite quality of art."

Henry recalls his musical beginnings while enrolled in the intensely political and theoretical curriculum of CalArts: "I hated the whole system there, but one of the things I learned was how to rock. It was the best class I had, and I was the teacher and the pupil." Henry and the other band members do not integrate their visual art and performing art careers. Explains Henry: "I didn't start making music out of art. It came out of boredom and wanting to be on stage." Yet, rock 'n' roll is the overwhelming influence behind his wall-size, Day-Glo canvases lettered with names of hard rock bands—Motley Crue and Van Halen.

"I made art about one of the most powerful things I knew—rock 'n' roll," he concedes. "When I saw Aerosmith in concert, I was mesmerized. There's no way I can ever hope to make a painting that

powerful."

Spinout's first record is rife with songs like "Hot Rod to Hell" and "Girlfriend's a Bitch." Henry says that if it takes longer to write a song than the wait for a traffic light, he figures it's forced. The lyrics reflect this and are obsessed with the perennial preoccupations of rock 'n' roll—girls, cars, parties. As one observer put it: "Their video is so sexist, it could only be a reaction against the years of feminist teachers at CalArts."

The group's label, Delicious Vinyl, is devoted primarily to rap acts. This has led to confusion on the part of radio programmers and the press, according to Henry. He and cohorts hope for better results with their second LP, tentatively titled "Race With the Devil."

"We work really hard at this. It's something I believe in as much [as], if not more than, art," Henry says. "The parallels between the art business and the music business are amazing in terms of the artist not being in control of his destiny. I never thought I could be in two such frustrating businesses at the same time."

Performance art, which developed out of a need to integrate personal experience with the formal framework of visual art, grew in part from the narrative impulse. It has been an important medium for women, and many have turned to rock music to express their ideas. Carolee Caroompas' performances incorporated songs with lyrics that related to her paintings.

"I liked the idea of taking the same subject matter and being able to play with its transformation from static to non-static," she says. In 1980, the songs were collected on an album, "Target Practice," which corresponded to a performance and exhibition. The music is simple accompaniment to Caroompas' vocals, which lean on blues or country styles to underscore the narrative concerned with relationships and gender roles.

Her most recent record, "La Lucha," is more complicated musically—with Tim Biskup as percussionist and Chas Smith on keyboards and pedal steel—and is sung

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by Caroompas in a plaintive, lyrical voice.

"I like to perform, and I love the aftereffect of hearing what you've done on the radio," she says. "The first time I heard my name and my music on KXL I thought, 'Mmmm, I like this.'"

"I have a great affection for rock 'n' roll. It's an immediate reflection of popular culture, more immediate than art, more visceral in terms of energy. Painting becomes the intellectual piece and rock 'n' roll becomes the other side of that."

On New Year's Eve at Sue Spaid Gallery, Marnie Weber exhibited a show of collaged covers for her new CD, "Woman With Bass." Weber, who was the bass player for that ubiquitous L.A. band of the early '80s the Party Boys, also plays guitar and synthesizer and sings. This, her second record, blends sophisticated electronic rock with erotic, subtle and poetic lyrics. "For me, visual art has a tendency to be more therapeutic," she says. "My music has a tendency to be more cerebral. I write and record all of it. Also, I write the music in character, to get more extremes of emotion."

Like Weber's first album, "Songs Hurt Me," the new record involves poignant tales of love and loss. "I try to write for sensitive people," she says. "It would look trite, I suppose, in visual art."

Willie Herrón, well-known Chicano artist, has a parallel career performing with his rock band Los Illegals. Ten years ago, the group released an LP on A&M called "Internal Exile." The bilingual single "El Lay," written by Herrón with performance artist and painter Gronk, was well-received. Herrón created the band as an extension of his art—hence the slide shows and live mural painting that are part of the performances. But he says that the political and social message of his music has led him to play museums and alternative spaces rather than clubs. "I prefer the audiences," he says. "They take us more seriously. I don't need to party."

Rubén Guevara has been a pioneer in synthesizing rock 'n' roll with performance art since his 1972 re-creation of Frank Zappa's concept album "Ruben and the Jets." In the early '80s, Guevara's band, Con Safos, was playing clubs. He added progressively more performance elements to the show—narratives on Chicano experience, slide shows, mural iconography spray-painted while the band was playing—which led him to play galleries and performance art venues.

