

CLINK Features**Gearhead Records*****Ass-Kickin' Rock N' Roll And Muscle Cars***

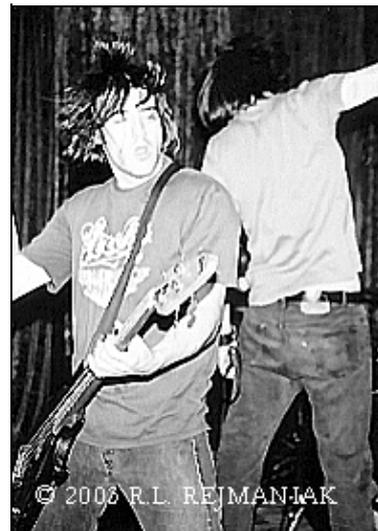
(an interview with Mike LaVella)

*by Joseph Lorenzo Hall*

In 1998, Mike LaVella of Gearhead Magazine heard The Hives play in Stockholm, and was blown away. In what has become a *modus operandi* for LaVella, his sixth sense told him that they would be a force to reckon with in coming years and was surprised that they hadn't been turning more heads or yet landed a sweet record deal. Even more surprising, this wild band from a small town was relatively unknown in their very own country, Sweden. In his characteristic can-do manner, Mike locked another Swedish band, the Hellacopters, in his car and forced them to listen to a Hives' track called "A.K.A. I-D-I-O-T." The 'copters were floored and asked where The Hives were from. Mike said, "Fagersta!!! They're from Sweden!" According to LaVella, "[A] year later, they were on tour together. I forced them on their own people."

Mike LaVella and Michelle Haunold (his partner in crime) bring a unique spirit to the indie record business. In a sector like punk rock where it is easy to ridicule those who make it big as having "sold out" or refuse to do business with major labels, LaVella sees things from a different perspective. "We had the Hives, their records were selling, they became more famous, got on Epitaph, our records kept selling... but when they went to Warner Brothers, it was like someone threw a fame switch. [...] I knew everything had changed when two days after they had signed, I'm watching Regis and Kelly... the wheel comes down and they're playing the Hives. Regis was like, 'The Hives... I love the Hives.' Who tells Regis Philbin to say that he loves the Hives? He doesn't love the Hives. [...]"

However, LaVella doesn't scoff at having one of his discoveries on network TV. With the mission of constantly striving to put out the best of the under-appreciated bands out there, he's fully aware of what this kind of exposure means. He says, "Why is that good for me? It's good because I have four [Hives] records in my catalog. If you go to the store and their new record is gone, but ours are there, someone's going to buy them. So what does that do? That helps the Riverboat Gamblers, that helps the Dragons, everyone on Gearhead for that matter."



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This is the essence of Gearhead records. In a noble quest that could end with the death of manufactured talent in the world, Gearhead finds and promotes the latest in post-punk, high-octane, rock n' roll. To get the story behind Gearhead, I had to go to the source...

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Accordingly, this summer, I found myself driving up to the Gearhead headquarters in Oakland in my "shitty Jeep". I got out and walked towards the only Dodge Charger in the area — which was coincidentally near the only warehouse entrance that could possibly house an independent record label and not a machine shop. A slicked-back, glasses-wearing dude with pencil-thin sideburns came out and said, "Is that your piece-of-shit Jeep? That's a '91? That's as new as any car I'll ever own." This was Mike LaVella, one-half of the Gearhead monster.



LaVella and Michelle Haunold, the warm bodies behind the scenes at Gearhead Records in Oakland, California, have pushed the envelope on "prolific" by putting out forty records in roughly three years. With half a century of experience in the business and the punk scene between them, they split up work along their strengths; Michelle's organizational and distributional skills keeps the label running like a well-oiled machine and Mike's zillion-pound mental rolodex ensures that Gearhead stays hip to the latest in supercharged talent.

