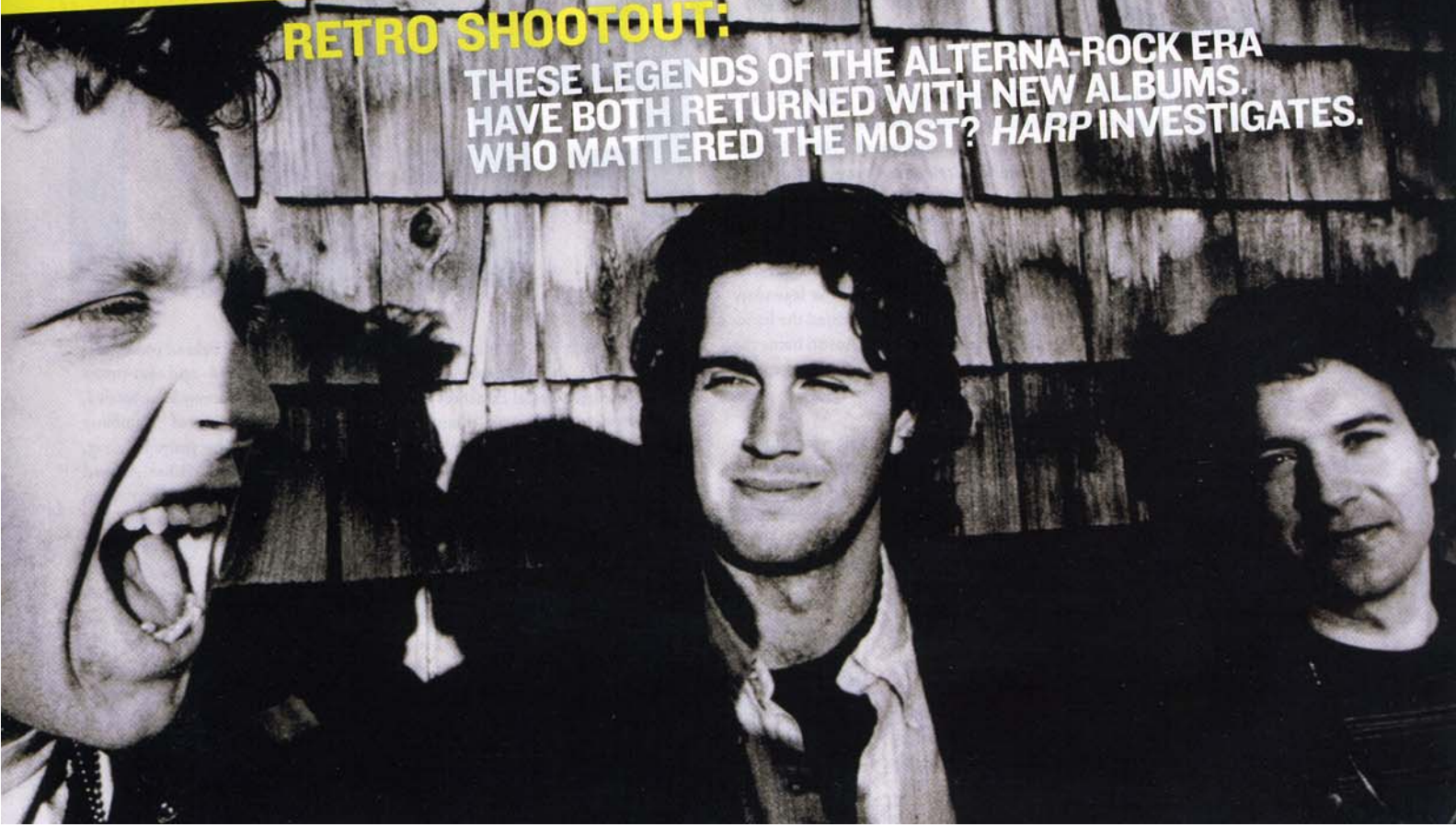


# MEAT PUPPETS **VS.** BUFFALO TOM

## RETRO SHOOTOUT:

THESE LEGENDS OF THE ALTERNA-ROCK ERA HAVE BOTH RETURNED WITH NEW ALBUMS. WHO MATTERED THE MOST? *HARP* INVESTIGATES.





