Those Were Different Times

A Memoir Of Cleveland Life: 1967-1973

by Charlotte Pressler

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Erik Bloomquist, age seven, Plaza child, whose father owns, with Allen R avenstine, the building at 3206 Prospect Avenue, was having trouble with his book report. He had chosen Oscar Wilde's The Happy Prince, far above his grade level, and the big words kept getting him stuck. I told him that the story was originally written for adults, and that one of my teachers had read it to us, but not until we were in the sixth grade. "Well," Erik said, "I could have picked an easier life."

This is a story about life in Cleveland from 1968 to 1975, when a small group of people were evolving styles of music that would, much later, come to be called "New Wave." Misleadingly so, because that term suggests the current situation, in which an already evolved, recognized "New Wave" style exists for new bands to aim at. The task of this group was different: to evolve the style itself, while at the same time struggling to find in themselves the authority and confidence to play it. And they had to do this in a total vacuum. There were no "New Wave Nites" at local clubs; in fact gigs of any kind were rare, and usually attended only by the bands' closest friends; the local media for the most part ignored these bands; nor was there yet a national network; there were few fanzines; there was no Radar, no Stiff, no CBGB, even. The whole system of New Wave interconnections which makes it possible for every second person on Manhattan 's Lower East Side to be a star did not exist. There were no stars, in Cleveland , then. Nobody cared what these people were doing. If they did anything at all, they did it for themselves. They adapted to those conditions in different ways. Some are famous. Some are still struggling. One is dead.

This is not a complete history of Cleveland bands; it is closer to a personal memoir, and concerns the people I was acquainted with and the events I witnessed. Some important figures, like Brian Sands, are left out for the simple reason that I did not know them. I hope they will not construe this as a slight on their contributions. This is strictly, also, a Cleveland story. The Akron story, equally important, is one I cannot write. Though I lived in Akron for six months once, I never knew it from the inside.

It is, then, a fragment of the history of a period which saw a tremendous explosion of energy; irrevocably determining the character of many people's lives, including, of course, my own. If you look for my subjective reason for writing this article, it is there. When you grow to be twenty-eight, and realize that you have been living a certain way for ten years now, and that you are likely to go on living this way for the rest of your life, because you can no longer imagine what it is like to live any other way, you naturally begin to ask yourself how this happened. How it happened is the subject of this article -- just the facts, ma'am.

But there are questions I would like to know the answers to. Why, for example, are so many of the people in this story drawn from the same background? Most of them were from middle or upper-middle class families. Most were very intelligent. Many of them could have been anything they chose to be. Jaime Klimek and Paul Marotta would have made fine partners in a law firm. David Thomas planned at one time to be an English professor. Peter Laughner would have made an excellent journalist. John Morton is an excellent visual artist. There was no reason why they should not have effected an entry into the world of their parents. Yet all of them turned their backs on this world, and that meant making a number of very painful choices. First, there was the decision not to go to college, at a time when the draft was still in effect and the Vietnam War was still going on: and several of these people were drafted. Most of these people did not marry; those that did generally did not have children; few of them worked jobs for very long; and the jobs they did hold were low-paying and dull, a long ways away from a "career." Yet they were not drop-outs in the Sixties sense; they felt, if anything, a certain affection for consumerist society, and a total contempt for the so-called counterculture. The Sixties drop-outs dropped in to a whole world of people just like themselves; these people were on their own.

You can ask, also, why they all turned to rock n' roll. Most of the people I will be talking about here were not natural musicians. Peter perhaps was, and Albert Dennis, and Scott Krauss; but John Morton and David Thomas and Allen Ravenstine and Jaime Klimek would probably have done something else, if there had been anything else for them to do. One can ask why there wasn't; why rock 'n' roll seems to be (except possibly for the visual arts) the only living art form these days.

I would like to know too the source of the deep rage that runs through this story like a razor-edged wire. It wasn't, precisely, class-hatred; it certainly wasn't political; it went too deep to be accepting of the possibility of change. The Eels, perhaps, came closest to embodying it fully; but it was there in everyone else. It was a desperate, stubborn refusal of the world, a total rejection; the kind of thing that once drove men into the desert, but our desert was the Flats. It should be remembered that we had all grown up with Civil Defense drills and air-raid shelters and dreams of the Bomb at night; we had been promised the end of the world as children, and we weren't getting it. But there must have been more to it than that.

I can't begin to answer these questions; I can only raise them. Perhaps the facts will suggest answers. It should be clear from this story, though, that what is now going on in Cleveland is in many ways different; and that, when the next great explosion of energy comes, it too will be different.

Peter Laughner is the central character in this story; not only because he was central to the Cleveland underground in those years, but also because I was his wife, and saw things through his eyes. And that, of course, is my second reason for writing this article; maybe in this mass of facts is some clue that explains things. One always asks why.

