



David Was (left), Sweet Pea Atkinson, Don Was and Sir Harry Bowens make up the core of the funky pop outfit Was (Not Was).

## Was (Not Was) defies all labels

By Larry O'Connor  
staff writer

Somewhere hidden deep in the bowels of Detroit, it exists. Yes, there is a tape with none other than the boy toy herself Madonna and the heavy metal poobah Ozzy Osbourne singing the same number.

Only Don Was of Was (Not Was) knows. He produced the collaboration from a pair of auditions by the two for the group's second LP "Born to Laugh at Tornadoes." Ozzy made the cut, Rochester's Madonna didn't.

"We didn't release it because we thought it would be the oral equivalent to her Penthouse photos," said Don Was, producer and part-time bassist and keyboard player for the somewhat twisted, yet talented funk pop outfit.

Geraldo Rivera and Leonard Nimoy may be butting heads in search of the prized piece of tape for their respective shows. In the meantime, Was (Not Was) has their latest tape and LP, "What Up, Dog?," available.

Zany? off-beat? you bet. Then again, what do you expect from the Detroit duo of Don Was and David Was who have had the likes of Osbourne, Mitch Ryder and Mel Torme make guest appearances on their albums.

EVEN FRANK Sinatra, Jr. croons a glitzy-style lullaby, "Wedding Vows in Las Vegas," on the band's first American release in five years on Chrysalis. The group tried to get Sammy "Peace, man" Davis, Jr. to do a tune this time out, but no go.

Besides guest artists, Sweet Pea Atkinson (a former autoworker) and Sir Harry Bowens (formerly of the O'Jays) do the vocals on "What Up, Dog?" Don and David Was write the songs. The end result is nothing less than pure genius.

Songs about pit bulls, Las Vegas weddings and

people termed maggots are wrapped in delicious melodies of pop, jazz and funk. Even Debbie Gibson would smile.

Yet lyrical content, in addition to the band's interracial makeup, makes them difficult to tune in on American commercial radio.

"Radio tends to break down bands along racial barriers," said Don Was, who is a 1970 graduate of Oak Park High School. "Black radio is rigid. So is the rock 'n' roll format radio. Anything that is not along those lines falls in between. Then you become a marketing problem."

Which, perhaps, can explain why Was (Not Was) is on the third label with as many albums. Geffen originally signed the band, but attempted to change the group's approach.

According to Don Was, the label wanted to replace both black vocalists with a pop metal fellow. They also wanted the band to produce more upbeat lyrics.

The band balked, instead buying themselves out of their contract. Phonogram then signed the band. Chrysalis had the American release for "What Up, Dog?" which was originally titled "Lost in Frohsthoric Detroit."

DON WAS describes the Geffen experience as something of a "nightmare."

"You can take the approach, 'That's just business,' like in the 'Godfather,'" he said. "They only go after the obvious things like a Whitesnake."

"I thought it was offensive," he added later about the label asking to replace Bowens and Atkinson. "I'm not saying they're racist. They're just reflecting the attitude of the record industry. The annoying thing is that they don't stand behind the artist. Instead they kowtow to radio stations."

Was (Not Was) didn't form for the sole purpose of playing on the radio. Making good music with contemporary themes has been first and foremost.

The partnership between Don and David Was goes back to high school. The pair landed in the principal's office for the crime of participating in unsupervised gymnastics before class. A musical friendship was struck.

David Was (whose real name is David Wiess) followed Don Was (a.k.a. Donald Ferguson) out to California. They continued to collaborate musically, paving the way for the single "Wheel Me Out" on Ze Records.

The duo is probably one of the most unusual and highly sought-after in the music business. Their Detroit background might be the reason.

"I think that Detroit being removed from the fashion centers of New York and L.A. is a positive thing," he said. "A lot of new things are coming from Detroit because they are not tossing fashion back at you."

The in-fighting for British bands is to come to Detroit and get the Was (Not Was) treatment from Don Was, who is also a highly-acclaimed producer. He has worked with the likes of Carly Simon, the B-52s and Bonnie Raitt. The group will also take part in an upcoming musical tribute to Walt Disney.

But, certainly, that would all pale in comparison to another collaboration with Mel Torme. The singer performed "Zaz Turned Blue" on "Born to Laugh at Tornadoes."

"We met him down at the hotel in Miami Beach," Don Was said. "He wanted to know more about this Zaz character. He did it in one take. He put so much emotion into it. Afterwards, David and I were walking down the beach with a big blaster playing the number over and over, saying 'God, I can't believe we got this guy to sing this song.' It was the highlight of my life."

