



The Laughing Hicks — John Novak, Rob Felenchak, Ted Smith and Dave McGilennen — play some of the most complex rhythmic music patterns around.

Breaking rules

Hicks go for audience participation

By Jill Hamilton
special writer

At a concert given by a usual local band, the rules are pretty much set — the band performs and the audience passively listens, or maybe dances. If they are extra riled up.

These rules of concert behavior simply don't hold true at a Laughing Hicks concert because, well, the Laughing Hicks are a bit different from other bands.

John Novak, the Hicks' lead singer and strange man extraordinaire, puts it this way, "I'm pretty much a fruit on stage, a noodle."

We're not going to argue with that assessment because it pretty well sums up the situation. Novak is into making a concert a participatory event, instead of remaining on the stage, like most other lead singers. Novak spends half his performance time roaming around in the audience.

He seems to enjoy strolling up to unsuspecting members of the audience and singing right into their faces to get a reaction. More often than not, the audience members are delighted to be singled out and yell things back to Novak and wave at their friends.

On the other hand, some audience members at a recent concert at Cross Street Station seemed a bit hesitant to walk near the stage for fear of suddenly being made into part of the show. Since the path to the restroom at Cross Street leads patrons in front of the stage, we'd venture a guess that a lot of people were ignoring nature's call that evening so that they wouldn't have to step into the limelight.

"WE'RE TRYING to outrage and amuse everyone at the same time," said fellow Hick Rob Felenchak.

They are doing just that. Consider Novak's dancing. It, too, is quite unusual. At first glance, he appears to be dancing wildly in random patterns and, in the process, looking not unlike a schizophrenic ostrich.

Upon closer inspection, his dancing begins to make sense. His weird, seemingly haphazard gyrations and staccato, angular movements are exactly in time to the music.

Pretty amazing, considering that the other Hicks — Ted Smith, Dave McGilennen and Felenchak — play some of the most complex rhythmic patterns around.

"My dancing" was labeled as "geometric," Novak said. "I've listened to a lot of jazz rhythms that aren't based in 4/4 time and it's hard for me to dance to regular rhythms."

The Hicks' difficult rhythmic arrangements are reminiscent of King Crimson's experiments. Their skillful playing of unusual time settings is something a casual listener might not notice, but, the other musicians hold in awe.

One local musician, upon hearing the Hicks, remarked, "These

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— John Novak

guys are great musicians — those songs are really impossible to play."

NOVAK SINGS/TALKS through the songs Frank Zappa-style. This is not necessarily due to lack of vocal talent — it is because the Hicks consider their songs to be poems. If Novak says the words instead of singing them, audiences are more apt to understand the lyrics.

"People say they like it because they can understand what the words are," said Smith.

The lyrics combined with Novak's movements help to get the Hicks' often politically charged messages across to the audience.

"I try to act out songs to a certain degree, I think of them in a way that can be told with the body in mind," said Novak.

That said, all of this meaningful movement doesn't add up to a rigidly choreographed show. At a Laughing Hicks concert there is a feeling of being on the edge, that anything could happen. That's probably because anything can, and in fact often does, happen.

"If I start to go off on a tangent, I will start improvising . . . making up poems in my head," said Novak.

This doesn't bother the rest of the band because they seem to have an almost unearthly creative link to each other. This band harmony serves them well whether they are improvising in front of an audience or working out arrangements for new songs.

"JOHN SAYS things like 'I want this to sound like ice,'" said Felenchak, referring to the band's song writing process. What is amazing is that the rest of the band understands such nebulous descriptions as this and will, in fact, play something that does sound like ice.

This adds up to material that is almost dauntingly creative. Audiences who are used to the easy-to-swallow, hey-dude-let's-party genre of music will find themselves initially taken aback by the Hicks' extremely challenging music.

Challenging music, yes, but ultimately satisfying. These guys are truly a ground-breaking quartet.

Well, we certainly can't argue with that claim to fame. Let's scan some of the song titles — hmmm, let's see, there's "All Women Are Bad" and um, "Bikini Girls With Machine Guns" and of course, "The Creature from the Black Leather Lagoon." Yup, sounds like "rock-and-roll disease" all right.

Since this is a family newspaper, there aren't too many Cramps tunes that we can go into very deeply but there are a few songs we can discuss. They do a very Cramps-like cover of the ever-popular title, "Shortnin' Bread." (Come on, you remember that song — "Mama's little baby loves shortnin', shortnin', etc. . .")

By "Cramps-like," we mean psychotic vocals backed up with distorted 1960s style music. The Cramps sound like "Beach Blanket Bingo" gone awry.