I'm sure as hell no gearhead in the mechanic sense, but I can appreciate good, throbbing Rock n' Roll, which happens to be what Gearhead does best. I was here, in part, to unravel how Gearhead can do what it does so goddamn well. I also wanted to be able to document the voluminous amount of punk rock history that has been a part of LaVella's life. The subsequent interview lasted 2 hours and came out to about 30 pages, a tad long to print. So, I've paraphrased the core of the interview here. For the full text, [click here](#) (link will be added soon).

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It was apparent from the get-go that Mike LaVella isn't your typical punk rock label owner. First there was his computer, pin-striped with an intricate, flowing design done by Dirty Donny, the same guy who striped James Hetfield's guitar's and piano. Second, there were 8 track tapes everywhere; the last time I saw an 8 track was in a Clink! Editor William Michael Smith's '78 Thunderbird when I was in my early teens.

Born in a small coal-mining town in Western Pennsylvania in 1964, LaVella grew up in a musical household. "I don't ever remember music not playing," he recalls. At the age of nine, he was already into rock, his favorites were artists like T Rex, Bowie, and Alice Cooper. He even had a subscription to Creem magazine. "I was reading Lester Bangs and all that stuff... it was really influential. I remember thinking there was a lot of freedom in rock journalism and that you could have an opinion that could affect the way people thought. Even if you weren't making the music, if you could champion it... that stuck with me."

Through reading magazines and keeping tabs on what was happening through rock literature, LaVella became "the little kid who knew a lot about rock" amongst the older crowd of muscle car owning kids. Hanging out with this crowd meant getting musical influences from all directions. "Then one day, punk rock came." Mike met Jason Pettigrew (now senior editor of

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Alternative Press) who was two years older and opened LaVella's ears to Captain Beefheart, XTC, the Damned, just to name a few. In LaVella's words, "After hearing the Damned, Rush sounded pretty stupid."

However, when a punk rocker named Bill Slam introduced LaVella to hardcore punk, he was sold. "I'm one of those people that as soon as I heard hardcore, I was completely into it and never looked back." After graduating from high school in 1982, LaVella moved into a notorious punk rock house in Pittsburgh called "Hell House" and the subsequent music turn-ons included "the Stooges, the Velvet Underground, the Birthday Party, the MC5, Miles Davis, The Fall, Joy Division. Everyday I was getting bombarded by these older people turning me on to stuff. They were also turning me on to Bukowski, Kerouac & we're talking about people that would work all week and then spend all their paycheck on books and records."

LaVella was disappointed that Pittsburgh had no hardcore bands, "There was a scene, but nothing ferocious." So, in what will become a recurring theme, LaVella started the first hardcore band in Pittsburgh, Real Enemy with like-minded friend Vince Curtis. "There was an immediate opposition. People said, 'Hardcore? We don't have that here.'" Despite whatever the local scene thought, Real Enemy opened for "Husker Du, Flipper, The Necros, Toxic Reasons, whatever touring band that came through Pittsburgh."

Real Enemy broke up in late 1983 and LaVella immediately started a band called Half Life, where he would remain until leaving Pittsburgh for the Bay Area five years later. They put out a couple records, toured, and ended up playing at the amazing 924 Gilman St. co-op in Berkeley. "I was so struck by the scene here. It was really *the shit*. We were killing ourselves in Pittsburgh, there was one mafia-controlled bar, and for two local bands, it was \$10 in 1984. Here it was \$5 for seven bands. They had it all figured out."

It was at this time that Mike met Tim Yohannan of Maximum Rock n' Roll fame at Gilman St. "He was the kind of guy who would say he was going to do something and then actually do it. Tim said if you move out here, you can write for us." So LaVella finished the Half Life album he was working on, "packed up the van, got married, and came out" to the Bay Area.

Mike and his first wife had decided to get married because it seemed like a good way to get money to allow them to move out to the West Coast, but subsequently they fell in love. Ah, punk romance. After moving "right into the Tenderloin" (which is a particularly seedy section of San Francisco), he got a job at a record store making minimum wage and writing for Maximum Rock n' Roll (MRR) on the side. The first story he did for MRR was to track down the legendary punk band Crime, who were all junkied out by that time. It went over well with MRR. "The first story I ever wrote for them made the cover."

