

of the music is often directly opposed to the mood of the lyrics. There's a palpable joy in every note of *Telecommando Americano*; singing and playing guitar were obviously life-affirming acts for Ellison. When I listen to his last album or Nirvana's *In Utero*, I hear the sound of talented if troubled artists drowning out the voice of nihilism with a blast of feedback or a ringing power chord. But then I've always believed that Jimmy jumped off the scooter.

Looney Tunes

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THE GUYS IN Redd Kross were born to star in their own cartoon series. In each episode our long-haired, southern California heroes—the brothers Jeff and Steve McDonald, intrepid guitarist Robert Hecker, and a new drummer every week—would pursue an evil villain, capture a secret formula, or destroy the world-domination machine. In the process they'd win true love with animated heroines who look like members of Josie and the Pussycats. Of course the highlight would be the music: a loud, fast song for the battle against the forces of oppression, and an anthemic ballad at the end when they get the girls. It'd sure be more entertaining than those pizza-eating Ninja Turtles.

The innocence and enthusiasm in the music of Redd Kross also brings to mind getting drunk on cheap wine, playing electric guitar really loud in the garage, going to see *Phantasm* on your first real date, or buying your first Rolling Stones record and realizing it's every bit as cool as KISS.

At the ripe old ages of twenty-three and twenty-seven, Steve and Jeff McDonald are the grand old men of the Los Angeles underground rock scene. They've been making records for ten years, but they haven't forgotten what first made them fall in love with rock 'n' roll. "One of the reasons we play a lot of covers is because that's the stuff that got us excited in the first place," Steve says. "It's not a conscious thing, like, 'Let's write a song that sounds like this' or 'Let's pay tribute to trash culture.' We just write about what we know, and we try to have as much fun as possible at all times."

The brothers admit that they've had some real Ray and Dave Davies-style brawls ("Since we know each other so well, we really know how to piss each other off," Steve says), but they've had even more trouble

getting along with other band members. About a dozen people have come and gone through Redd Kross ("We tend to chew drummers up and spit them out," Jeff says) and Hecker is the only non-relative who's been around for more than a year or two. When you talk about Redd Kross, you're really talking about the McDonalds, because in addition to playing bass and guitar and writing all the songs, their sense of humor and their unique worldview define the band.

The brothers grew up in Hawthorne, a middle-class suburb of Los Angeles that was also home to Brian, Dennis, and Carl Wilson. But if they admire any group of rock kin, it's the fictitious Partridge Family, not the Beach Boys. They inserted a photo of Susan Dey and a loving poem about Lori Partridge into one of their album packages and recorded with Danny Bonaduce on a studio side project called Tater Totz. They also speak with reverence about meeting David Cassidy while working on an unreleased B-movie called *1976*. (They wrote the film's title track, which appears on their new album, *Third Eye*.)

The McDonalds readily grant that southern California is a very strange place to grow up. "We love L.A., it's our lady, and we wouldn't want to live anywhere else," Steve says in a laid-back Valley accent. "We have a friend who's a very pretty girl, and she was shopping at this mall and sat down to have a cigarette. Cloris Leachman walked by, saw her, and came over and gave her a twenty-minute lecture about how an attractive young girl like that shouldn't be smoking cigarettes. Now where else could something like that happen besides L.A.?"

Jeff says his parents preferred jazz to rock, but older cousins turned him and his brother on to the Stones, "and that was our downfall." Steve was barely thirteen when he and Jeff formed a band with two high school buddies who'd later become members of Black Flag and the Circle Jerks. The brothers made their recorded debut in 1980 as Red Cross on a three-band sampler with such topical songs as "I Hate My School." By 1982 they had a new lineup, a new spelling of their name, and a new album, *Born Innocent*, with sloppy but enthusiastic songs such as the worshipful "Linda Blair" and a cover of Charles Manson's "Cease to Exist."

Redd Kross finally came into its own with 1984's *Teen Babes from Monsanto*, a college-radio classic consisting almost entirely of covers by the McDonalds' heroes (including the Stones, Bowie, KISS, the Stooges, and the bubblegum songwriting duo of Boyce and Hart). All in all it was a heavy dose of '70s nostalgia that prompted critic Ira Robbins to brand the group as "the ultimate bratty garage band."