

STREET BEATS

Mekons adhere to punk

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

Somewhere lost in black leather jackets, spiked haircuts and safety pins through the nose, an idea was lost.

The notion of the punk movement was that anyone — man, woman or child — could play. The music you performed was irrelevant.

Meet the Mekons.

These band members aren't sporting the latest in Sid Vicious wear. Nor can a wayward safety pin be found piercing their anatomy. Yet the English outfit adheres to the punk ethic like Protestants are said to be attached to work.

In a sense, the Mekons are survivors. They were right at the front of the line when the Sex Pistols and The Clash made their mark on the music scene in the late 1970s.

Where others have left disillusioned, the Mekons somehow have emerged out of the often-wasted, confusing pipeline known as the punk movement with their values still intact. Of course, it hasn't made them millionaires.

If more than 10 years of touring in obscurity has left the Mekons a bit ready to compromise, they're not letting on. Especially in the wake of their latest album "So Good It Hurts."

"EVERYTHING HAS always been sort of a hybrid," said Jon Langford, one of the founding members of the Mekons. "We're still very much a punk band. I would be worried if we did settle down. Then it would be boring."

Punk to the Mekons means whatever kind of music, play it. The band through the years has dabbled in everything from snarling sound of industrial punk to more laid-back Caribbean music.

Cajun appears to have found a place in Langford's heart. He's raving about an album he found in a record store on a trip to New Orleans. "They're weird pop songs straight from the swamp," he said.



The Mekons include Kevin Goulding, Robert Worby, Jon Langford, Rico, Steve Bell, John Gill, Dick Taylor, Tom Greenhalgh, and Susie Honeyman and Sally Timma.

On their latest album, the band has ventured into a variety of African and Caribbean music. The end result is a more upbeat product.

"We've always been slap happy and spontaneous," Langford said. "We wanted to show we could play what we feel is good music. Before we said, 'This is Mekons. This is what we are.' This is more of, 'This is what the Mekons can be.'"

"This album is a bit more jollier. We made conscious effort to not waltz in the despite bit. We have been accused of that in the past."

The Mekons have a storied past, including seven albums and numerous ups and downs. The band came out of the infant phase of the punk movement in a strong wave of notoriety, signing with Virgin Records. After one album, though, the band and the record label parted ways.

THAT, IN addition to the violence that was plaguing the punk scene in England, had the Mekons taking a breather from the road. The band didn't begin touring again until

1984, doing the benefit circuit for the miner's strike in Great Britain.

"Fear and Whiskey" was the end result of listening to American country and western music along with punk sounds from the Bayou. Yes, a crude band with a fiddle player had re-emerged.

The album didn't sell a ton, but a ton of critics loved it. The Mekons were on their way again. "The Mekons Honky Tonkin" (Twin/Tone) was their first U.S. release.

The Mekons' newfound countrified leanings soon found them shaking hands with the likes of Johnny Cash ("He was quite nice," Langford said), and Merle Haggard, who didn't appreciate the hammer and sickle on the band's banner ("I can't understand why," said Langford, sounding genuinely puzzled). "Especially in these days of détente."

America's country and folk music opened up a whole new vista for the band, according to Langford.

"In England, there's no sort of a folk music scene," he said. "There is just stiff upper-lip, boring pop songs. In America, there is this whole cul-

ture of country and western music, which is folk music at the same time."

LANGFORD'S disillusionment with the music business is not limited to write English pop. The Mekons never allowed themselves to fall into the formula. And, as result, mainstream success has eluded them.

The Mekons are working on some new material, some of which will be showcased on this current U.S. tour. "It's definitely heavy metal. We're going to kick some bottoms," said Langford, sounding like Ozzy Osbourne already.

If so, it will be one of many musical turns the Mekons have made in their jagged career.

"I find it hard to understand popular music," Langford said. "I think we like moving off and plodding our own course."

The Mekons will perform with special guests, The Living Giants, at 10 p.m. tonight at The Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For more information, call 99-MUSIC.

