

# Rock & Roll Dope

John Sinclair

1969

We arrived in New York City on Dec. 15 and made it to Steve Paul's Scene to dig the Rationals and Slim Harpo. The Rats were cooking as ever and even managed to get a few people dancing. Slim Harpo had Lightnin' Slim, one of my childhood heroes, on guitar and vocals and the joint was jumpin'! We stuck around until closing and went in. The next day we hung around the Elektra offices listening to tapes and checking out the artwork for our album, which should be released by the end of this month. On Tuesday the issue of *Rolling Stone* hit the stands with Rob's picture on the cover and 5 pages of the MC5 inside. We were overjoyed even though the story was complete bullshit.

On Wednesday night we went down to the Fillmore East to play for the "community" in the Motherfuckers' "free night," which they had extracted from Bill Graham with much difficulty. David Peel & the Lower East Side and the Group Image played first, finishing just before we arrived. We got hung up trying to leave our hotel and didn't realize that things started and ended so early at the Fillmore, and when we got there people were going crazy. We got it together as fast as we could, but the people were really restless and had taken over the stage, pushing and shoving each other around, fighting, etc.

The feeling in the Fillmore was incredibly tense when we finally got on stage ready to play. Evidently Ron Levine, our equipment manager, had pushed a kid from the neighborhood off the stage in an effort to clear the performing area, and the kid's friends were uptight to the point of pulling knives and shit. We did our show and split, meeting with the Motherfuckers later for tokes and rapping at the Zenta Colony.

New York City isn't like Detroit at all. You have to understand that. In fact, Detroit is Mecca compared to New York City. And Ann Arbor is heaven itself. There's no place like the Grande Ballroom in New York, although there are thousands of places "to go." They all suck. Steve Paul's Scene is the only place you can dance to rock and roll of some quality in New York City, and it's a cellar bar, you dig? New York City is the end of the line, man. Concrete consciousness. Walking out the door in the morning onto the street in New York City is like walking into a vise. The dirt and fear grind themselves into your skin and you feel dirty and shitty all the time. Detroit feels like a pasture after living in New York City for a week—and the lower east side makes the Warren-Forest feel like an old western town, with the sky showing through everywhere, places to stretch and breathe, even the fucking John C. Lodge expressway is a relief after the lower east side. Whew!

And the people are trapped in all that, too, just as you would expect them to be. You can't live in a dungeon without becoming a prisoner, without getting pulled down into convict consciousness, and New York City is the last stop before Hell itself. The people want to have a good time and get down but they aren't sure if that's what it's all about. They are pushed around by fear and paranoia like rats in a biologic sink. And within the crowding cramped shoved-together city people are incredibly separated from each other. It's almost impossible for living communes to form and grow because there isn't enough space. And even if you can buy the space the pressures are so intense and the space is so dark and dirty it all starts to grind into your brain and you can't stand it any more. Like rats it seems the only hope lies in deserting the sinking ship—get the fuck out now! is the only thing I could say.

Anyway, we got the fuck out of New York City and stopped to play in Cleveland one night on the way home. Back home we played with Arthur Brown Monday night at Olympia Stadium, which was a bummer since Olympia is such a jive place to have a concert and not enough people came. The Rationals and the SRC were also there and warmed up the night considerably, but nothing could have saved it for me. It was too fucking cold and empty in there. The one great thing happened during the 5's set when someone turned on the waving American flags up under the roof and lit them up like a pinball machine. I think it was during "Rocket Reducer No. 62." Reminded me of Francis Scott Key.

We had Christmas Eve off and went back to work the next night at the Crow's Nest East. We stayed up all night, caught the plane at 8:30 a.m. and flew into New York to play a free concert at the Fillmore East. Elektra rented the Fillmore for the concert, gave away 3000 tickets, and pressed a special preview edition of the 5's single "Kick Out the Jams"/"Motor City Is Burning," to give away at the concert. This was the day after Christmas, and we walked into the middle of a hurricane:

On the Monday before Christmas (the 23<sup>rd</sup>) there was supposed to have been a free night for the community but Graham canceled it, issuing a statement to the effect that the police had told him they'd close him down unless he stopped letting the Motherfuckers use it. This would seem to get him off the hook, but the Motherfuckers didn't believe him. They couldn't afford to believe him.

The lower east side is a desperate fucking place, and the free nights at the Fillmore, weird as they might've been, were the first really encouraging thing in the neighborhood in a long time. The people on the street had a place where they could meet for free, listen to music, rap, smoke dope, hang out, beat each other up if they were into that, or whatever. They needed it, and they had to have it no matter what else was going down, even if Graham said they couldn't—he had to be bullshitting because they had to have the Fillmore if only for that one night a week.

To top it off, Graham had also told the Motherfuckers that there were 500 tickets for the community which he had willfully destroyed because he wasn't going to let them in there for the MC5 concert no matter what. But after we investigated the matter and talked it over with Elektra President Jac Holzman, and after we had made it clear that we wouldn't be able to play unless everyone who wanted to get in was allowed in Graham somehow came up with a bunch of tickets that had been "misplaced," and they were taken over to the Common Ground coffeehouse for distribution to the street people.

