

Fan records Laughner tapes

By Jane Scott

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Word-renowned Cleveland rock writer Jane Scott was a big fan of Pete's.

"I only met him once. I saw him play at the Pirate's Cove five or six times, though, back in the winter of '76. I couldn't forget his guitar. It was amazing. He was so honest," said Doug Morgan.

Morgan was a high school student from Chagrin Falls then. Today he is 24, the same age that guitarist/singer/poet Peter Laughner was when he died in his sleep five years ago. Morgan has done what many others have told you that they were going to do. He put out a 12-inche EP of Laughner's tapes.

The seven-song album on Koolie Records, just called "Peter Laughner," is a good representation of the many aspects of Laughner's short life. John Sipl helped mix it at Kirk Yano's After Dark Studio. They are not studio songs with hours of recording expertise behind them. You can see where better apparatus would have helped. But the feeling and the sincerity come across and remind you again of how much we have lost.

One, "Rag Mama," recorded by Laughner on a Nakamichi cassette at his parents' home in Bay Village, is rather lightweight but catch and fun, an up tempo ragtime. One, "Dinosaur Lullaby," is an instrumental, rather dissonant. It was recorded live at a WMMS "Coffeebreak Concert," as was my favorite on the LP, "Baudelaire." Laughner had been a dinosaur freak since he was 5. Laughner sings "I felt myself set free in a world without weather" in "Baudelaire." This was written in the summer of 1973 when Laughner lived with a bunch of musicians in an old house on E. 23d St. The house is gone, too.

The rather traditional "Lullaby," an acoustic slide guitar piece, was engineered by Allen Ravenstine with Albert Dennis on bass, as was the captivating "Sylvia Plath." "Peter wrote songs that were almost letters to people," said Richard Clark, a close friend who wrote the foreward on the album cover. He's the Richard referred to in "Dear Richard," where Laughner sings, "Get away from that window, Richard." "I had just broken up with my girlfriend. I was over by the window, but I was just trying to stay cool on a hot night," said Clark. "Hideaway" is a love note to bassist Tina Weymouth of the Talking Heads. "Peter and Tina spent a rainy day together in New York once, sitting up in a loft, reading books and eating apples and listening to records. He had kind of a crush on her," said Clark. These two songs feature Susan Schmidt on rhythm guitar, Deborah Smith on bass and Anton Fier on drums. (The two women have gone on to Chi Pig. Fier is with Pere Ubu and the Golden Palominos.)

Laughner would have gone on to be an important rock star, many of us feel. "The talent, inspiration and desire to make it happen were all there ... when he was right, and when he wasn't, Peter Laughner was the sound of the streets ... No fancy solos, no frills, no posing, just straight-ahead rock 'n' roll," wrote his first boss David Frost in the San Antonio Express-News. Frost, now of KRTU-FM in San Antonio, had hired Laughner here at Disc Records. "Peter was capable of making a bridge between underground music and songs played on the radio," said his former wife, Charlotte Pressler, reached in New York. "The album is surprising. To some people Peter was the first of the punks. But he was very versatile. They selected some of Peter's favorite songs."

Laughner was ahead of his time, lyrically, believes Clark, once a third-floor neighbor of Laughner's at the Plaza, 3206 Prospect Avenue. "He was so uncompromising in his subject matter and style. He was a pioneer. He would go down to see Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground at old LaCave when he was 14 or 16 and practically hang out all night. Peter wanted to combine literary quality with rock 'n' roll. He did it in a time when a club owner would hand you a play list with Grand Funk songs and Deep Purple's 'Smoke on the Water' "

Morgan has his own band, Neptune's Car, but once played in the Human Switchboard and lived at the Plaza. Laughner's parents, Luke and Margaret (Pat) Laughner, gave Morgan the rights to publish the songs. Mrs. Laughner also gave Peter his first guitar. "It was a Christmas present when he was 14. He looked at the package and at first thought it must be a machine gun. He put it in a closet. Then one day he got mad at something and hit it and liked the sound of the music. Then he practiced and practiced and practiced," Mrs. Laughner said. The family soon soundproofed his downstairs bedroom, the one where he was found dead on June 22, 1977. The coroner's ruling was natural causes, but it was known that he had acute pancreatitis and severe liver problems.

Laughner's first band was Mr. Charlie while at Bay High School. The others were Cinderella Backstreet (Rick Kalister, Dennis, Scott Krauss, Cindy Black and two backups called the Leatherettes); Cinderella's Revenge (Eric Ritz, Schmidt and Smith); Rocket From the Tombs (David Thomas, Gene O'Conner, John Madansky and Craig Bell); Pere Ubu (Thomas, Thom Herman, Tim Wright, Krauss and Ravenstine); Peter and the Wolves (Herman, Black, Krauss and later Adele Bertei); Friction (Schmidt, Smith and Fier).

Laughner spent most of his space building up his favorite local groups – Jimmy Ley, 15-60-75 and Mirrors – when he wrote an article for this page in October 1974. "A lot of people didn't know how generous he was. Almost every musician was welcome to climb up on the stage when he played. He bought Adele her first guitar and gave me my first one," said Clark. "Peter brought Television to Cleveland for its first gig out of New York City, at the Picadilly Inn, and he did it out of his own pocket."

Unfortunately there was a dark side, too. Laughner tried to live up to what he thought was the rock 'n' roll musician's life-style. "When he finally figured out his mistake it was too late. Ironically Lou Reed has cleaned up his hard-drug habit and conquered alcoholism, too. So has Peter Townsend. Peter just wasn't as lucky as Reed and Townsend and Eric Clapton," Clark said.

Everything Laughner worked for was beginning to happen just as he died, said Anastasia Pantsios, a co-worker at the old Zeppelin and Exit magazines. "He turned us onto Patti Smith years before her records were out. But he also wrote about English folk artists Richard and Linda Thompson."

"Peter's spirit never faltered, even to the end. He was still creating, planning, looking to the future," Laughner's father wrote to a devoted fan. In fact, the night before he died Laughner was up all night recording music. He wrote "Going to China," his mother's favorite. His final words on a paper surrounding the cassette were "Dawn in the twilight zone, 6/21/77."