"The sensibility is the same in that rock is a rebel art form and in performance art you take the guerrilla approach and do it wherever you can," Guevara says. His familiarity with Chicano history and experience appeared in his music and also led him to form a label at Rhino in 1984. Zyanya—the Aztec word meaning forever—put out three LPs, "The History of Latino Rock, 1956-1965," "The Best of Thee Midnitters" and "Los Angelinos: The East Side Renaissance,"

with such bands as the Plugz, Thee Royal Gents, the Brat and his own band.

Although Guevara has spent the past four years active in performance art, including his sociopolitical narrative called "Aztlán Babylon Rhythm and Blues," he continues to play music. He recently revived his Lil' Ruben G. and the East Side Soul Revue for Wednesday night shows at Fais Do Do.

"I use music as a metaphor for life, to try and find the music in one's life and art," Guevara says. "Straight-ahead singing is very different [from performance art]—very immediate but still soulful. I guess soul's the bottom line in both forms. It's got to be some kind of soulful experience."

**A**mong artists who have a long history in the record business, one would have to cite Terry Allen. He has been making records as well as paintings, sculptures and installations since his 1967 single "Gonna California" and "Color Book." In 1975, Allen released "Juarez," a compilation of five years' work. He made related works of art as he would do with subsequent albums—"Bloodlines," "Lubbock on Everything" and "Amerasia." The last three were released on his own label, Fate Records, and are now available on CD.

"I always made music, always did drawing or painting. They are similar working processes," Allen says. "The '60s had something to do with it. I was at Chouinard [Art Institute—now CalArts] from 1962 to 1966, and played in a band. Music was what was happening then that proved to be the most volatile form of expression."

"Music is more accessible. It's not expensive relative to art. It doesn't have as much pretense as isolated art-making does. It's just as difficult to make a good song as a good painting or sculpture. I don't know too many artists who don't play an instrument or listen to music while working."

Allen goes on to cite examples: "William Wiley is a good guitar player; Ron Nagel, the ceramist, used to write music for the Tubes; Bruce Nauman used to play bass in a polka band—though he might deny it. Larry Bell played under the name of Dr. Lux. When Lenny Bruce played L.A., he always did two shows and they had a hard time getting the first audience out. So they hired Larry to play and he drove the audience out."

But Allen produces records with the regularity and the chops of a careerist. It is rock music rooted in country-Western as befits his Lubbock, Tex., origins. He performs with his Panhandle Mystery Band but confesses: "I don't consider myself a performer. But if you write songs and no one else is playing them, that's your only option. It's like hanging the art on the walls."

Allen has collaborated on a few occasions with that art student-turned-musician David Byrne, most recently on Byrne's new

album, "Uh-Oh." Asked whether there is more freedom in making music, Allen says: "It can come off as easy. Part of me thinks everybody ought to be able to make music. But I don't want to listen to it."

**A**llen dedicated his song "Amarillo Highway" to his oldest friend, Dave Hickey, who has succeeded in the unlikely hyphenate career of art critic-songwriter. After a stint as senior editor of Art in America, Hickey lived in Nashville, Tenn., from 1976 to 1980, writing country and pop songs for

Tompall Glaser and Waylon Jennings.

He returned to art criticism in the early '80s but continues to write songs. He wrote a soundtrack for an installation of photographs by Nic Nicosia and last year produced "Oscar and Billy," a speculative ballad on the lives of Oscar Wilde and Billy the Kid. At present, he is simultaneously writing a novel about a rock 'n' roll band and producing an album of songs by the fictional group.

Hickey has a unique perspective on the reasons visual artists might get involved in rock 'n' roll: "It's

kind of comforting to know you can communicate on some sort of community level with another person. I have no problem distinguishing myself from my peers, but finding common ground can be important, and pop music is about that. It may only be establishing common ground with other dope-shooting, violent, bike-riding a--holes, but that's better than total alienation. If you're interested in total alienation, you make a work of art." □

Hunter Drohojowska is chair, department of liberal arts and sciences, Otis/Parsons School of Art & Design.

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