— Jill Hamilton

IN CONCERT

• THE WAY OUTS

The Way Outs will perform on Monday, May 14, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

• ROGER MILLER

Roger Miller, SST recording artist, will perform with guests, Jodie Raincoats, Tuesday, May 15, at Club Heidelberg, 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. For information, call 663-7758.

• WALK THE DOGMA

Walk the Dogma will perform Tuesday, May 15, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

• LARGE BEAT EXISTENCE

Largest Existence will perform with guests, Yab Yum, Wednesday, May 16, at Club Heidelberg, 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. For information, call 663-7758.

• ZVUKI MU

Zvuki Mu, a rock'n'roll band from the Soviet Union, will perform on Wednesday, May 16, at the Michigan Theatre, 603 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. For information, call 668-4327.

• MARS NEEDS WOMEN

Mars Needs Women will perform on Wednesday, May 16, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First, Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

• THE LOOK

The Look, featuring Dave Edwards, will perform Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, May 16, 18-19, at Jagers, 3481 Elizabeth Lake Road, Waterford.

• STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Strange Bedfellows will perform with Frank Allison & the Odd Sox on Wednesday, May 16, at Key West, Six Mile and Telegraph.

• JODINE RAINCOATS

Jodie Raincoats will perform with guests, The Happy Accidents, Thursday, May 17, at the Blind Pig, 208 S. First.

Ann Arbor. For information, call 996-8555.

• CRAZY LIZARD

Crazy Lizard will perform Thursday, May 17, at Club Heidelberg, 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. For information, call 663-7758.

• MEANIES

Meanies will perform with guests Taste and Wall of Sound on Friday, May 18, at Blondies, 21139 W. Seven Mile, Detroit. For information, call 535-8108.

• THE COWBOY JUNKIES

The Cowboy Junkies will perform at 8 p.m. Friday, May 18, at the Michigan Theatre, 603 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. For information, call 99-1051C.

• JOHN SHEA TRIO

John Shea Trio will perform Friday, May 18, at the Blind of Paradise, 207 S. Ashley, Ann Arbor. For information, call 662-8310.

• BEFORE OR AFTER

Before or After will perform Friday, May 18, at Paychek's Lounge, 2932 Caniff, Hamtramck. For information, call 872-5524.

• COLORFUL TRAUMA

Colorful Trauma will perform with guests, The Seeds and Johnny Bravo, Friday, May 18, at Hamtramck Pub, 2048 Caniff, off I-75. For information, call 365-9760.

• LIVRATION

Livration will perform on Friday, May 18, at Pullum's Place, 6901 Woodward, near Burroughs, Detroit. For information, call 831-4188.

• CIVILIANS

Civilians will perform on Friday, May 18, at The Ritz, 17580 Prazmo, Roseville. For information, call 778-8150.

• LOVE KINGS

Love Kings will perform with The Wayouts, Friday, May 18, at Finney's Pub, 3565 Woodward, Detroit. For information, call 831-8070.



The Cowboy Junkies will perform Friday, May 18, at the Michigan Theatre in Ann Arbor.

COUNTRY

Best-selling country-western records of the week:

1. "Walkin' Away," Clint Black.
2. "I'm Over You," Keith Whitley.
3. "The Gambino Theory," Steve Warner.
4. "If Looks Could Kill," Rodney Crowell.
5. "Help Me Hold On," Travis Tritt.
6. "I Watched It All (on My Radio)," Lionel Cartwright.
7. "Guardian Angel," The Judds.
8. "Bring Back Your Love to Me," Earl Thomas Conley.
9. "Waiting Shoes," Tanya Tucker.
10. "I've Cried My Last Tear," Ricky Van Shelton.

(Source: Cashbox magazine)

LOCAL

Here are the top 10 songs receiving airplay on "Detroit Music Scene," which is heard 4-5 p.m. Sundays (repeated 5:30-6:30 p.m. Tuesdays) on WDTN-FM 90.9.

1. "Color Crimes," Babylon Hotel.
2. "Take You There," Virus B-23.
3. "Pauze," The Wayouts.
4. "What You Say," Love Kings.
5. "Cluttered Again," Hanzbals.
6. "All in the Cards," Jimmy Bones and the Graverobbers.
7. "Lax People," Sensitive Big Guys.
8. "The Ballad of Lillies," Coppa Joe.
9. "Tote," Naming Mary.
10. "Dear Grandpa," Goobers & the Peas.

REVIEWS

DAYS OF OPEN HAND

— Suzanne Vega

There weren't a lot of record companies beating down a path to Suzanne Vega's door six years ago. They probably concluded that her brand of folk-oriented rock had little, if any, potential for sales. However, those bottom-liners have been proven wrong.