Mike describes the late '80's and early '90's as "a good, fertile scene. Lookout! Records started, bands like Operation Ivy and Fang would play at small clubs like the Covered Wagon, there was Jawbox, The Fluid, Tad, Nirvana, Fugazi & I must have gone out at least 5 nights a week." One day about a year after arriving, Pushead of the skate mag Thrasher called and said, "You're friends with Mudhoney? Can you write for Thrasher?"— for money." Coincidentally, LaVella had just interviewed them for MRR and had a bunch of extra stuff. He sent over the article hours later and was hired. LaVella wrote for Thrasher for five years, making roughly \$100 per piece – which is hitting the big time in punk journalism terms. Then RIP magazine called and wanted him to do a monthly column. He said, "For a while there I was writing for a lot of people. This job I had at a record store led to a job at a record distributor, which led to me

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knowing a lot of bands and labels."

It was this time, with connections and experience under his belt, that LaVella got the idea to start a magazine. "I always saw the relationship between rock n' roll and cars as way more than a guy in his '55 Chevy listening to the Beach Boys. What's wrong with a guy in a '68 Charger listening to the Stooges? It's the same thing ... 15 years later ... then again with the Supersuckers. Gas Huffer, etc. in the 90's. All that muscle car imagery was coming back and there was no one to document it. The rat fink monsters with the 8-ball gearshifts& all that great imagery just seemed to go with the music. I said I wanted to create a mag with the most ass-kickin' rock n' roll and muscle cars. One night at a Didjits show at the Kennel Club, I was describing my vision to Rick of Thrasher and he said, 'Oh, you want to start a mag for gearheads.' You could see the light bulb going off over my head."

In 1991 Gearhead was born. It would be another year and a half before the first issue came out but people were already donating time and resources to help out. He asked Gas Huffer to design Gearhead shirts, and then got the idea to put a record of Gas Huffer doing the Rezillos' "Bad Guy Reaction" inside the magazine. The local band Supercharger got wind of that and told LaVella that they did a Rezillos cover too. LaVella says of that first issue, "It was literally that simple; the way that all these things arrived. I had this idea, I was excited ... and all these other people said they wanted to get on board. That's how the split singles started. I had access to these two great bands that both had a recorded version of a Rezillos song. It sold out -- a couple thousand copies -- in one day."



Cash was tight. Photography was donated by friends at Thrasher. They had to break into a digital production place late at night that a friend worked at to lay out the magazine. Peter Bagge, Coop and Frank Kozik wanted to do covers. "Looking back, it was this tremendous effort by everybody involved. Basically, the scene spoke. For example, Nick Rubenstein, who I just met, lied to get the coveted art director job. He said he could lay out a magazine, which he'd never done before, but he really wanted to work with me and we learned as we were going. The first one was really primitive, the second one was good, and the third one was really good. That attracted other people. By the time we did number 5, I had a staff that stayed pretty much through the end. It got seriously good."

Gearhead # 1 came out in 1993, and one per year followed until 1997 when they started putting out two per year, all with 7" records in them. If you don't own a copy of the Gearhead magazine single compilation, you should. *Running on Fumes* (Gearhead RPM011) collects all the singles that came inside the first ten Gearhead magazines. In order, this includes: Gas Huffer, Supercharger, Clawhammer, Red Aunts, The Fastbacks, The Meices, Girl Trouble, Monomen, Chrome, Man or Astro-Man?, Southern Culture on the Skids, The Untamed Youth, The Groovie Ghoulies, The Donnas, Cosmic Psychos, The Melvins, Mudhoney, Dave Allan & the Arrows, Rocket from the Crypt, and The Hellacopters.