Part One: Origins

La Cave was a small basement club on Euclid Avenue near East 103rd, a short walk from Case Reserve. In the middle Sixties, when the folk revival was in full swing on the college campuses, and racial tensions were still low enough that college kids felt safe in venturing two blocks into the ghetto, it had become the folk music center of Cleveland . Josh White, etc., had all played there. But around 1967-68, when acid-rock began to replace Odetta in the dorm rooms, lesser-known rock bands began to appear at La Cave as well. Some quickly went on to larger venues. One that never did, that became in fact something like the La Cave house band, was the Velvet Underground. Cleveland was one of the Velvets' better cities; and among the core of loyal fans who could be counted on to show up for each performance were two West Side kids, still in high school and thus technically underage for the club. They usually hung out in the back room between sets, listening intently while Lou Reed strummed his big Gibson stereo and talked about chord progressions and life on the road, An uneasy, tentative friendship began to grow between Peter Laughner and Jaime Klimek. Peter invited Jaime down to hear his band.

Peter had decided at thirteen that he wanted to play rock'n'roll. He had asked for and gotten an electric guitar, and had talked two friends into playing with him: Russ Williams on bass and Craig Ferrier on borrowed snare-drum. The band had grown since then (it had helped enormously when Craig, one Christmas, got a proper set of drums), and now consisted of Dan Pilske on vocals and harmonica, Rob Stewart on lead guitar, Russ Williams (later Don Harvey) on bass, Craig Ferrier on drums and Peter on rhythm guitar. They began as a white blues band, whence the name "Mr. Charlie," but they soon branched out from their repertoire of Yardbirds and Stones. After *Trout Mask Replica* came out, the band played their blues Beefheart-style; but the main influence on Peter was Lou Reed. Reed's guitar work had shown Peter what music could do; it opened up for him what he always called "possibilities."

So the band worked up a thirty-minute, feedback-filled version of "Sister Ray," at the close of which Peter generally leaned his guitar against the amp and walked away, letting it scream. They did originals, too; there was a quasi-blues Peter had written called "I'm So Fucked Up"... It wasn't your average high school band, but they did get a few gigs. One that Don Harvey's father had gotten for them turned out to be the classic

room-full-of-old-people-who-expected-a-dance-band night. They weren't a responsive audience. One middle-aged woman reached for Peter's amp cord as he was going into a particularly atonal solo. He told her he'd kill her if she pulled the plug. The band got paid not to play, and left. The night Jaime heard them they were playing for a canteen at Bay High. He went away impressed (and still thinks it was the best band Peter ever had).

Jaime himself was learning to play, thinking about starting a band. It wasn't something he had thought he would do; Jaime, unlike Peter, had never liked old rock'n'roll. Chuck Berry didn't interest him; long solos built out of blues licks had no appeal for him; jazz left him cold; most bands bored him. But the Velvets were different. For him, too, they opened up possibilities. He thought it over and decided to do something along those lines. His friend Jim Crook showed him the E and A chords, and Jaime started writing songs. He worked hard on making a tape of them, and sent it to Jim, who was in the Army. It got blown up by a mortar shell before Jim could hear it. (This was 1969).

It was about this time that a Lakewood High sophomore with an impressive, vaguely European appearance walked into the Disc Records Westgate store, where Peter clerked after school, and ordered about half the ESP jazz catalogue from him. Peter, naturally, struck up a conversation with him. In Cleveland , but especially on the West Side , people grow up starved for signs of intelligence in the outside world, believing in its existence the way an apostate priest believes in his God, a faint, mystical possibility that manifests itself largely by its absence. The upshot of the conversation was an invitation to Peter to join the boy and some of his friends in a movie-making project. So Peter found himself one rainy Saturday at Euclid Beach Park ; it had been closed for some time and nobody could figure out a way to get in. There was the awkward stiffness that arises when six or seven people are waiting for someone else to get things going. John Morton, a tall, beefy high-school kid with peroxide blonde hair down to his shoulders, wearing secretary-blue eye shadow and giant earrings shaped like Pepsi-bottle tops, decided to oblige. He picked up a brick, a five-pounder, and threw it at a friend of his, Davie McManus, slight, lame, immaculately dressed, who threw it back. They played catch for a while, throwing hard, their friend Brian McMahon watching with approval. Peter was uneasy. He was familiar with the spidery, obliquely verbal attempts at mind control practiced by his friends, but this was something new, a cultivation of the potential for physical violence. Later, they filmed John Morton breaking up a card game, overturning a table and stomping things into the ground. Later still, some nuns chased them out of there.

Time passed: Peter got to know John Morton and his friends; Jaime wrote songs and practiced his guitar; Peter's parents had his bedroom soundproofed so Mr. Charlie could practice there.

A vignette from 1970: Jaime walks into the old Disc Records store at 221 Euclid Avenue , holding his fifteen-year-old sister Karen by the hand, wondering if the *Loaded* album has been released yet.