# ON YOUR

AGAINST ALL ODDS, AND AFTER AN 11-YEAR ABSENCE, THE MEAT PUPPETS ARE ON THE RISE AGAIN. BY AARON GILBREATH

# FEET

MIDWAY THROUGH THEIR MARCH 14TH SXSW GIG, MEAT PUPPETS bassist Cris Kirkwood told the crowd, "This just happens to be the first time in 11 years that Curt and I are gonna play together, so..." A roar reminiscent of a NASCAR rally echoed through the small, outdoor club, and Cris raised his arms, both visibly dotted with the white scars of old burns and needle marks, in what seemed part gratitude, part inauguration. "It's pretty coooool," he chuckled.

Half bluegrass, half electric, the 30-minute set was part of a string of warm-ups leading to the July 17 release of *Rise to Your Knees*, the first CD Cris and his guitarist brother have made together since the bassist's chemical spiral put the legendary band on hiatus. *Hiatus*: Cris was never kicked out, and Curt never retired the band. "I don't have to check my interest in this shit," Curt said from his Austin home the week before the show. "It doesn't seem old to me in any way."

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FORMED IN 1980 IN PHOENIX, THE MEAT PUPPETS built their reputation on a carefree embrace of experimentation and evolution. Self-satisfying creativity was job one. Long before Uncle Tupelo popularized the this-isn't-your-pappy's-country-music sensibility, the Puppets were mixing country, thrash and Americana with Stooges-styled hard-charging rock and Jerry Garcia-ish psychedelia. They played over amplified versions of "Dixie Fried" and "Blue Bayou" in Phoenix punk clubs and covered everyone from Kris Kristofferson to George Jones, at a time when liking Hank Williams was still something to hide from your friends.

The group's first break came when L.A. punk band Monitor couldn't play its song "Hair" fast enough and the members asked their friends in the Puppets to record it. The resulting studio session yielded five Puppets originals, issued by Monitor on their own label; the *In A Car* EP was subsequently

re-released in 1981 by SST. With the venerable punk label getting behind 1982's self-titled full-length, the group was soon a popular touring act. Label- and tour-mates may have included SoCal thrashers Black Flag, and *Meat Puppets* may have totaled, in typical punk fashion, 20 minutes, but the curvball inclusion of "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" and Doc Watson's "Walking Boss" foretold the genre-bending, countrified vastness of the band's entire career. *Rolling Stone* writer Michael Azerrad called the Puppets "one of an elite group of pioneering bands that... [blazed] an underground railroad of indie-oriented clubs, stores, radio stations and fanzines."

Yet radio and records were never Curt Kirkwood's deal. "I was more of a band guy," he says. "I just liked to have a band, liked to play a lot of music." Curt had dropped out of college to play, and after he, Cris and drummer Derrick Bostrom teamed up, Bostrom's punk-rock sensibilities merged with Cris' art-rock/fusion-jazz and Curt's straight Zeppelin rock. Bostrom also upped the Kirkwoods' anemic indie-business sense. "We're from Phoenix," Curt says. "We weren't thinking, 'We'll get a video and blah blah blah,' or, 'Oh, we're gonna make a record. [But] I think Derrick knew a little bit more about the actual 'bands that are cool make records.'"



Original Meat Puppets, L-R: Cris Kirkwood, Derrick Bostrom, Curt Kirkwood

During breaks between tours, the Puppets recorded six albums for SST before making the jump in 1991 to a major label, London. Along with the brothers' verging-on-off-key harmonies and Curt's nimble guitar work, the band's one constant has always been change: 1985's *Up on the Sun* is a jazzy, jam-based trip-out; 1987's *Huevos*, guitar-driven, ZZ Top rock; 1994's *Too High To Die*, catchy, moody and fuzz-heavy. "I don't care if any of my fans want to hear anything," Curt says of their music. "That's not how this works. They have a good time at all the shows. The other side is completely self-indulgent stuff."

