

MC-5 in San Francisco

Art Johnston

1969

Special to the *Fifth Estate!*

SAN FRANCISCO—The MC5 have blasted their way out of the grease pits of FoMoCo city, resolved their feud with the Motherfuckers of New York's lower east side, and wound up in the San Francisco jailhouse after a near street fight with a squad of TACs.

In the early hours of March 18 the Five were rolling along San Francisco's Bayshore Freeway in a borrowed station wagon with eleven other friends of the Berkeley White Panthers, doin' their usual thing, when the forces of Legitimate Violence tried to run them off the skyway.

The pigs busted the Five for speeding, drunk driving, overloading a station wagon, possession of marijuana and other dangerous drugs, contributing to the delinquency of, fucking, and otherwise violating minors and resisting arrest.

In the scuffle that followed, White Panther Jerry Younkings was thrown against the guardrail by steel-helmeted fuzz who threatened to throw him to his death far below.

"Who would they believe, punk, you or us?" they taunted. Rhythm guitarist Fred Smith had the shit kicked out of him.

White Panther Minister of Information and beatnik-ideologue John Sinclair was in another vehicle, and escaped over the bridge into Berkeley.

At their arraignment the following day, the charges were reduced to driving with alcohol in the vehicle and resisting arrest. The Five were out of jail in time to play for a frenzied mob at a benefit for Liberation News Service in Berkeley.

Reaction to the energy rock group in this stable revolutionary community has been a mixture of paralysis and coming-in-your-pants.

Bill Graham, manager of the Fillmore rock emporiums, refuses to hire the rabble-rousers anymore after the riot which followed their last appearance in New York.

The Five, in cooperation with the Motherfuckers, staged a free show at Haight's Straight Theatre on March 13. The bawdy Scum Palace was filled to capacity with (in the words of the master of "ceremonies") "the most baddest, low down, come down, run down, vile, likker drinkin', drug runnin', spiteful, nogood man-haters that ever stalked the face of this earth!"

Predictably, the crowd went insane. Dee-generate, glassyeyed, straw-toned, teased out braless freakies threw themselves at lead guitarist Wayne Kramer, their raunchy groins oozing fuzz-tone energy. It was a surreal, macabre burlesque of a 1955 Gene Vincent State Fair show.

On Sunday the 16th the Five turned up at Golden Gate Park to play for an estimated crowd of twenty thousand grizzly loonatics. The only cop that turned up that day split when he saw the Hell's Angels congregated behind the bandstand.

The MC5 are almost like an acid test. From the several times we have observed their masterful performances out here, it has become apparent that their music appeals to the lowest on the social strata.

The blacks dig it, the really wiggled out revolutionaries dig it; while the genteel hip, the intelligentsia, and older people in general can't relate. There is nothing to hang on to; it bespeaks more anarchy, more destruction.

Jac Holzman of Elektra Records has run into fire from every segment of the industry for backing the Five. We read in *Billboard* that the liner notes are being revised.

"He came crying on our shoulder," Sinclair says, "and we told him, we knew people would get uptight. They're scared. They don't know what's going on."

People out here often react to the MC5 the way jazz followers first reacted to the be-bop of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie when they used to play at Vinton's in Harlem in the early forties.

A lot of people don't know if they are "real." Like, is this a Hollywood hype? Were these guys blended together by Elektra in a Moog Synthesizer? Is this really what's happening to us?

Or, conversely, is this where we came from; is this what's really bothering us, deep down?

The MC5, virtually alone among contemporary rock musicians, are trying to encounter the black man's music of the present: the anguish and violence of burning ghettos; not the nostalgic up-tempo electrified R&B that Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley were playing at rent parties in the thirties.

The Five are trying to fuse this experience with the purest of their own culture (itself a derivative of black music); the hard rock exemplified in their road show opener, Carl Perkins' "Tutti-Frutti."

For the past several generations, Western music has been a history of encounters with Afro-American music. Popular music has been a reflection of black styles developed a generation or so before.

White "swing" of the thirties was based on innovations made by Louis Armstrong in the twenties. In the forties, whites reacted to be-bop by popularizing a cheapened Dixieland.

In the fifties, rock and roll (perhaps the only "legitimate" form of popular music to yet emerge) developed out of the rhythm and blues created in the thirties and forties.

The Five are transmuting their voices into emotive musical instruments—and their instruments into energetic expressions of ID-eology: that life-style which emerges as a gut-level reaction to an irrationally suppressive society—once the cover, the mental scab, is ripped off.

Some of the cuts, such as the opener "Ramblin' Rose," don't come off. Others such as "Come Together" and "I Want You Right Now" are hard drivers always on the verge of climax.