Graduation from high school was now imminent for all these people; there were decisions to make. Jaime, who had attended West Tech, abandoned high school after a brief stint at Lakewood , and went to live in 1971 in a Clifton Boulevard apartment with his mother, his sister Karen and his brother Andrew. He started to form his band. Jim Crook, who had at last gotten out of the Army, was the obvious choice for lead guitar. Michael Weldon was collared and told he was a drummer. Craig Bell, who was in love with Karen, wanted to move in, and Jaime said "OK, if you're going to hang around, you're going to be in my band. We have lead and rhythm, do you want to play bass?" The band's name, they decided, would be "Mirrors." The full band practiced for six months; then Craig got drafted.

John Morton graduated from high school and went to live in a house in Strongsville . Brian McMahon and Davie McManus were always with him. One night, as Morton tells it: "Me and Davie , or me and Brian, or me, Brian and Davie went to see Captain Beefheart, and Left End were playing. And they were real bad. And I said that we could do better than that. We started practicing on the back porch. I played guitar and Brian played piano cause he didn't want to play guitar. We figured Davie could sing cause he didn't do anything else. We had our ideas about playing anti-music back then." They called themselves the Electric Eels.

The other guys in Peter's band had never liked him very much. They all smoked a lot of dope and did a lot of acid; they liked to stay back from situations, calculating their next move. Peter drank instead, and was too full of restless energy, too full of scraps of knowledge picked up from William Burroughs and *The Magus* and the backs of album jackets to stay back from things long; he was always going in ten directions at once; twitching from impatience, he was looking for the great burst of energy that would set everything in heaven and earth right. The other guys were going to college; Peter only wanted one thing, and that was to be a musician. When his class graduated in 1970, Peter gigged around for a while as an acoustic performer, then in 1971 went to California .

California , to Peter, was an animated corpse. The casualties in Berkeley were everywhere; it was impossible to avoid them at whatever hour of the day or night you walked up to Sproul Hall to play and pass the hat, you would have to pass them; it was as if a truck had come down Telegraph Avenue dumping bodies; half-alive, they curled up against the walls, sucking on their orange juice, waiting for the coming of the Acid Messiah, who seemed to be taking his time. The weather, clear and mild for what seemed like endless weeks, lacking definition; there was nothing to put your back against. People whispered "negative energy" when you mentioned the Velvets. He stuck it out three months and returned to Cleveland .

Mirrors, meanwhile, had found a replacement for Craig Bell; another friend, Jim Jones, who was living with his parents in a suburb remembered as East Nowhere (Mayfield Heights), filled in on bass. One of the Velvet's songs memorized at La Cave had been

"Sweet Sister Ray," an unrecorded sequel to "Sister Ray." Mirrors learned it, and Jaime remembers their activities at this time as consisting mainly of "smoking a lot of dope and playing a lot of 'Sweet Sister Rays.'"

They were, in fact, following what will be a familiar pattern: frequent practices, intense seriousness, no audience interest, and no gigs. What gigs they did get were due to Michael's friendship with the man who ran the Lakewood YMCA teen dances. There is some confusion about who played at these: Jim Jones says he never played one; Craig Bell remembers playing only once, in 1972, when he was home on leave. What is not in doubt is that the gigs always went badly and no one ever made any money; Mirrors insisting the Lakewood teens could perfectly well dance to "Foggy Notion," and that even if they couldn't, they were going to hear it anyways; the Lakewood teens replying with their feet that Mirrors could play it all they liked; they didn't have to listen. Mirrors' response to that was to smoke even more dope and retreat, slowly and imperceptibly, into a defensive shell, composed of the belief that there was no one out there, and never would be, and that it didn't matter because they were all fools anyhow. It was a belief that came more and more to color the band's actions as time went on; which perhaps would make it impossible, later on, for them to take advantage of opportunities when they did arise. They would come to be a reclusive, aloof band, suspicious of the outside world, seemingly indifferent to their audiences. But this attitude took years to harden; perhaps at this time they were simply waiting for Craig Bell to get out of the Army.

The Eels were even more underground; it is hard to say whether they were even a band in those days. "The Electric Eels" seemed more to be the name of a concept, or perhaps a private club, with John, Brian, and Davie as members. The Eels may have practiced, but never tried to play out. And though John Morton was beginning to be known as a visual artist, the Eels collectively were known mainly for their potential for random violence. For example: at one point John and Davie were living in an apartment on Madison Avenue, in almost-Lakewood, a neglected backwater of the West Side full of cheap apartments and failing storefront businesses. They decided to have a party. John had built a room-sized construction in the dining room of the apartment, a sort of jungle gym of two-by-fours, over and under and through which the guests had to crawl to get to the kitchen, the refrigerator, and the beer. As the party progressed, this became more and more difficult. At first things went smoothly, though; I remember Davie, entranced by "The Man Who Sold The World," which had just been released, making sure all the guests heard it. But a little later, what may have been a fight started between John and Davie . Davie wound up pinned to the balcony of the second-floor porch by John, who was threatening to throw him off. No one was sure whether it was a serious fight, or just Eel experimentation; but everyone knew that Eel experimentation was capable of including actually throwing Davie off the porch. No one wanted to intervene. I don't remember whether John actually did throw Davie off the porch; he may have.