That fierce independence—making art for yourself, not your audience—certainly moved musicians like Kurt Cobain to proclaim: "The Meat Puppets gave me a completely different attitude toward music. I owe them so much." Cobain repaid his debt by inviting the brothers onstage to record "Oh, Me," "Plateau" and "Lake of Fire" for Nirvana's MTV *Unplugged* appearance, not only lining their pockets with impressive royalties but also introducing the band to innumerable new listeners. *THTD* went gold, produced the band's only charting single, "Backwater," and the band played sold out stadiums on Nirvana's U.S. *In Utero* tour. Despite the increased recognition, though, in 1994, the Puppets' 14 coherent years began to unravel.

Following *THTD*'s release, they toured with then-alterna-darlings Cracker and Soul Asylum, and during that summer's Stone Temple Pilots tour, Cris developed a

Curt's pleased. "With Meat Puppets in the '80s it was a lot of, 'Well, that's cool,'" he recalls, noting how later, amped on coffee or playing to the record, he would often find renditions too slow and ask himself, "'Why didn't I think to record that to my liking now?' [*Rise*] is, song-for-song, one of my more successful things."

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THE MILLENNIUM HAS FOSTERED A REUNION RENAISSANCE: PIXIES, the Stooges, Dinosaur Jr. "I'm sure that's lucrative for them," Curt says. "There's no guarantee for the Meat Puppets that it would be lucrative."

"The Meat Puppets have always done what they've done and never been very popular," Cris said in a 1994 *Boston Globe* article, "but we've been popular enough to keep doing it. I've always considered myself really fortunate." According to his then-girlfriend's 2004 blog, Cris felt like a failure for becoming "the guy that wrecked the Meat Puppets." But once Curt learned of Cris' recovery, he played some new songs over the phone, and they started rehearsing. "[Cris] was pretty much, very very adaptable to the situation," Curt explains. "He understood I wanted to have a fairly autonomous reign on what was goin' down this time."

Cris didn't have trouble remembering the old songs. Both brothers had to relearn things. "That's the nature of having a large catalog," Curt says. "I don't remember a lot of stuff." Like "New Leaf," the song he recorded for *Rise* but previously released

## "PEOPLE NOTICE WHEN YOU'RE AWAY MORE THAN YOU DO." CURT KIRKWOOD

cocaine habit. Hit-makers STP were already multimillionaires, and as Curt recalled in a 1998 *Phoenix New Times* article, ounce bags of coke and boxes of straws fueled that tour. Singer Scott Weiland struggled with addiction for years after, doing jail time and ruining his marriage. Cris didn't fare much better. Period concert recordings capture a band full of energy: forceful harmonies, tight renditions and what sounds like fun. But listen closely to the intro of the 1994 Fillmore show, and you'll hear Cris greet the crowd: "I am so fucked up."

He would stay fucked up until 2004.

Fans consider *Too High* a classic, and London predicted big sales for its followup, *No Joke!*, but with Cris nodding in the sessions, record execs eventually pulled promotion. Between *No Joke!*'s October '95 release and the Puppets' final tour (with Primus), Cris and his new wife Michelle retreated to their Tempe, Ariz., house, smoking coke and shooting dope delivered by dealers like Chinese food. Cris' two *No Joke!* songs boast of newfound escapism, as in "Inflatable" where he sings, "Gotta run gotta hide/Gotta get away/Gotta run gotta get away."

While the tips of Cris' fingers turned scaly black from pressing rock onto Brillo, Derrick bowed out and Michelle fatally overdosed. (Cris' woes wouldn't end there: In 2004, he received a 21-month prison sentence for assaulting a security officer in a Phoenix post office; during the bizarre incident he also got shot in the abdomen.) Curt, unwilling to retire, moved on without them.

"Just my experience as a professional musician," Curt says. "You pretty much have to stay on it unless you're stupid successful. You're balancing on top of people who are just completely insincere and all this shit, your own insincerity. It's not that great a place to be anyway." After relocating to Austin, he re-formed the Puppets with new members for 2000's *Golden Lies*, played a 2001 solo tour, formed the short-lived Eyes Adrift with Nirvana's Krist Novoselic and Sublime's Bud Gaugh, and released his first solo effort, *Snow*, in 2005.