Wayne Kramer is becoming over the years an amazingly together guitarist. Rob Tyner's voice has yet to come to maturity—and this doesn't mean he's too loud necessarily—he's awaiting more vibrato, more control.

In live performance, Dennis Thompson's fine drumwork is almost buried under layers of lashing Thanatos.

The Five have shown that they can play hard mean rock and roll that has the primal fascination of a menstruating cunt.

Now maybe they can get down to the business of assimilating the present in America, a challenge that rock and roll has been delaying for too long.

Contemporary rock is in danger of falling into the complacent imitation of nostalgic blues forms. The only truly forward direction rock and roll can take and one which will bring white youth into the revolutionary cadence of black militancy—is to confront and attempt to understand, and even assimilate, the black experience as it is being reflected in the atonal, explorative shriek of jazz artists like Sonny Rollins.

The MC5 are trying to understand, and to live, pure rock and roll, as well as the seething discontent of the new jazz. Their music does lead to fucking, and it does lead to anarchy, and violent opposition to institutionalized repression.

"Kick Out the Jams" should be viewed as any first album, and weighed not only for what it offers, but what it portends.

Sidebar

Motor-City Madness: "That Sort Of Thing We Don't Want Going On"
from our anchor-man in Berkeley

BENEFIT FOR BLACK PANTHERS ON MARCH 21 & 22 CANCELLED BY PIGS INSPECTOR O'JALLA: "THEY (THE FINNISH-AMERICAN HALL) DIDN'T LOSE THEIR DANCE PERMIT THE BPD ADVISED THEM OF THE PROBLEM WEDNESDAY (WHEN FIVE PLAYED THERE FOR LNS) AND IT WAS APPARENTLY THEIR DECISION THAT THEY DIDN'T WANT THAT SORT OF THING GOING ON" F-A HALL (SCARED): "YOU CAN'T TELL POLITICS MAY HAVE BEEN THEIR CHIEF MOTIVATION FOR CLOSING THE HALL. IF WE HELD THE DANCE THE HALL WOULD BE PERMANENTLY CLOSED"

CHARLES BERCY OF NAT BLACK PANTHER OFFICE & CANDIDATE FOR BERK CITY COUNCIL: "IT WAS A TRICK BY THE POWER STRUCTURE TO SABOTAGE OUR CAMPAIGN & OUR EFFORTS TO RAISE MONEY FOR IT. I SPOKE WED & WORD LEAKED OUT I WOULD BE THERE."

WHITE PANTHER & CANDIDATE FOR BERK CITY COUNCIL BILL MILLER: "WE GOT THE WORD FRIDAY NIGHT AT SEVEN WHEN WE WENT TO PAY THE MONEY. THE MONEY WE LOST HURT US SO FUCKIN MUCH IT WAS UNIMAGINABLE. THE MC5 ARE THE HERO OF THE LUMPENPROLES HERE. IF THE 5 WOULD STAY AROUND A COUPLE MONTHS THEY COULD BREAK INTO THE TOP NATIONWIDE. A LOT OF PEOPLE & ORGS IN THE MOVEMENT BEHIND THEM.

BERKELEY BARB BUSTED FOR FIRST TIME IN ITS FOUR YEAR HISTORY. BARB IS SECOND OLDEST UNDG PAP IN COUNTRY. ALAMEDA COUNTY DA BUSTED THIS WEEKS ISSUE OF BARB TUES MARCH 25 FOR ALLEGEDLY OBSCENE PICTURE OF 4 OF MC5 ENGAGED IN (S) FUCKING ETC WHITE PANTHER CHICK (with no other identity, apparently) FILTHY PIC TAKEN BY PANTHER EMIL BACILLA FROM DETROIT TO GO WITH STORY BY PANTHER ART JOHNSTON FROM FoMoCoVILLE 53 YR OLD BARB EDITOR MAX SHEER RELEASED ON 500 DOLLAR BOND DA: "WHAT IS THIS MC5 SOME MOTORCYCLE GANG"

SHEER: "THIS IS NOT A LEGAL MATTER BUT A POLITICAL ONE REAGAN IS DOING THIS TO BOLSTER HIS UPCOMING LEGISLATION FUCKING IS NOT DIRTY PEOPLE HAVE BEEN DOING IT FOR YEARS WE PRINT PICTURES AS THEY COME WE HAVE NEVER PRINTED A PICTURE PORTRAYING INTERCOURSE BEFORE THE MC5 TELL US TO KICK OUT THE JAMS TO RELEASE INHIBITIONS THIS IS ONE WAY OF DOING THAT"

THE ISSUE HAS BEEN COMPLETELY SOLD OUT FOR SEVERAL DAYS IF CONV EDITOR SHEER FACES 6 MON &/OR 500 DOLLARS.

—AJ

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