IN CONCERT

- **THE MEKONS**
The Mekons will perform at 10 p.m. Monday, Nov. 21, at The Blind Pig, 208 S. First St., Ann Arbor. Tickets are \$8.50. For more information, call 99-MUSIC.
- **BLUESIMUS MAXIMUS**
Bluesimus Maximus, a band from Columbus, Ohio, will perform on Tuesday, Nov. 22, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First St., Ann Arbor. For more information, call 99-8555.
- **PAT BENATAR**
Pat Benatar along with special guests, Rhythm Corps, will perform on Tuesday, Nov. 22, at Masonic Temple in Detroit.
- **BOP HARVEY**
Bop Harvey will perform on Wednesday, Nov. 23, at Alvin's, 5758 Cass, Detroit. For more information, call 235-2355.
- **KAREN MONSTER**
Karen Monster will perform on Wednesday, Nov. 23, at Lil's 21, 2930 Jacob, Hamtramck. For more information, call 875-6555.
- **THE KNAVES**
The Knaves will perform on Wednesday, Nov. 23, at the Woodbridge Tavern, 289 St. Aubin, Detroit. For more information, call 259-0578.
- **ROCK**
Rock will perform on Wednesday through Sunday, Nov. 23-27, at the Studio Lounge, Wayne Road, south of Warren Road, Westland. For more information, call 729-2510.
- **CARUSO**
Caruso will perform on Wednesday through Saturday, Nov. 23-26, at Jagers, 3481 Elizabeth Lake Road, Pontiac. For more information, call 681-1700.
- **ROOM SERVICE**
Room Service will perform on Friday, Nov. 25, at the Token Lounge, Joy Road, Westland.
- **BEFORE OR AFTER**
Before or After will perform on Friday, Nov. 25, at the Hamtramck Pub, 2048 Canfield, off I-75. For more information, call 355-9760.
- **BROKEN YOYO**
Broken Yoyo will perform on Friday, Nov. 25, at Alvin's, 5758 Cass, Detroit. For more information, call 832-2355.
- **DETROIT ENERGY ASYLUM**
Detroit Energy Asylum will perform on Friday, Nov. 25, at Lil's 21, 2930 Jacob, Hamtramck. For more information, call 875-6555.
- **HYPERFORMANCE**
Hyperformance will perform with special guests, The Stand, on Saturday, Nov. 26, at the Hamtramck Pub, 2048 Canfield, off I-75. For more information, call 355-9760.
- **STINGRAYS**
The Stingrays will perform on Saturday, Nov. 26, at Lil's 21, 2930 Jacob, Hamtramck. For more information, call 875-6555.
- **SUN MESSENGERS**
The Sun Messengers will perform on Saturday, Nov. 26, at Alvin's, 5758 Cass, Detroit. For more information, call 832-2355.

COLLEGE

Here are the top-10 albums receiving airplay on WORB-FM, campus station at Oakland Community College in Farmington Hills.

1. "A Nation of Millions" Public Enemy.
2. "What Up, Dog!" Was (Not) Was.
3. "Preppies" Sioxi and the Bambees.
4. "Worker's Playtime," Billy Bragg.
5. "Secrets Dream," Dave and Rockets.
6. "Truth and Soul," Phish.
7. "Substance," Joy Division.
8. "Tigkies' Up," B.A.D.
9. "The Last Days of Pompeii," Camouflage.
10. "Nothing's Shocking," Jane's Addiction.

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"Money," featuring Dire Straits' Mark Knopfer on guitar, could be Newman's first pop chart hit since "Short People," way back in 1978.

But there's a subtle autobiographical songwriting to lead additional depth. An appealing sense of wistful longing marks "Dicie Flyer" and "New Orleans wins the War," two songs of Newman's early, southern childhood.

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ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

"Street Level" host Ted Maluchnik is a youth minister at a Catholic church.

way of getting the Gospel out are what get played.

"Street Level" has received a positive response, even from those people in his parish. Maluchnik has letters from people in Ann Arbor and Temperance, Mich., who listen to show. WDTN-FM has a 50,000-watt signal that reaches a good portion of the Detroit area.

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REVIEWS

GREEN

— R.E.M.

R.E.M. is having fun these days. Their sixth LP, "Green," comes on the heels of 1987's "Document," the Georgia band's biggest commercial success.