John tried art school several times: Chicago , the School of Visual Arts , and Cooper in Cleveland . It never worked out for him. The pressure was building up, and, about 1972, he decided to make a break. He moved to Columbus to get away from his life in Cleveland ; he was successful enough in this to live across the street from the Columbus art school for a year without knowing it. Brian and Davie knocked around Cleveland for a bit; the Eels were, temporarily, broken up.

Peter had been, for most of this time, frustrated and at loose ends. He had looked up Russ Williams when he got back from California , but Russ was married, and working a lot of hours at the gas station, and his wife didn't want him in a band. So he went back to solo acoustic work, combining traditional songs with Velvets material. He made a certain name for himself among the folkies, but there were a lot of audition nights and not many gigs (after all, "What Goes On" doesn't really work on the folk guitar). Peter took to snapping at the audience, calling them fools for not paying more attention to music they might never hear again. What he really wanted was a band, but there seemed to be nobody who would play his music. He envied Jaime at times; what Jaime was doing with Mirrors was in some ways what he would have liked to do. But Peter, unlike Jaime, could never have put up with the slow process of teaching non-musicians to play; he wanted people who were already competent. Though Peter never valued technical skill for its own sake, it was for him a necessary pre-condition for making music. There was another problem as well; Peter's outbursts were giving him the reputation of being difficult to work with.

But Bill Miller, the Mr. Stress of the Mr. Stress Blues Band, had heard Peter play, and found him interesting; always on the lookout for young guitar players, he asked Peter to join his band. A lot of talent had passed through Stress's bands, most notably Glenn Schwartz, who had made a national reputation for himself before his religious conversion. So it is not surprising that Peter accepted Stress's offer.

Peter played with Stress for four or five months, Friday and Saturday nights at the Brick Cottage. Stress has been called a Cleveland institution, which is not a compliment but a description of his role; like other institutions, he provides stability in changing times. Stress's show almost never varied. Most of the crowd knew his jokes by heart. They had been coming to hear him for years, and would keep on coming to hear him. The small, dim room was always jammed; Monique, the one barmaid, hopelessly over-worked. But Stress, knowing his comfortable reliability might become too predictable, always provided himself with a foil in the band. His guitar players, usually young and untried, drew people who wanted to see who Stress was going to come up with next. Peter Laughner, with his grimaces and raw, almost violent solos, was one of the more interesting.

He didn't seem to really fit in with the rest of the band. It wasn't that he played too much or covered up the other musicians, but he stood out from them. His solos were never long; he never played scales or filler; but they were jagged, rough; they refused to

integrate themselves. There were some personal conflicts as well. Peter was impatient with Stress; he was tired of doing the same sets over and over. He wanted to introduce more rock'n'roll material and he wanted to sing some of it. He was trying to get Stress to record, and to play-some out-of-town gigs; things Stress was not willing to do. Stress came to suspect Peter was trying to steal the band away from him; in any case he was finding him difficult enough to work with. All of this led, in the fall of 1972, to a relatively amicable (as these things go) axing. Peter was at loose ends again.

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David Thomas, John Morton, Michael Weldon, and Peter Laughner, clockwise from top left.

It was after Peter had left the Mr. Stress Blues Band. He was living on Page Avenue in East Cleveland , working for his father as a tape machine repairman and playing occasionally with a bluegrass band. Brian McMahon was living around the corner with a girl Peter'd known since high school; the Eels were broken up and he was spending his days watching game shows and playing Kinks albums. Now Brian's girlfriend Kristen had these four cats: completely untrained, they preferred the space behind the bathtub to the litter box. which used to infuriate Brian. When he caught one, he'd wedge it behind the stove and turn the oven on to broil and leave it there for a while to teach it a lesson. This made Peter, who had had cats since childhood, very upset. "You can't condition a cat!" he'd shout. Whereas Brian thought that Peter, who was starting to flirt with a glittered-up version of bisexuality, was being silly; having settled the question for

himself in his own straightforward fashion, he thought Peter should either go gay or shut up about it, but in any case find out where he stood.