Her debut album, "Suzanne Vega," quietly sold about 200,000 copies with little or no promotion. "Solitude Standing" followed in 1987 by going gold and launching probably the most unlikely Top-10 single in recent memory, "Luka" — a song about child abuse.

Vega's third album, "Days of Open Hand," shows a small — but not significant — move toward a more radio-friendly sound.

Despite bringing in the considerable talents of Hugh Padgham (The Police, Phil Collins), who mixed the album, "Hand" shows that Vega is in control of her musical direction, and she has no intention of selling out.

Working with collaborator Anton Sanko (who co-produced as well as co-wrote more than half the tracks), Vega the poet continues to fill her songs with rich imagery and provocative themes. This is most evident on the tracks "Room Off the Street,"



"Big Space" and "Fifty-Fifty Chance."

"Chance" is the gem of the album, featuring a string arrangement by Philip Glass that perfectly complements the story of a woman's ordeal at a hospital bedside.

"Tired of Sleeping" and "Men in a War" open the album with the most pleasant music we've ever heard from Vega, which almost detracts from the stark images brought forth in the lyrics.

"Book of Dreams" sounds like a single from the opening chord and is downright anemic compared to the other 10 tracks.

Overall, "Days of Open Hand" is another strong effort from the Buddhist who cut her musical teeth in Greenwich Village.

— Bob Sadler

STAY SICK!

— The Cramps

Well, as the title hints, The Cramps are indeed staying sick with their latest release. Cramp fans should be pretty delighted as this is the band's first record in three years. We won't try to venture a guess as to how they spent their artistic hiatus.

Our friends guitarist Poison Ivy, vocalist Lux Interior, drummer Nick Knox and bassist Candy Del Mar prove themselves once again to be, as the press release says, "leaders in skull-fracturing rock-and-roll disease."

Well, we certainly can't argue with that claim to fame. Let's scan some of the song titles — hmmm, let's see, there's "All Women Are Bad" and um, "Bikini Girls With Machine Guns" and of course, "The Creature from the Black Leather Lagoon." Yup, sounds like "rock-and-roll disease" all right.

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Let's check out the chorus to "The Creature from the Black Leather Lagoon." Mr. Interior sings, "Black Black/Black Black League/Smash Smash/Black Black Leather/Kill Kill/Black Black Leather/Crash Crash/Black Black Leather/I'm the creature from the Black Leather Lagoon."



Another point of interest on this album is their version of "Old Time Rock 'N' Roll." The only thing is, The Cramps changed the words in the song just a bit. Their version is about, of course, "G— D— Rock 'N' Roll."

The songs range from ditties about decadence to tales of invading from outer space to, again, things better not discussed in polite company. The album pretty much covers everything that is offensive — sadism and misogyny are two of their favorites.

Yes, yes, we know The Cramps are just sharing one big joke with us, but the trouble is that, after 10 years, the joke isn't funny any more. Actually, it was never funny in the first place.

— Jill Hamilton

VIOLATOR

— Depeche Mode

Depeche Mode once again grabs the hearts and feet of the dance crowd and hit the top of the college charts as a result.

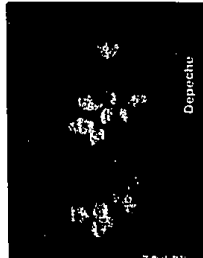
For a band that was dismissed after the departure of its only songwriter, Vince Clarke of Yaz and Erasure fame, Depeche Mode has certainly turned things around into the faces of its critics.

Martin Gore stepped up to the forefront to accept that responsibility. "Violator," the band's latest release on Sire, once again features all songs written by the aforementioned Mr. Gore.

Leading off with "World in My Eyes," it dispels any fears about bearing the term "electro-dance." Depeche Mode treats the format with liberal doses of mature intelligence.

As a matter of fact, what is a curiosity is that the band's main audience is teenage girls, an audience known for its fickleness and general attraction to non-cerebral bands. Gore's lyrics are subtle in their examination of relationships and the world around him.

From the expressions of love/bravado in "World in My Eyes" — "Let me take you on a trip, around the world and back, and you won't have to move, you just sit still, now let your mind do the walking and let my body do the talking" — to the fear and paranoia of "Waiting for the



Night" — "I'm waiting for the night to fall, I know that it will save us all. When everything's dark, keeps us from the stark reality" — to the pseudo sexism of "Blue Dress" — "Put it on, and don't say a word, put it on the one that I prefer . . . say, you believe just how easy it is to please me, because when you learn, you'll know what makes the world turn" — and the confessions and revelations of "Clean" — "Now that I'm clean, you know what I mean, I've broken my fall, put an end to it all, I've changed my routine, now that I'm clean."

As purveyors of electro pop with intelligence, Depeche Mode leads the field.

"Violator" is a consolidation of that.

— Cormac Wright