R.E.M. exudes confidence and contentment on every ear-pleasing note of "Green." The intriguing lyrics are more accessible than on any previous release. The group even thinks enough of one song, "World Leader Pretend," to print its lyrics, surprising longtime fans.

"Green" breaks new ground for R.E.M. Peter Buck's hard-driving guitar is still present on some songs, but others feature mandolin, a lap steel, a cello, piano or organ. Sound effects and strange vocal mixes are also used, but the album is not over-produced. It is comparable to "Reverend," precursor to "Sgt. Pepper," when the Beatles began to experiment with new effects and instruments without letting them dominate the music.

A band must have confidence in itself and its audience to do that. Particularly impressive on "Green" is Michael Stipe's vocal performance. On earlier records, his vocals were unintelligible, hidden in a cloud of music. On the slower songs like "Hairshirt" and "Yes as the Everthing," every syllable is clear.

Stipe's range is as wide as ever. On "Orange Crush," the single about



the plague of Agent Orange, he sings with an assertive anger, as on "Begin the Begin." On "I Remember California," a descriptive list of Golden State images, Stipe moans like an 8-year-old straining to recall those images.

He does a dual lead vocal on "The Wrong Child," a chilling song about a child, who has never been outside, watching other kids through a window. "I'm not supposed to be like this," Stipe slowly sings, "but it's OK."

The rest of "Green" is upbeat entertainment for players and listeners alike. "Pop Song 89," the jaunty opening number, is a twist on the Doors' "Hello, I Love You." And the band really has a good time on "Strand," perhaps the catchiest song done since "Happy Birthday." With a strong new album to accompany their new-found fame, R.E.M. has reason to celebrate.

— John Cortez

LA PISTOLA Y EL CORAZON
Los Lobos

Los Lobos has managed success in two worlds. The band has played live in the Hispanic neighborhoods of East L.A. It has also scored several hits on the mainstream pop rock charts in recent years.

There were several last year, first from the album "By the Light of the Moon." Then Los Lobos recorded the soundtrack for the film story of the late pop star Ritchie Valens, "La Bamba." The soundtrack, including the latest version of the over-recorded title song, provided the band's biggest success commercially.

But success has not spoiled Los Lobos. "La Pistola y el Corazon (The Pistol and the Heart)" the band has stepped beyond any formula for pop success.

Instead they went for roots music. As band member Louie Perez explains it, this latest recording came about when the band, on a break from extensive touring, began unwinding in a living room, "banging out old tunes on acoustic guitars."

The result is a rich, nine-song tribute to the musical flavor of Mexico.

— Brian Lyons



There are two traditional songs, several others borrowed and reworked, and a pair penned by band members.

The songs come from different regions of Mexico, and the band has in most cases recorded them with instruments native to the region.

The playing of David Hidalgo and Cesar Rosas, the band's string masters, is at its finest here. There are instruments with obscure-sounding names: huapanguera, jarana, and requinto jarocho.

The lyrics are sung in Spanish, with liner notes in English and Spanish.

It is a tribute to something — its integrity most likely — that Los Lobos could veer off a course toward pop chart success, and pull it off so well.

They knew what they were doing. This album is a pleasure, pure and simple.

— Brian Lyons

LAND OF DREAMS

— Randy Newman

It's been a while since we've heard anything new from Randy Newman, his brilliant soundtracks to "Ragtime" and "The Natural" notwithstanding.

Land of Dreams (Warner Bros.) is worth the wait, however.

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Among other songs of note: "I Want You to Hurt Like I Do," is another example of Newman's always-skewed view of love and life in general. "Falling in Love," with its gentle synthesizers, takes a slightly rosier tone. But then, it's the only track produced by the ex-Electric Light Orchestra leader Jeff Lynne, who's everywhere these days. Any one else remember the late 1970s song where Newman roared ELLO on his musical slip?

When he tries to do the same to rap music, in "Masterman and Baby J," however, the end result is the album's weakest cut.

Truth to tell, Newman is less well-served by the more modern sound wrought by Knopfer and Lynne than by his own voice and piano.

Newman is an acquired taste to be sure. But it's a taste many more people may develop after an album as strong as this.

— Wayne Peet