So there was a lot of tension in their friendship. Once when they'd been drinking beer all day and went out to get more, Brian suddenly picked up a full six-pack and threw it hard at Peter. But most of the time they got along. They drank a lot together; they could both put it away pretty good. One night Peter somehow got hold of some cocaine, and they drank beer and did cocaine through the night. About four in the morning they decided to get something to eat. Now the advantage of living on Page Avenue was that the Crystal Barbecue was right at the head of the street; cheap, a little seedy and open twenty-four hours, its fluorescent lights were generally a little brighter than you wanted them to be by the time you wound up there, but the ribs were good. So as they walked up the block, Peter saw some parking meters, a not uncommon sight in East Cleveland , which has as stringent a set of parking regulations as Cleveland Heights does. He'd seen them many nights before, and mainly he had ignored them and gotten expensive tickets, but this night something in him snapped and he decided to do them all in. He went to his truck for his tool kit, got out a hammer and punch, and started in on breaking up all the parking meters in East Cleveland . As he was finishing on the third one, the police (East Cleveland police are very efficient) pulled up with the handcuffs ready. Peter spent the night in jail, but his father bailed him out and he was home for the next night, which was Christmas Eve, 1972.

Life was a little easier in those days. We were younger, our bodies were still resilient, we knew there would be someone to pick us up each time we fell. There were fewer consequences; we could get by on less. And there was no pressing need to actually do anything; it was enough to know we were artists. We were nineteen and twenty and twenty-one.

There was an important change coming over Peter at this time. For some time, though he secretly longed to have a band, he had been convinced there was no future for him in rock'n'roll. Now he was beginning to believe it was possible again.

Most of that fall and winter he was casting around for musicians, unsuccessfully. One meeting would have consequences later. Peter put an ad in the *Plain Dealer* musicians' classifieds looking for "real punks," and a couple of kids named Gene O'Connor and Johnny Madansky answered. They were real punks. Gene had grown up with his mother in the projects on West 25th Street , and at the age of nineteen had already fathered two illegitimate children. Johnny had grown up on Buckeye Road , where the main amusement seems to have been to drink a six-pack of beer apiece, steal a car, and try to run down dogs. Gene played a mean Stooges-sound guitar, and Johnny could get a lot of pounding out of his twin-drum kit. They played with Peter a couple of times. Under Gene's influence, Peter bought his first and only Marshall amp, which he used for a rendition of "Auld Lang Syne" played at midnight New Year's Eve; other than that, nothing came of their meeting but he kept their phone numbers just in case.

It was the beginnings of the phenomenon called "glitter rock" that made Peter think seriously about doing rock'n'roll again. Now I suppose that, apart from the New York Dolls (who were "not really"), the glitter bands are remembered the way one remembers a fart at a formal dinner, an embarrassment about which the less said the better. But at the time, people felt differently. We may have forgotten what a wasteland the early Seventies were for music; but they were awful. The radio was well down its long slide into AOR programming; the hippies were aging fast; heavy metal a la Uriah Heep dominated the teen scene; people were making a big fuss over Leon Russell and of course there was the continuing series of Mud Festivals. Besides this flat, predictable debris of a decaying counterculture, there was nothing else, except a few years-old records by the Velvets, the Stooges, the MC5... and all those bands had broken up. Lou Reed had made one solo album and was in hiding. Now we have a counterweight, in the form of New Wave; in those days, the choice seemed to lie between pre-dental studies on the one hand and "Teach Your Children" on the other. (The illusion, of course, persisted that the two were incompatible).

The leading rock magazine, *Rolling Stone*, seemed to think this was a fine state of affairs. Sixties punk, and what experimental rock there was, they called "primitive" and "unlistenable;" they liked technological sophistication, being distant cousins of the guy who is real amazed when the sound seems to travel from one speaker to the other. So Peter had not only given up on rock'n'roll; he had given up on rock magazines as well, until somehow he ran into his first issue of *Creem*.

Creem these days is only the shell of what it was; its writers still go through the same moves, but in an increasingly empty and unconvincing way. Then they were fresh and exciting. They were writing about music the other magazines ignored; printing articles on the Velvets and Stooges, blowing away in a deliberately snotty-adolescent way the solemn jive of the counterculture; pushing for the new, the experimental, the obscure. Peter, reading this magazine, discovered there were other people out there who still called themselves rock'n'rollers, who loved the music he loved. And when David Bowie made *Hunky Dory,* and then did the Ziggy Stardust tour, and brought out Lou Reed, and got the Stooges to reform, it seemed to Peter that the moment had at last arrived when the music he loved would finally be accepted.

It is important to know this about Peter's personality; it is part of his tragedy: acceptance meant everything to him. Jaime Klimek, working away at his songs, endlessly practicing with a band of non-musicians, could ignore, or at least could believe he could ignore, his lack of acceptance. The Eels may have known that since they were more of a threat than their audiences, they were more in control. But Peter had a deep need for approval; he could feel real only if he saw himself reflected in other people. As long as he was alive, he had great difficulty bringing out his original songs. He was convinced that no band would play them, and that, even if a band could be found, no one would want to hear them. The bands he was associated with, and especially the bands he led, always played a great deal of cover material; they were underground jukeboxes. It was

easier for him to play Richard Thompson and the Seeds and Lou Reed's songs; they were known to be good, but who knew that about Peter Laughner?

