

## **Recalling a Rocker Whose Time Never Came**

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It was 25 years ago that booze, drugs and a rock 'n' roll myth took Peter Laughner to an early grave.

Peter who?

Don't feel bad. Peter Laughner isn't a household name; he never was. But to those who saw him play guitar and sing his guts out, Laughner might've been a household name - had he not died at 24.

In the 1970s, Laughner founded two of Cleveland's most important bands, punk pioneers Rocket From the Tombs and Pere Ubu. He co-wrote "Sonic Reducer," "Final Solution" and "Ain't It Fun" - songs covered by everyone from Pearl Jam to Guns 'N Roses.

More than that, he believed in himself and inspired others to do the same, says guitarist Rick Kalister. "He was the most enthusiastic guy I ever met," he says. "He would light up a room."

Creative sparks definitely flew when Kalister met Laughner in 1973.

"I was jamming with some guys at this house on Superior and East 23rd," says Kalister. "We were just regular guys playing blues tunes. Not Peter. He walks in, dressed in black, wearing a leather jacket and sunglasses," he recalls. "We start jamming and he starts jumping around, doing Pete Townshend windmills, going absolutely nuts."

There was a method to his madness: Laughner was hell-bent on injecting some life into a stagnant music scene in Cleveland. Within days, he and Kalister had formed Cinderella Backstreet, the first of many Laughner-led bands that hit the stage running. "Back then, you basically had cover bands who played songs everybody wanted to hear," says Kalister. "Peter was hip to new music and was going to play it, regardless of who came." Most shows were in front of a few people, in gritty bars like the now-closed Viking Saloon, which was near Cleveland State University. But Laughner was on to something, says former Plain Dealer rock reporter Jane Scott. "Peter was three steps ahead," says Scott. "He knew what was happening, and he became an advocate for it."

Scott recalls Laughner - who also wrote about music for Creem and The Plain Dealer, among other publications - dragging her to see Bruce Springsteen's first area show, in 1973. "Bruce was totally unknown, except to Peter. He kept on saying, 'This guy is the next big thing,' " she says. "Peter was really a New Yorker trapped in Cleveland."

By 1976, Laughner almost was a New Yorker flat out. He often traveled to Manhattan to soak in its burgeoning punk scene and to hang out with its icons: Patti Smith, Richard Hell and Tom Verlaine of Television. "He auditioned for Television," says Dead Boys guitarist Jimmy Zero. "The word was he got the gig but was afraid to

move to New York. At heart, Peter was a well-to-do kid who couldn't leave his hometown." Still, Laughner brought a bit of New York to Cleveland. He convinced Television and seminal punk band the Heartbreakers to play their first out-of-town gigs here. More importantly, he inspired Cleveland musicians to greatness. "Peter was a dreamer who dreamt for everybody," says his father, Luke Laughner, from his home in Sarasota, Fla. "He'd tell people, 'You're as good as anybody. Now, go do it.' "

His confidence and leadership stemmed from his upbringing, says Anastasia Pantsios, who photographed Laughner often. "He grew up in Bay Village in a well-off family that supported his every effort," she says. "He had self-confidence. He was a leader."

After co-founding Pere Ubu in 1975 with singer David Thomas, Laughner led the band into action. Within months, Ubu had released two singles, "30 Seconds Over Tokyo" and "Final Solution," on the band's own label. An amalgam of brains and brawn, the little discs that could turned the punk world on its head.

"Back then, bands didn't dream of putting out their own records," says drummer Scott Krauss. "We did and, thanks to Peter's contacts, we started playing New York." The only thing faster than Pere Ubu's rise was Laughner's fall. "He worshipped Lou Reed," says Pantsios. "That meant doing every drug Lou did. One morning, he called me at 7 a.m. just to tell me that he had shot up [heroin] for the first time."

Within months, Laughner became so erratic that he was kicked out of Pere Ubu. "He'd be totally out of his mind, waving his gun around like a madman," says Krauss. "We couldn't take it anymore."

Within months, Laughner was in and out of hospitals, suffering from liver problems. But he didn't let up. Even after he was told to stop drinking or die, Laughner made a beeline to the Flats club the Pirate's Cove. He drank until he passed out, according to Pantsios. Laughner also played on, but couldn't keep a band, says Kalister, who played with Laughner at the Eagle Street Saloon in May 1977. "He was lying on the stage, screaming, 'I can't get no satisfaction,' " Kalister recalls. It was Laughner's last show.

On June 21 of that year, at his parents' house, he recorded a tape of originals and songs by Robert Johnson, Richard Thompson and Lou Reed. The following day, he died in his bed from acute pancreatitis.

For years, Laughner's death received more attention than his music. It was immortalized in stories and books, including a famous eulogy by legendary rock scribe Lester Bangs that celebrates his life, but also chronicles his downward spiral. Then, in 1993, a collection of Laughner's songs, "Take the Guitar Player for a Ride," brought him notoriety as a poetic songwriter. His role as a rock 'n' roller and a

prime mover in America's punk scene was recognized earlier this year with the release of a CD of Rocket From the Tombs material.

"There's this outsider quality to his music that resonates with people, especially those familiar with his life," says Dave Sprague, a New York rock critic for Variety and the Village Voice. "When most people do it, it's contrived. But Peter's songs take on a different meaning when you hear lyrics like, 'Ain't it fun when you're gonna die young.' " "Here's a guy who romanticized about tragic heroes, and by doing so, became a tragic figure," says Sprague. "He didn't realize that Lou Reed exaggerated his drug use to create an image."

That, says Jimmy Zero, is what killed Laughner.

"He was so talented," Zero says, adding that he also wasted his talent. "If only Peter would've been content being himself, he might have achieved greatness."