

Feature Review: *Flying Saucers Rock ‘n’ Roll: Conversations with Unjustly Obscure Rock ‘n’ Roll Eccentrics*

Posted by Driftwood Magazine on December 21, 2011 in Book Reviews, Reviews

Flying Saucers Rock ‘n’ Roll: Conversations with Unjustly Obscure Rock ‘n’ Roll Eccentrics

Edited by **Jake Austen**

[Duke University Press (2011)]

Rocktober is an obscure music magazine that covers the far fringes of rock music, which they define loosely enough to include Sammy Davis Jr. and stuff they make up, like “robot rock.” So where else are you going to get any information on the likes of outer space glam rockers Zolar X, punk rockers turned gay dance duo the Fast, Armenian novelty singer Guy Chookoorian, or Sam the Sham (who’s no longer with the Pharaohs)? The book also includes talks with country singer David Allen Coe, jazz activist (or should I say revolutionary) Oscar Brown Jr., forgotten Long Island rockers the Good Rats, 1960s soul firecracker Sugar Pie DeSanto, rockabilly pioneer Billy Lee Riley, and X-rated Las Vegas lounge rockers the Treniers.

Some of the stories are inspiring and heartwarming. The Treniers were a brother act that had an R&B hit, the title of which I’m sure the Driftwood editors don’t want me to use here [*hey, some of us are adults! - one of the editors*], but their article tells a tale of family closeness. The brothers performed their comedy and soul show for decades, Claude into his 1980s, and the act continues today with other relatives. Sam the Sham got into music as a “sham,” pretending to know how to play the organ to get into a band, and would have rather played greasy R&B than novelty tunes like “Wooly Bully,” but, hey, he dug it anyhow. He’s had fun with it and is currently a minister, bringing the word and the music into prisons.

But the eccentricities of some of the rockers are way more creepy. I’m sure the writers were going for kooky in their profiles, but reading a few of them left me feeling icky instead. Coe, a genuine outlaw biker, is pretty smarmy; he self-released pornographic records in the 1970s (you could order them from Hustler magazine), possibly married several women at the same time, and allegedly has more than a few racist bones in his body. Not a fun guy to read about. And Zory Zenith the leader of Zolar X, who used to wear an alien costume and make-up for everyday living, is currently in prison, convicted of assault (breaking a bottle over another man’s head), and, as his story comes out, friends and family members accuse him of beating his wives and something even more disturbing.

At first, the bad feelings from the more disturbing interviews put me off the whole book, but on reflection, most of the conversations are enjoyable and enlightening, so if you get your hands on this book, skip the ones I mentioned. You’ll thank me. You might wind up skipping parts of some of the other interviews. A few of them, like the Billy Lee Riley talk, go on for a bit too long when the interviewers are keen to make the most of their chance to find out all the details from artists who have hardly had a chance to “get it all out there.” Overall, there’s tons of information and personality here that’s not available anywhere else. So dig in (judiciously) and dig it.

—Jeff Lindholm (Montpelier, VT)