If glam-rock had not come along in 1972-1973, it is possible Peter would have committed himself totally to traditional music. He was always eclectic, and could find the depths in any style he played; he would have been good. But the glitter phenomenon meant to Peter that he could play rock'n'roll again with something other than the four walls to hear him; though this rock'n'roll was not his original style. The Beefheart-blues had gone, to be replaced by "Transformer." Peter began wearing makeup, and satin clothes, and platforms; he flirted incessantly with homosexuality. This about-face naturally caused some head-shakings and mutterings among his traditionalist friends, who wondered where the person they had known four months ago had gone. One can wonder if he was ever deeply committed to the glam-rock style; when the fashion changed, he committed himself equally thoroughly to punk. But Peter was only superficially a trendy; it was only that, whatever he did, it had to be in a style that would be accepted, and for that reason, he invariably adopted the fashions of the moment.

Since I had some bearing on the events that followed, I must now intrude on the story. Peter and I had married on his return from California , and as his wife, I followed him in his fads. He was encouraging me to begin an affair with a young lesbian named Natasha whom we had met at the Brick Cottage. Though I could never go through with it, I strung her along for a while, and so it happened that she and I went in 1972 to a gala art opening at the New Gallery. Among other events there was an electronic band called Hy Maya scheduled to play. Natasha and I were walking along, looking artistic, when suddenly there was a blood-curdling scream from the floor above. We, and everyone else, stopped dead and stared at the tall, beautiful girl who then leaned over the upstairs landing and said in a quiet voice, "The Hy Maya performance will take place in ten minutes."

So we, and everyone else, went upstairs to hear them. I liked what they did: broad, free sound constructions flowing into each other. But for Natasha (and therefore for me, since I was playing along), the main interest was Cindy Black, the girl who had screamed. I decided to find out how I could get in touch with her, and after the Hy Maya performance, went up to talk to the band. There were two members, one, a tall guy with a long black beard, looked too scary to get near, so I talked to the other one, whose name, I found out, was Bob Bensick. Bensick gave me his phone number, and invited me to get in touch, which I did not do. But the more I thought about it, and the sillier play-acting at lesbianism looked, the more it seemed that the person who really needed to call these people was Peter. So after a little persuasion, he called up Bob Bensick and asked him if he needed anybody to play with him. Bob said no, he and Allen Ravenstine had a pretty tight thing going, but there was a group of people who had regular jams at a house on 23rd Street downtown, and they were always looking for people to play with. So Peter called them up and one Sunday night went down to jam. When the jam

was finished, Peter asked the rest of the group (Albert Dennis, Rick Kallister, and Scott Krauss) if they wanted to start a band. They said, "Sure. " A month or two later, they were playing at the Viking under the name of Cinderella Backstreet. They were the people Peter had been waiting for: accomplished musicians, but open to new music. Most of them had originally come from the Sandusky-Norwalk-Milan area of Ohio , and had followed each other into Cleveland . The move got started in this way:

In 1967-1968 there had been a band called The Munx. Denny Earnest played guitar, his younger brother Billy played keyboards, and a high-school-age Bob Bensick played drums. Albert Dennis was the equipment manager. Billy was a child prodigy, a thirteen-year-old virtuoso, and the rest of the band wasn't half-bad either. Denny's mom acted as their manager; thanks to her push, and to the musicianship of the band, they got a lot of gigs. The band opened for the Velvets once at La Cave, and Lou Reed is supposed to have been very impressed, especially by Billy's playing. They transformed themselves into the Sheffield Rush in 1969, and then broke up for a time. Denny went to California with his girlfriend Judy Spencer, a black, classically-trained soprano with a powerful voice and an equally powerful appetite for tequila. The rest of the band were getting out of high school and getting ready to leave town.

There had been younger kids, too, friends of the band, who looked on Bob and Denny as their role models, who practiced their instruments and looked forward to being in their own bands. So when Bob Bensick married and moved to Lakewood , and when a little later Denny and Judy returned from California and moved into Cleveland , the friends of the band followed: Scott Krauss, Leo Ryan, Pat Ryan, Albert Dennis. They met people in Cleveland : Tony Maimone, Cindy Black, Rick Kallister, Tom Herman, Allen Ravenstine. They became a loosely organized association of jam bands, occasionally pulling together to play out under Denny's direction, in a group featuring Judy Spencer's singing called "Froggy and the Shrimps." Their lives revolved around three buildings. There was a brownstone apartment at 36th and Prospect; Tony, a struggling guitar player, lived there until he moved to Florida, and Tom, called T or T-Bone owing to his spare, 6'4" frame, a girl called Darlene, who claimed to be a mulatto, and several more-or-less groupies, girls with feathers and rhinestones and red lipstick, whose number included Cindy Black for a while.