There was another hassle during David Peel's set when someone interrupted Dave to say that there were 50 people outside who weren't allowed in and there were still seats open. Then they were let in, or let themselves in, one way or the other, and the show went on.

The tensions were rising by now—the neighborhood people were looking for a confrontation of some sort with the Fillmore people and we were right in the middle of it. Dudes were telling us things like "you just say the word and we'll rip the fuckin' seats out!" and "we can't leave here tonight or we'll never get back in." Whatever else we knew about what was going down, we knew that wasn't our scene at all. We came all the way from Detroit without any sleep to play a free concert, made sure everyone who wanted to come was admitted, and were ready to kick em out as promised. If we'd known people were going to be into ripping the seats out and fucking people up, we would've stayed home and played at the Grande, where people come to have a good time, smoke some dope and fuck in the corners or whatever.

But the lower east side has its own scene and its own very specific pressures, which were acting on us and trying to twist us into reacting to this weirdness. The politics of the moment were defined for us as confrontation and destruction, and we couldn't dig it. So when the band went on stage Brother J.C. explained that we were there to play the music and have a good time, which pissed a lot of neighborhood people off. And when Tyner repeated J.C.'s statement in the middle of the set they got pissed off even more. But it was true, and that's all we could say.

When the 5 finished playing and left the stage, a group of Motherfuckers and neighborhood street kids, including the Puerto Rican Black Cats, a local gang, stormed the stage and tried to take over the microphones so they could rap their thing out, but Graham's staff had turned the p.a. system off. Frustrated in what they saw as their only hope for keeping the Fillmore, the people on stage began beating on our drums and milling around. Meanwhile most of the people who'd been at the concert were leaving, with maybe 100 people staying behind to agitate. Reports came to the stage area that Graham had been struck in the face with a chain and some other people had been beat up.

The scene on the stage started to get out of hand and ended with the street kids bashing thru all the drumheads, tearing the cymbal stands and other hardware apart to use as weapons, trying to carry drums and cymbals offstage and into the street, and general chaos and weirdness. I managed to salvage all the drums, with the help of some brothers and some of the Fillmore staff, and got them together with the rest of the equipment backstage, where the band was waiting to hear about what was going on out front.

The battle raged on the stage in front of the fire screen, and an attempt was made to rip open the asbestos screen with a knife. We got our shit together and the band split out the side door, with me waiting behind with the equipment to make sure everything got out o.k.

Elektra Records had sent down a limousine to pick up the 5 and take them to eat, and when the Motherfuckers and street kids saw the big black car they freaked completely and started kicking it, screaming at the band, and hollering for blood. The band seemed to have entered the limo and it pulled off, only to discover that Wayne Kramer and Dennis Thompson had been left behind in the middle of the crowd. Knives were waving in the air. Wayne and Dennis tried to rap it down to the people and finally reached some kind of understanding as the car came back for them. The pissed-off people were breaking copies of the free 45 and throwing them at the limousine, but everyone escaped o.k.

We left New York City for Stratford, Conn., the next morning and played two days at the Ballroom in Stratford, about an hour's drive from the City. It was a relief to play for kids again, and everyone had a good time. Then we returned to New York Sunday, went out to East Orange, New Jersey, to do the Kokaine Karma show with Rudnick & Frawley on WFMU, and shot back to the east side to dig Pharoah Sanders at Slug's. Pharoah was out of sight. If you haven't got his album "Tauhid" yet, you'd better go out and get it right now. Pharoah was packing them in at Slug's every night between Christmas and New Year's and making some truly religious music. You should have been there.

We were supposed to play New Year's Eve at the Broadway Central Hotel in the east Village with David Peel and the Soft White Underbelly, but rumors started that the street people were going to invade the hotel and disrupt the dance, so the promoters (the Underbelly's management) called off the whole dance, which was a bummer. We stayed through New Year's Eve, went to hear Pharoah again, partied, and decided to come home.

In the meantime, with all this shit going down, some of our people from Ann Arbor drove out to New York to be with us on New Year's. My woman brought out the MC5 film so we could finish editing it in NYC and get the final print cut. But before we could get to the film lab Monday morning the police had towed the car away. We got the lab, traced down the car, and I went up to Pier 96 to the police pound to pick it up. It cost \$25 and when I got to the film lab and opened the trunk, the film was gone. All of it.

All I could figure was that a cop saw the film in the trunk at the pound, thought it was porn, and snatched it to show to his buddies at home. It wasn't the work of a street thief or junkie because the film was the only thing that was missing—two suitcases, some new cowboy boots and a lot of other stuff was left in the car, and just the film was gone. We went back to the pound to inquire, but all they would say was that it's against their policy to look in people's trunks! What bullshit.

I stayed in New York two days after everyone else came home to try to track it down, but with no success. Ed Sanders has contacted a number of lawyers, but it looks like we'll have to do it all over again. We spent three months and over a thousand dollars so far on the film. What a bummer.

I'll leave you with that. See you next time—hope I'm feeling better.

# fifth Estate

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