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WHILE AGE WAS BUSY GRAYING CURT'S THICK HAIR AND CARVING LINES INTO his cheeks, technology was busy changing the music business. YouTube became the new MTV, MySpace the new marketing gimmick, and file-sharing threw record labels' roles into question.

"It's not really a comeback," says Curt, of reviving the Meat Puppets franchise. "It's more like, Cris was really sick."

Being on the indie Anodyne Records, the Puppets approached *Rise to Your Knees* as they did their classic SST albums: really fast, really cheap. "It's like the old days," Curt says. "Like punk rock: you didn't see them chargin' any less for their records, did ya? They didn't fuckin' cost anything, but they sure charged the same as someone who put a couple hundred grand into it." Curt would know. *No Joke!* cost London Records over \$200,000. *Rise* only cost a few. "We took five days to record it," he continues, "and a couple days to mix it." As an exercise in fiscal restraint and artistic independence, they tracked mainly at Austin's Wire Recording, operated by Curt's engineer buddy, Stuart Sullivan.

on *Golden Lies*. "It's one of those things that you just go, 'Oooo.' But it's a different arrangement," he snickers, "so I forgot." Yet Curt quickly points out that performing in public again after all this time doesn't scare his brother. "He's been in fuckin' federal penitentiary. If anything's gonna make you nervous it's being around a bunch of murderers and thugs like that."

Curt's philosophy now: "We just wanted to make a record pretty much for ourselves and for anybody who wanted to hear it. We don't have any ambition. We don't have anything to prove. We figure, you know, we'll probably be given whatever we're due, because we have a good name, and if we play good people will kiss our asses as much as we deserve."

As usual, Curt wrote all the material, some of it having lain around for years. Surprisingly, Curt plays drums on nearly half the record, even drums *and* bass on three tracks. Although asked to participate, Derrick Bostrom declined the invitation, favoring the settled pace and steady pay of a job with the Phoenix Whole Foods Market. Luck delivered Ted Markus, a New York-based engineer who did audio on a Puppets documentary. Markus, drumming since age 8, owns a sizeable collection of live Puppets recordings. "Nothing needs to be filled in," Curt says. "He knows the stuff better than Cris and I do, easily."

Interviewed for a 1993 PhD dissertation, Bostrom described touring as a drag. "You drive all day and eat shitty food and take weird hours," he stated. "Nobody likes living out of a suitcase." But his other interests had also started assuming importance. *The Trouble with Cinderella*, clarinetist Artie Shaw's autobiography, seemed to resonate with Bostrom because Shaw "kept saying, 'Man, if I could only get a lot of money I would just quit.' And he finally realized that he was in the weird vicious circle."

Like Shaw, Bostrom eventually gave up playing music. Having overseen the 1999 Rykodisc reissue campaign for his old band's SST albums, he now travels, hosts a web-radio show and manages the Puppets' website ([www.meatpuppets.com](http://www.meatpuppets.com)). Time has also revealed a love of writing in the form of a voluminous and eloquent blog called Bostworld ([www.derrickbostrom.com](http://www.derrickbostrom.com)). "[If] you get out of the business," Curt says, "and a lot of people will tell you this, it's hard to get back in. It's hard to get your head back in it." As much as he wanted his erstwhile bandmate onboard, Curt knows, "If somebody hadn't played the drums in 10 years, they're probably not playing the drums very well." (Bostrom did not respond to *Harp*'s attempts to reach him for this article.)

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THE BAND RAGED THAT NIGHT IN AUSTIN AT SXSW.

After banjoing through "Lost," Cris shouldered his bass, Ted Markus hit the floor tom, and fans screamed to a blaring "Lake of Fire." "Where do bad folks go when they die?"

"People notice when you're away more than you do," Curt says.

Hearing the new songs live, it hardly feels like a year, let alone 11, has passed. **H**