There was the house at 23rd Street , an old frame building dating from about 1910, sandwiched between a factory and a photo lab between Payne and Superior . Scott Krauss moved in there and painted his bedroom black. Denny and Judy shared a room. Albert lived on the third floor with a cat and a red telephone; he was very reclusive in those days. Leo Ryan moved in, and one night after a fight with his girlfriend, tore his room apart, smashed all the furniture, punched holes in the plaster, and then painted a few memos to himself on the walls, among them "Fucken Dumbass." Ever after known as the Fucken Dumbass Room, it was never used again. The first floor held two practice rooms filled with snarled black cords, a bathroom that, by common consent, was never entered, and a big communal kitchen with a scarred, filthy red linoleum floor and a

leaky refrigerator. On the bottom shelf of the refrigerator, after Rick Kallister moved in, there was always a box marked "Rick" holding a loaf of bread and three or four hard-boiled eggs. Apart from that, the refrigerator wasn't used much; Scott and Cindy (who had become close) seem to have lived mainly on Doritos and potato salad from the Convenient on Twelfth Street. The house had a big front porch on which, in the summertime, you could sit and listen to the catcalls drifting over from the City Jail, two blocks away.

The third center was Bob Bensick's apartment in Lakewood. Bensick, by this time, was no longer the straight-ahead rock drummer he had been with the Munx. He was learning keyboards, experimenting with electronic music and jazz-rock; he was also (basically for something to do) taking art at Cleveland State, where he found himself, to his surprise, one of the stars of the department. Bensick, though his own bands have never been very successful, has always had a gift for putting people in touch with one another. He began to introduce the Cleveland State art crowd to the downtown music crowd, and a loose but fruitful association sprang up which still continues. According to Allen Ravenstine, he was also responsible for Allen Ravenstine. The story, as Allen told it to me one night, goes something like this:

Allen's Story

"The thing that's really great is that I can trace -- helps me very much to keep my ego separated from letters from Spain -- I know exactly when this career started. It started the day Bob Bensick moved into the floor below me in the house in Lakewood, 1296 Cook Avenue. Bensick moved in and he liked to smoke pot, so that helped, and I met (Scott) Krauss the night that I met Bensick, hit it off with him right away. And Bob used to take these fuzztones and rewire them so they were oscillators; he had these little black boxes, and he played them for me; and I used to get stoned and go down there, and I'd fiddle around with these black boxes. And then after a while he'd start playing his flute, and I'd just play with the black boxes. And they were neat, I mean they made neat noises, and I'd never messed around with any kind of electronic instruments before. I'd tried millions of times to be a guitar player and just never could get the discipline together. I hated all that crap where my fingers had to get calluses, and I had to endure all this excruciating pain while my fingers were learning to stretch that far, and put up with the bloody fingertips till they got the calluses, and that trash; I really couldn't deal with it. It was too much regimented work that I wasn't into. But I liked the idea of playing music. So I'd just fool around with these boxes, and after a while I had three or four of them, and one day Bob just said, 'Hey, you, know you can get a whole bunch of those little black boxes in one big box, and they call it a synthesizer.'

Well, I still had the inheritance from my parents, so I bought one. And it was great, 'cause I lived in Mentor in this little house in the country, three acres of wooded lot, and a river running through the front yard, couldn't see the house from the front road, it had a big hill, used to get snowed in at least two or three times every winter, even with my

four-wheel drive Jeep. And I spent two years out there not working, and just playing the synthesizer. And for the first few months, I actually like punched a card, I actually worked eight hours a day with it. I'd get up in the morning, and get real stoned, and play it all day while the other guys, there were two other guys living in the house, and they'd go to work. I'd play the synthesizer all day, and when they came home, I'd quit. Cause they -- there was no point in boring them, really. And then they moved out, and I lived there alone for a year and a half , and I just played with it. I didn't really work as hard as I did in the beginning. Toward the end I worked less and less; and then I suffered a great kind of apathy about it till I moved down here (the Plaza), and there was so much more energy down here, just generally, that I started to work with it more."