Unfortunately, the decreasing marginal costs of printing don't exist in pressing records. Gearhead's circulation was increasing which meant that more of the money was going to pay for the records. In LaVella's words, "If I'm doing 10,000 issues, I have to lay out 6 grand just for the records. Then it occurred to me, of the 10,000 people buying the magazine, probably 5,000 didn't even have turntables. This was 1999, really late to be pushing a single. I decided to go out with a bang. I interviewed Robert Williams and he let us use one of his most famous paintings for the cover. Then I got Rocket From The Crypt and asked them who they wanted

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on their B-side with. They said to get The Hellcopters, who I had known for years. That issue sold 13,000. That was the big finish to that whole era."

At this point, late in 1999, the modern Gearhead era begins. Mike was shopping around for a label to put out all the Gearhead Magazine singles when Frank Kozik said, "Why don't you just put it out?" That idea had never entered Mike's mind. He knew that he didn't have what it took to be a deft bookkeeper and that most of the bands he knew complained about the lack of accountability in indie rock. Enter Michelle Haunold, who already had lots of experience in retail, radio and most recently as the top salesperson of Gearhead Magazine through Mordam Distribution. She called and delivered a classic left-hand complement, "'I heard that you want to start a label.' She said, 'You know LaVella, I think you're a genius, but you're a shit businessman.' – that blew me away, I knew she was the person for the job right then and there."

At this time Gearhead Records was temporarily being run out of the Man's Ruin Records office space. As a favor to Kozik, LaVella had introduced legendary stoner rockers Kyuss to Man's Ruin and the subsequent record — a 10" Black Sabbath cover "Into the Void" — sold 30,000, which guaranteed LaVella *free* office space for years to come.

LaVella recruited Hi-Fives guitarist Chris Imlay (now art director for MacAddict) to lay out the cover to *Running on Fumes* and it sold really well from the beginning. "We made enough money to do the next record and the next. If we were confused as to why no one was putting out a certain great band, then we would just put it out." By producing good records one by one, Gearhead managed to pay the rent and keep going forward.

Then there's the "Scandinavian thing." I use this to refer to the prevalence of Scandinavian bands on the Gearhead roster. Apparently, Sweden and Denmark particularly have an obsession with American cars, pop culture and rock n' roll, and Norway and Finland also have vigorous rock scenes. LaVella recognized this through Gearhead Magazine sales. "There was a time when one little store in Stockholm was selling 600 copies of the magazine. To put that in perspective, Amoeba [here in the Bay Area] would sell 200. A store one-tenth the size is selling three times as many mags. Those were unbelievable numbers."

Mike didn't even know Gearhead was big over there until he noticed that on their latest record the Swedish band The Nomads had Gearhead stickers on their guitars. While working at a distributor, LaVella asked a buyer who purchased for a Swedish store about this and he replied (in vague Scandinavian accent), "Oh yeah, Gearhead is number one mag of Sweden. The Nomads, they would like to meet you." Mike was able to interview the legendary garage band on their first US tour and a friendship was quickly cemented.

The first indication of how crazed the Scandinavian punk rock obsession was came when the drummer for The Nomads, Jocke (pronounced Yo-key-uh), asked Mike to be the best man in his wedding — even though it was one girl and years away. A few years later, Jocke did get married and LaVella did fly over for the wedding. When he arrived, he was whisked away to a party dubbed "Gearfest" that they had planned without Mike's knowledge. All the biggest bands in Sweden showed up to play this party for Mike. At one point, all these American muscle cars started to roll into the venue, as the planners had invited everyone with American cars to the Gearfest. It was too much fun to do only once.



Gearfest now happens every other year. Each time they add a new Scandinavian city to the festival tour; Stockholm in 1998; Helsinki, Finland in 2000; Oslo, Norway in 2002; then Copenhagen, Denmark in 2004 and Reykjavik, Iceland in 2006. Sounds expensive, huh? Nope. LaVella says, "When the bands play, included in their fee is the ferry trip to Helsinki and a hotel room. They feed you when you're at the club. In Europe, they really take care of their bands. It's nothing like here. The poor "Demons" (a Stockholm band who were the first officially signed to Gearhead) when they'd come here, if I didn't make them spaghetti, they wouldn't eat."