Was (Not Was) will perform Friday, Sept. 30, at Saint Andrew's Hall in Detroit. For more information, call 961-MELT.

## IN CONCERT

### ● RHYTHM CORPS

Rhythm Corps will perform at 10 p.m. today in the Nectarine Ballroom, 510 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Advance tickets are \$10.50. For more information, call 99-MUSIC.

### ● PASSION NOUVEAU

Passion Nouveau will perform tonight at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First St., Ann Arbor. For more information, call 996-8555.

### ● SCRUFFY THE CAT

Scruffy the Cat, a band from Boston, will perform Tuesday, Sept. 27, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First St., Ann Arbor. For more information, call 996-8555.

### ● WAS (NOT WAS)

Was (Not Was) will perform Friday, Sept. 30, at Saint Andrew's Hall, Congress, Detroit. For more information, call 961-MELT.

### ● JOHNNY ALLEN

Johnny Allen will perform with special guests, New Logic, on Friday, Sept. 30, at the Hamtramck Pub, 2048 Canfield, off I-75. For more information, call 365-9769.

### ● SHOUTING CLUB

The Shouting Club will perform with special guests, Hippodrome, on Saturday, Oct. 1, at Heron's, 13027 W. Warren, east of Schaefer, Dearborn. For more information, call 582-8826.

### ● WALK THE DOGMA

Walk the Dogma will appear Saturday, Oct. 1, at Alibi's, 5766 Cass, Detroit. For more information, call 832-2355.



Wire will perform along with The Church and Tom Verlaine Sunday, Oct. 9, at the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor.

### ● B.B. KING

B.B. King will perform at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 7, at the Michigan Theater, 603 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Tickets are \$16.50 and \$12.50. For more information, call 99-MUSIC.

### ● CHURCH, WIRE AND VERLAINE

Church, Wire and Tom Verlaine will all perform on Monday, Oct. 10, at Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor. For more information, call 961-MELT.

### ● TAXI GANG TOUR

The Taxi Gang Tour, featuring reggae bands Sly and Robbie, Freddie McGregor and Maxie Priest, will take place Thursday, Oct. 13, at Saint Andrew's Hall, Congress, Detroit. For more information, call 961-MELT.

## COUNTRY

Here are the top 10 songs receiving airplay on WWWW-FM, a country station in Detroit.

1. "I'm Gonna Love Her on the Radio," Chubby Pride.
2. "The Gift," The McCarters.
3. "A Little Bit in Love," Patty Loveless.
4. "Give a Little Love," The Judds.
5. "I'm Down to My Last Cigarette," K.D. Lang.
6. "Streets of Bakersfield," Dwight Yoakam & Buck Owens.
7. "I Couldn't Leave You If I Tried," Rodney Crowell.
8. "Honkey Tonk Moon," Randy Travis.
9. "I Have You," Glen Campbell.
10. "Joe Knows How to Live," Eddy Raven.

## COLLEGE

Here are the top 10 albums receiving airplay on WHFR-FM, the campus station of Henry Ford Community College.

1. "Tighten Up," B.A.D.
2. "Short, Sharp, Shocked," Michelle Shocked.
3. "Creation," House of Love.
4. "People," Hothouse Flowers.
5. "Fate," Hunters & Collectors.
6. "Lovely," Primitives.
7. "Go Bang," Shriekback.
8. "The Indescribable Wow," Sam Phillips.
9. "What Is There to Smile About," Close Lobsters.
10. "Information Society," Information Society.



K.D. Lang's "I'm Down to My Last Cigarette" is No. 5 on the WWWW-FM country chart.

## CLASSICAL

Here are the top 10 most requested classical selection on Paul Russell's show on WQRS-FM.

1. "Canon in D," Johann Pachelbel.
2. "Meditation from Thaïs," Jules Massenet.
3. "Symphony No. 5," Beethoven.
4. "E-Flat Trumpet Concerto," Joseph Hayden.
5. "E-Minor Violin Concerto," Felix Mendelssohn.
6. "Symphony No. 25," Wolfgang Mozart.
7. "Ride of the Valkyries," Richard Wagner.
8. "The Four Seasons," Antonio Vivaldi.
9. "Violin/Cello Concerto," Johannes Brahms.
10. "La Marseillaise," Hector Berlioz.