(On the Formation of Hy Maya)

"We had this big room in that house; I don't know what it was for. It was like a sun porch that somebody had framed in, real nice; it was too big to be a regular room. It was a big rectangle that had steps down to it, while everything else was on the same level, so it obviously started out as something other than a room. And it was a perfect room to set up band equipment cause it was real long. So Bensick and I -- I had that EML 200 that I have now, and then I had the keyboard that I have now, the little -- looks like a touch-tone phone -- and he had an Acetone organ and a 200, and he plugged those two together. And we had a big PA system, we had two of those Voice of the Theaters, in that little room, one at either end playing at each other, and we were in the middle. And we used to just do crazy things, we just jammed all the time. He'd come out and then we'd play for a couple hours, just straight, just go with it. And after a while we actually formed a band. And Albert (Dennis) joined the band, and he played string bass; there were two synthesizers and a string bass. It was real great. And after a while, I had about a twelve-dollar sitar, homemade, that Bensick had built. And we'd put a pickup on it, and ran it through a synthesizer, and I played it with a stick that I'd put a few tacks in and a rubber band around it, and I'd bow it, and run it through the synthesizer. It was amazing, made incredible noises. And we played a job at that Firelands College, out by Sandusky, the three of us; first time in my life I'd ever played out. No, we also did an art show at the New Gallery -- one of those times was the first time I'd ever played out, and it terrified me. So I drank I think like maybe closing in on half a gallon of dry sherry, and didn't feel anything from it; and then the minute the performance was done I was blind, and I don't remember anything afterwards. The whole thing caved in all at once.

(He remembers Cindy screaming at the New Gallery)

"That was really good, maybe the high point of Cindy's career. She was with us, I think maybe just for decoration; we told her, we said, 'We're ready. ' And she said, 'Well, you know, how should I get their attention?' And we just said, 'Oh, I don't know, be creative. ' About three seconds later I heard this blood-curdling scream. And it worked. There were a lot of people there...

(On their performance)

"It probably was impressive, just from the sheer audacity of it if nothing else, cause neither of us -- oh, I don't know, Bob was trained as an artist, I suppose he knew what he was doing: but, you know, I'm just a primitive, and that was a real primitive primitive, that one.

"I guess we did some other stuff; now I remember we did one at Cleveland State where I didn't play anything. I just ran the lights. And they had knobs, so it was like a visual synthesizer, I just fooled around with that.

"I slowly infiltrated Bensick's world, and it really is my world. Everything that is now me directly stems from that: the friends I have, owning this building (the Plaza), everything stems from the day he moved into that apartment. Which is why I know, like the whole thing has nothing to do with me. It's all fate, there's no doubt in my mind, cause I can trace it, to the day it all started and I had nothing to do with it. I mean I did not control Bob Bensick moving into that house, and my whole life stems from that."

Hy Maya seems to have been a very loose band. It's hard to pin down the membership, let alone the dates. There was an electric and an acoustic Hy Maya; at various times, Bob and Allen; Bob, Scott and Albert; Bob, Allen and Albert were the members of the band. Perhaps it's truest to say that Hy Maya was Bensick's name for his way of doing music; and that if you shared his style at the moment, you also were in Hy Maya. It is certainly true that all these people were very adverse to tight formations. They were young, and still learning; Scott Krauss in particular was wary of commitments because he doubted his abilities. They preferred loose jams; they were not anxious to pin down things any further. Cindy Black has said in a letter: "As far as I am concerned, the most constructive time took place during the events preceding the collapse of Hy Maya, when we all met randomly at Allen's cottage to smoke, drink, discuss new music etc.... No one was overly concerned with recording contracts, press, egos, etc. Just simply being kids."

Peter, obviously, was coming from a different place. He wanted a tight, committed band that would stand shoulder-to shoulder against the world, a duplication of the camaraderie he imagined had existed in his high school band. He wanted a band that would play out several nights a week, get press, get known; though he never mentioned a recording contract, he may have had this in mind too.

It is possible that if the jam band that night at 23rd Street had realized what Peter was thinking, they would have turned him down. But they thought he meant a band along the lines of Froggy and the Shrimps; five or six people all used to each others' styles who would work up four sets in a week and play out for fun. Peter said, "Let's have a band," and they said, "Sure." Rick, Albert, Scott and Peter worked up some songs, and played the Cooper School of Art midwinter party under the name of Space-Age Thrills. It was a good party: Tom Yody, the Cleveland artist, made his entrance by riding his motorcycle

into the center of the room; our friend Donald Avery came as a nun, complete with lipstick and pectoral cross made of tampons, crayon-reddened at the ends. The rest of the band must have felt that it would be fun to play with Peter. A little later, Darlene and Cindy Black were worked into the band; as the Leatherettes, their jobs were to sing backup and look good. They were better at the latter than the former; in their feather boas, rhinestone-studded cutoffs, and low-cut lace and velvet tops, they were beautiful, but chronically off-key. The band's name was changed to Cinderella Backstreet, a name Peter had possibly derived from "Cindy Black"; they were now, Peter felt, officially a band, ready to take off. Probably the rest of the band had still not grasped what Peter had in mind; as they came to realize the difference between Peter's approach and their own, tensions would develop that eventually split the band apart. But for now, they had landed the Wednesday night slot at the Viking Saloon, we were moving into the house at 23rd Street, *Raw Power* was due to be released, and everybody was feeling pretty good.