



Assault with a Smile

MELVINS

by David B. Livingstone
Photos by Dominique Spina



It's one of those nights when everyone seems to be screaming. First at the Magic Stick; then in the normally-desolate lobby of the Ramada on Cass; finally in Lafayette Coney Island, where clatter and clamor are drowned beneath repeated barks of "chili cheese fries." It's three AM, the morning of September 12, and the Melvins are in search of sustenance following a 90-minute set. Silence, even relative silence, is elusive.

Buzz Osborn, Dale Crover, and Kevin Rutmanis are tired. It's late. And there isn't much time - the band heads for Cleveland bright and early - and there's a lot to talk about. Their just-finished set at the Magic Stick; their just-released collaboration album with English gloom-industrial guru Lustmord; their about-to-be-released disc with Jello Biafra; the monstrous coffee table book they just published, *Neither Here Nor There*, which doubles as a "greatest hits" album. Beyond that, it's the 20th anniversary of drummer extraordinaire Dale Crover's first performance as a Melvin - September 11, 1984.

I am healthily skeptical. Really, September 11? "Yes, As far as we can tell. September 11, 1984. It was also the date that those cowards crashed those planes..." Buzz says.

"Which I predicted," Dale asserts.

"Dale predicted that. He said there would be a new divine wind," Buzz agrees.

"I knocked over my two cymbal stands, and I said 'this is what's going to happen about eighteen years from now.'"

Sarcasm has a sizeable place in the Melvins' ethos. Despite the apocalyptic volume, distorted roar of the guitar, and often funereal trudge of their tempos, they leave the overseriousness associated with many of their contemporaries at the door. Humor, grim though it may be, is one of the band's main ingredients - even if many of their fans don't get (or even notice) the joke. Album titles like *Pigs of the Roman Empire* and *Hostile Ambient Takeover* are funny. Redoing "Smells Like Teen Spirit" with Leif Garrett on vocals (and actually improving the song) was funny. Wearing matching muu-muus onstage is funny. But audiences can be forgiven for thinking that there just might be an undercurrent of malice, and that the biggest joke might be on them.

It's an impression that *The Melvins Trick and Riddle Book* does little to dissuade. It's a CD-sized book oddly free of tricks, and with only a few riddles (and no answers). Seems there wasn't enough room for such things once all the necessary photos of car and motorcycle accidents, pictures of mummified cats, and enlarged tick heads found their way in. So what was the trick? "They got you to buy it," Maureen Crover deadpans. "No, we gave him one," Buzz answers. "We tricked you into taking one for free."

"We met this guy in Minneapolis, a graffiti guy, who'd put together a few little things like that. So we sent him a bunch of images, and he put it all together. I love stuff like that. I'm so happy with those sorts of things. I guarantee you that there will be more stuff like that in the future." Like what? "A DVD. But I've got to think of an angle for it. It's got to be like the book; you've got to be just as confused when you're done watching it as when you start."

Beyond sarcasm, Melvins Family Values also necessarily entail doing things differently, both from everyone else and from their own prior efforts. They're probably the first band to emerge from the various idioms critic-types have assigned them to (metal, grunge, punk, blah blah....) to have produced their own coffee table book - *Neither Here Nor There*, a monstrous hardbound tome filled with amazing art and writing - none of which has much at all to do with the Melvins.

"We got the idea to do the book a couple of years ago. We were selling the trilogy gatefold vinyl, and the idea popped into my head that it was like a book. Then I went and looked at a whole bunch of rock books and I realized how stupid they all are. I knew I didn't want to do anything like that," Osborn explains. "So then it was a matter of thinking of a way to make it happen that would be amusing to me and not totally pointless. And avoiding completely any kind of biography type thing, which I think is horribly boring. It's got all kinds of different artists and writers. Once it got started, it didn't take long for me to realize that this was going to be really fun and cool. It was a lot of hard work, at least a year and a half. Fortunately my wife (*Mackie Osborn, designer of CD packages for the likes of Tricky*) is a designer, so that end of things was pretty well covered."



I note that the Melvins book seems to have already been influential, as Buzz has just bought Krist Novoselic's recently-published *Of Grunge and Government*.

"I'd like to think that if I had sold upwards of 20 million albums, I'd come up with something a little better than a half-assed paperback ghostwritten by a couple of chowderheads from who knows where. It makes our book look like the Bible. Or at least the tax code book."

The Melvins' latest album, *Pigs of the Roman Empire*, was created in collaboration with English industrialist Lustmord; continuing a longstanding trend, the album marks a departure from anything fans might find familiar. Brooding electronics, noise bursts, odd atmospherics suddenly interrupted by a trademark Les Paul snarl. "I had the idea to do an album with him a long time ago. And these things can take longer than you imagine. At least three years ago, I heard his stuff and thought that it would be a cool collaboration.

"There are true collaborations, and then things that are mostly us, others that are mostly him. It's unlike anything we've ever done, which is what attracts me from the very beginning. We did our stuff in LA at the same place we did *Hostile Ambient Takeover*. He did his own stuff in his own studio. It's everything I like about making music; it's something different than anything we've done, and he's an interesting character who's added things we never would have thought of. I think it came out really good. Kevin calls it our *Dark Side of the Moon*."

Pigs of the Roman Empire was released to an eagerly-waiting world in August. But in one of those career-killer sort of moves that record label execs would usually scream about (but of the sort that the Melvins seem to do habitually), they've already got their next disc ready for October release - a collaboration with Jello Biafra, who joined them onstage at the Magic Stick. "Jello got interested in us way late in the game. And I don't know how interested he really is in us, but enough to give it a whack," Buzz says. "When we got an opportunity to do something with him, it seemed weird enough and too much of a golden opportunity to pass up."

And a golden opportunity it was indeed. Biafra's

appearance onstage at the Magic Stick came as a welcome surprise to the several hundred fans in attendance, and it was all that was needed to spur an already-cyclonic mosh pit to fevered new heights. Live and on record, it's an odd pairing that works extremely well, with Biafra's polemics meshing well with the band's blunt-force-trauma sound. "I think it's good; I'm happy with it," Crover says. "It's been an interesting experience, and it's going to be a very interesting result, for sure."

"I like working with Jello because he means it," Rutmanis says. "It's good to be around somebody who'll practice what they preach." Live, Jello practiced by spending half of "California Uber Alles" crowd-surfing. "You won't find me diving out there at that age," Crover says admiringly. "You won't find me diving out there, period," Osborne replies. "He likes people a lot more than I do." It was a fitting finale to a set that included the blaring of Rutmanis' pedal-triggered fire alarms, the screeching of one of his custom-made doll voice toys ("You give the best happy hugs ever" sounds different distorted at 120 decibels), and ninety full minutes of sound-cudgel wielded by the sole credible survivors of the once-vaunted northwest music scene.

It was a fitting commemoration of Crover's 20th year as a Melvin, and Osborn treated the occasion with all of the reverence it deserved. "Detroit is our third favorite place to play, right behind Las Vegas and Des Moines," he told the crowd. What's so great about Des Moines? "Nothing, really. This is actually the finest place in the world to play. On the way in, we saw an operating old folks' home with a 20 foot pile of garbage in front of it. It doesn't get any better than that."

"Somebody OD'd in the bathroom on chop chop charlie," Buzz says. Was that the first overdose at a Melvins show? "What, that wasn't a band member?" Kevin asks. "So no, it wasn't," Buzz concludes. "What exactly is an overdose? We've had severe underdoses. But it's not like we're almost out of people. There are more dumb junkies where that came from."

Subtle and sensitive to the last.♦♦♦♦