## REVIEWS

### Chimes of Freedom (EP)

— Bruce Springsteen



It's "Tunnel of Love" revisited with this four-song, extended-play album from Springsteen's successful 1988 world tour. Included are live versions of "Tougher Than the Rest" and "Be True," as well as a cover of Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom" and the acoustic version of "Born to Run" that was one of the Tunnel of Love tour's many highlights.

All four songs offer further proof, as if it were necessary, that Springsteen is an even stronger performer live than he is in the studio.

The overall highlight is the stark, moving "Born to Run." Here, Springsteen breaks down and examines one of the earliest, best-known songs, changing it from a youthful exuberant boast into a mature, tough-minded statement of purpose.

The local highlight is "Be True," recorded on the spot during Springsteen's March 28 appearance at Joe Louis Arena.

This, however, is but a taste of the musical glories that made up the New Jersey rocker's first post-autostardom concert tour. Better stuff, one hopes, is still waiting to be released.

Those unlucky enough to have missed the shows or bootlegged the Boss' worldwide radio broadcast (in July) lost out on such highlights as the blazing, horn-blasted "Tunnel of Love," the melodic piano solo that led into a fiery "Spare Parts," the fierce workout on Detroit bluesman John Lee Hooker's "Boom Boom" or the dance-til-you-drop "Light of Day."

With most artists a little is enough. With Springsteen, however, too much isn't enough. Four hours, or four songs, you still want more.

— Wayne Peol

### EVERY DOG HAS HIS DAY

— Let's Active



"Records are equal parts triumph and heartbreak and hopefully, the triumph wins out. In some ways, you're always trying to reach a wider audience, but in another you're just trying to reach yourself all over again and make sure you should still be doing this."

Thus spoke Mitch Easter, singer, guitarist, producer, main songwriter and all-around good guy, from Let's Active.

Actually, there are a lot of things about Mitch Easter I like. For example, I like his production credits (REM, Berkeley's favorite son Marshall Crenshaw, Game Theory and Velvet Elvis are a few notables). And even Let's Active's format seems as though it would appeal to me.

But there is something about this LP and Let's Active that I find off-putting. Maybe it is that I have a hard time warming to Easter's nasal voice.

Don't get me wrong, though, listening to Let's Active is infinitely preferable to listening to heavy metal, or for that matter, any Detroit

music radio station. But within the different relative comparisons of the type of music I like, this LP would not be one of my first choices.

Let's Active's pretty basic instrumental lineup of guitar, bass, drums, keyboards and vocals deliver a tight, punchy pop sound. This LP, on I.R.S., was recorded in Wales and mixed in Abbey Road Studio. It is produced by John Leckie, who previously worked on Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon" and thereby frees Easter to focus on being a member of the band as opposed to producing as he normally does.

Easter also writes all but three of the songs here, and even these he co-writes with keyboardist Angie Carlson. One of the three, "Horizon," sung by Carlson, is the highlight of this album with its memorable driving chorus. In fact, I would be so bold as to say it is worth the price of admission itself.

— Cormac Wright

### FOLKS SONGS FROM THE TWILIGHT ZONE

— various artists

Tremor Records has rounded up a few of funky Detroit's best — or at least better known — bands for this compilation album, the fifth in eight years from Tremor Records, the Royal Oak-based studio and record label.

There are 13 songs here, album or cassette, from 13 bands — that's if you feel generous enough to count the "Wild" character.

The lineup includes some familiar names from the bar circuit: Junk Monkeys, Shouting Club, 3-D Invisibles, Vertical Pillows and Orange Roughies.

Gary Reichel of Cinecrazy picked the bands and produced most of the tracks, though one was cut live at a famous Hamtramck bar.

The packaging is slick, lots of accolades and background on the bands, photographs of them and lists of personnel.

Detroit is dubbed "the twilight city," thus the title, and we are asked, metaphorically, if it is dawn



or dusk for this town.

There is life among the bands, of course, and there are some gems here, notably Bootsey X and the Lovemasters' "Pusherman of Love." It's outrageous, and features a herd of noisy, buzzing guitars. In certain, ain't no need to call the doctor. Call the pusherman instead.

A band called Sleep offers a tune of modern angst, aptly titled, "Can't" with nice vocals from Diana May. The Volebeats play a twisted jug band ditty called "Chain Gang." The Junk Monkeys pound out a nice number and the Vertical Pillows sing a monotonous one.

But it's good to hear the local stuff on wax. "Folk Songs" is proof that local talent deserves radio airplay. Is anyone listening out there?

Buy this album, turn it up real loud, dance around and say nice things about Detroit.

— Brian Lysaght