"When The Hives had their success, things started to happen. It was really weird. It's not like, 'Hey, now we're ok.' It's actually the opposite. Suddenly there's this demand, and if you don't have enough money to meet it, you're screwing yourself. Michelle had to re-mortgage her house, she actually put her house up. If a distributor said, 'I need 10,000 Hives CDs,' where the hell are we going to have money to press 10,000 CDs? We we're eeking out this existence where hopefully one thing would sell enough to cover something else."

"Yeah. The thing is, if that demand would have suddenly ended, we would have been sitting on 10,000 CDs. That's the chance you take, re-mortgage the house, get the money. When you make a CD, you have to pay the pressing plant on 30 days, but your distributor is paying you on 90 or 120. So there's a huge gap. She went and mortgaged her house, made these Hives CDs, the gamble paid off, we supplied the demand and sold a bunch."

"When the money came in, I insisted she go get her house back, before anything else. It's funny. The last check we cut to The Hives was \$72,000. She said, 'Oh, man, we've got to cut this check.' I said, 'That's good!' It's a 50/50 split, the standard indie rock thing: after expenses, it's 50/50 profit." So that meant Gearhead had also pulled in \$72K. Which is a good thing as, in LaVella's words, "Credit and credibility are totally different. If only you could go to a bank and say, 'I know Bob Mould' or 'I know Glenn Danzig.' That doesn't mean shit." This is how Gearhead can afford to keep putting out new talent.

LaVella has a good grasp on what it takes to sell records, "The audience ultimately decides if you're going to make it or not. So you really have to work to put out the best product humanly possible. We have a good attitude... we really really love Rock n' Roll. As Cliche' as that sounds, it really is what set me free. I was never like, 'Man, I want to weld.' or 'I want to make clay pots'... I don't have that. I love Rock... so what else can I do?"

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Hard work is definitely the name of LaVella and Haunold's game, and the road has not been free of obstacles. Distributor problems (not the car type!) have been the toughest. Gearhead dealt with Mordam's relocation to Sacramento which involved the firing of its entire sales staff. The newer sales staff didn't know the labels they were distributing and didn't know who would buy the product. LaVella says, "Our sales went down, the first Red Planet record sold 1600 and the second sold 300! The sales people didn't know our products... we had to leave. So we went with this distributor, DNA, owned by Valley..."

Unfortunately, this change of distribution happened at the worst time possible. The parent company of DNA was Valley Media, which subsequently went belly up. In the process, they secured their warehouse in light of bankruptcy proceedings and the only label able to get their merchandise out of the warehouse was Suge Knight's Death Row Records. "We lost four months' salary, most of our inventory... but, ironically, literally it was the day we picked up our returns from Mordam. We got on the phones and just called stores and sold it direct... got the COD money just to keep going." By busting their asses, Haunold and LaVella avoided a disaster that would have brought down an average record label. Gearhead is not average. Case in point: Gearhead has been picked up by Koch (which distributes Epitaph and Hopeless Records), a kick-ass, dedicated distributor.



The two election days in California this fall coincide with two Gearhead releases that LaVella is especially excited about. The day that the terminator may be elected as governor of California, October 7, will coincide with the release of the New Bomb Turks' record, *Switchblade Tongues, Butterknife Brains*; promised to be the punkest Turks record since their first, *Destroy-Oh-Boy!* Then, on November 4, a innovative Gearhead compilation, *The Greaseball Melodrama*, will hit the shelves. Put together by Eric of the Turks, *The Greaseball Melodrama*, will showcase various obscure and underappreciated artists such as The Cuts, The Baseball Furies, Charger Street Gang, all at a bargain price of \$6.98 list.

What's in store for Gearhead's long-term future? Being with Koch will allow Gearhead to explore channels and media that weren't previously available such as videos and maybe even DVDs. As Mike puts it, "The more we can do, the more we can sell, they more we will spend. If anyone goes out and buys our records, we're going to take that money and we're going to spend it marketing the next record. No one's buying a Cadillac. We'll just keep putting it back in." Long live Gearhead, long live ass-kickin' rock n' roll!

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