



db's own Rheobituary

This article first appeared in the *Globe and Mail* on the eve of the Rheostatics' final show.

The Rheostatics' first gig was at The Edge in 1980; our last gig will be at Massey Hall in 2007. At the Edge, we opened for a white reggae group from Kitchener called The Customers. We didn't get along. One of our bands took an obnoxiously long time to sound-check, and then the Rheos' old keyboard player Dave Crosby punched the stage wall. Later, The Customers' afro'd singer blew his nose during their set and told the crowd: "This Kleenex is for the Rheostatics." During our set, I felt an unknown force hoist me atop a set of tables near the stage, where I kicked over Coke glasses and beer mugs, creating a joyful mess. After the gig, I remember looking out at the streets around Church and Gerrard: seedy, dark and wild. To four kids who'd been driven to the gig by my dad in our family sedan, it seemed too exciting to be real. The next 27 years would confirm that it wasn't.

Bands we've played with: Kinetic Ideals, Blibber and the Rat Crushers, the Flying Kites, The Waltons, The Inbreds, Velis Discordia, The Four Ones, The Wardells, Breeding Ground, Woods Are Full of Cuckoos, The Box, Lighthouse, Rik Emmett, Saddle Tramps, John Otway, Pursuit of Happiness, Violence and the Sacred, The Thought Rockets, Adam West, Veda Hille, The Rent Boys, Malhavoc, The Look People, Suffer Machine and, one evening in 1997, an unknown band called Creed, who refused to leave the stage during a media-only performance, which their record company had begged us to let them do during one of our weeklong engagements. Our guitar technician, Tim Mech, discovered that they'd moved our amplifiers without permission, so he walked on stage, unplugged their stuff and told them, "See ya in the delete bin!" Creed went on to sell 8 million records worldwide, but broke up with their career in tatters. Their lead singer spent much of his post-Creed career working on a concept album based on *The Passion of the Christ*, proving that there is a rock and roll god, and that he can tell a good joke when he wants to.

The first Rheostatics' drummer was Rod Westlake, whose brother built a little riser in his basement to simulate a live rock and roll setting. We played songs by Cheap Trick, Triumph, the Ramones. Rod's basement was flared with Etobicoke street signs that his brother had pillaged, and, one afternoon, I pretended to call the police about them during a break in one of our jams. A few hours later, the cops surprised the Westlakes during dinner. That night, Rod and his dad brought my amp back to my house. He told me that he couldn't play in the band anymore, and suggested we call Graeme Kirkland, who suggested we call Dave Clark. Dave played us Frank Zappa records and let us rehearse in his basement, which barely had room for our pea-shooter amps and Dave's enormous white Milestone drumkit, which he bought because Max Webster's Gary McCracken played one. It was in Dave's parents' basement where I met my wife, Janet, who was sixteen and swore a lot. I learned everything I needed to know about music there, which isn't to suggest that we studied chord charts or tonic constructs or how to play in 7/4 time. With our shoulders keening against each other, ears gummed to speakers, arms thrashing the air, we learned how to rock, which is all that anyone needs to know about anything.

We played clubs. Because we were underage, we had to get special liquor permits to perform. A lot of people who saw us figured that, because rock and roll is an impossible life, it wouldn't be long before we climbed down into the real world, struggling like everyone else to pay the bills and stay out of jail. But while we never got rich – in fact, we got just barely not poor – we stayed together, defied the odds, assailed time, made a bunch of interesting records, weathered the rise and fall and rise of various technologies, survived crappy record deals, wasted good ones, tormented, then forgave, managers, agents and publicists until, finally, in 2001, we were awarded a small crystal statue that one of us eventually lost – the CFNY Heritage Artist of the Year, or something like that – which brought back memories of driving to Brampton to give the station's programmer, David Marsden, a recording of our first studio session with songs called "The People Who Live on Plastic Cake" and "Sometimes I Feel Like an Elevator" and "Radio 80 Fantasy" on it, and then driving home hoping that he'd play it on the radio.

He almost always did.

We toured the country for the first time in 1987. The tour took three months. After surviving Thunder Bay, the rest was easy. Well, not easy. We borrowed the same sedan in which my dad had driven us to The Edge, and it nearly ended up being our Chariot of Death, seizing on a narrow mountain pass just east of Revelstoke. But we coasted into the parking lot of a motel, where the owner rented us a Dodge Ram Charger, which we used to scramble towards the coast. That summer, our lives were strewn across the country. We wrote our second album *Melville*, then another, *Whale Music*, then another, *Introducing Happiness*. We lost our drummer, Dave Clark. The basement could hold us no longer.

Toronto changed, but we didn't, not really. You used to be able to drive 80 mph from Spadina to University along Queen Street, then park at the CityTV building for free before going to shows upstairs at the Beverly Tavern – Dave Howard Singers, Disband, Vital Sines. If you played to 500 people at the Rivoli, it was like playing Carnegie Hall. If the junior A&R director from Ready Records saw you, you were one-step closer to getting on *The New Music*, a huge achievement in pre-video days. Being independent meant being weird, courageous, loyal and unfortunate. We lived a secret life, imagining a world where strange bands would give Canada the bold, expressive sound that it deserved, rather than copycat singers aping Duran Duran, Beaver Brown, Dire Straits. The Barenaked Ladies happened; Lowest of the Low, too. The Tragically Hip knew we'd been first, but they took us on tour anyway.

There was a Group of Seven record, anthems at Maple Leaf Gardens, a psychedelic children's record, *Whale Music* the film; the drawer got crowded, but there was always room for more. Everybody wrote, everybody sang, and everybody had their turn. Over 13 records, no one ever complained about their song count.

"You know what you guys are?" my friend, Richard, once opined. "You're Commie!" I argued that we were Canadian, and left it at that, because, like Canada, we weren't only one thing, one voice, one song. We were four satellites who got along, and if you listened closely or saw us on a good night, you got bit. Travelers lost in the wilderness were nursed to safety through our music; attempted suicide cases, too. Once, three cops rushed into a fan's flaming wreck to rescue his tape collection. Years before that, Jake got knocked into a coma, then awoke without any knowledge of birds, chocolate or television, but singing "Me and Stupid." Another time, a fellow in Florida opened his head shop to find a cracked cassette of *Whale Music* pushed through the door without a note. He played it, liked it, and every year, he travels north to hear us. They'll all be at Massey Hall, watching us sing until our last small burst of breath. And then something will die.