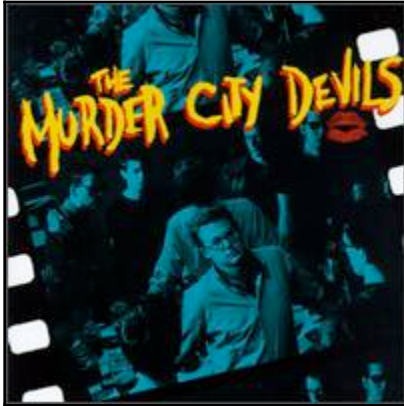


Testify!



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Murderin' Music -- The Murder City Devils

by Joseph Lorenzo Hall

The frequency with which good bands with promise take their shot and dissolve back in to the day-job jungle can be sickening. The trick lies in catching them before their label goes under or their music goes out of print. Exhibit A: The Murder City Devils.

Easily one of the most talented and crazy bands of the millennial transition, the MCD lasted for five years (1996-2001) and put out records that could incinerate the hi-fi and cause alcoholic recidivism. The MCD struck a truly uncanny balance. I can name a number of artists who have attitude or technical ability. I can name a number of artists who come across well live or on record. I can name bands that call themselves "punk" bands or "rock" bands and try to maintain some perversion of a stereotype. The Devils didn't claim shit; they played, they rocked, and, as the name suggests, they slayed.

Formed in Seattle in 1996, for most of their existence the MCD consisted of Spencer Moody (vocals), Dan Galluci and Nate Manny (guitars), Derek Frudesco (bass), Coady Willis (drums) and Leslie Hardy (Moog/farfisa organ). Their sound lies somewhere on the spectrum between rock and punk although they often stagger from one side to the other within a song. Indeed, the Devils straddle the two genres; and not straddle as in fence-sitting but straddle in the way that Slim Pickens' character straddled that nuclear warhead in *Dr. Strangelove*. Sub Pop itself had trouble with this one and, after deciding that the MCD didn't fit into the Sub Pop catalog, created an imprint label — Die Young Stay Pretty — with the sole purpose of releasing their first album, *The Murder City Devils*.

The Devils sound makes me think of an AA meeting where someone has replaced the water in the sprinkler system with whiskey and then lights professional-grade fireworks.

Their live shows were wildly renowned. They toured so much that they've said that they literally couldn't stay home, it being just too strange to wake up in the same town every day. They had a knack for playing as if their lives depended on it, and sometimes it might have, as Willis was not averse to setting his kit on fire — while playing — night after night.

The Devils released four albums during their abbreviated existence, and each one came with its own power, brilliance and end-user addiction. The first was the aforementioned release on the Die Young Stay Pretty imprint. The last three, *Empty Bottles*, *Broken Hearts* (1997), *In Name and Blood* (2000) and the *Thelema* EP (2001) were all on Sub Pop. On each of these, the bass and guitar come off raw and direct while gorgeously melodic and rhythmic at the same time. Their records show that the five musicians aren't there to take up space but necessary to execute lucid and unforgiving composition. Spencer Moody's voice and visage deserve their own nod. He's been compared to Jim Morrison, Iggy Pop and Glenn Danzig (there are even claims that Moody is Mr. Danzig's second cousin). These comparisons only

give a hint of what Moody can do with his voice as he deftly cuts through the band's wall of sound. As well, Moody's characteristic leaning into the mike-stand with a beer bottle or high-ball in his free hand has been burnt into the brains of many crowds.

And the songs. Many MCD tunes reach anthem status after the second or third play. There's the homage to Iggy Pop off 1998's *The Murder City Devils*, "Broken Glass," where Moody screams through the pulsating farfisa organ, "Iggy... Baby... Iggy... Baby.../I like the smell of your blood/I like the sound of you rolling in that broken glass/on the big stage." How about the hooves-over-horns "Murder City Riot," where the ear can barely tell that Moody yells, "This sounds like a riot looks/had some pills don't know which ones I took/been up all night.../been up drinking all night."

Empty Bottles, Broken Hearts has gems like "Every Shitty Thing" where the Devils probe the collective conscience with "And I wonder/how you can sleep at night?/Don't you remember/every shitty thing/that you've ever done?" "Cradle to the Grave" has guitar riffs that could strip paint and lyrics to match (imagine "shit holes" below forced as hard as possible out of only-human lungs):

*For some of us it's a long way,
From the cradle to the grave, ow!
When you got no lovin',
When you got no love
When you're livin' in the truck stops
When you're sleeping in the parking lots
But the Devils know,
I said the Murder City Devils know,
When you're out on the road,
When you're down in the shit holes*

I never saw a Devils' live show (although I did see a later project called Dead Low Tide with Moody, Manny and Willis from the MCD and Mike Kunka of Enemymine and Godheadsilo). I was turned on to them in 2002 when my girlfriend bought *In Name and Blood*. This one had liner notes where each member "introduces" himself as a center-piece in his own gory murder scene. I surrendered when I heard "Rum to Whiskey" with its battling guitars, throbbing bass and lobotomizing organ:

*She was the best thing,
Best thing that he ever had
She was the best thing
He switched from rum to whiskey.
She was the prettiest girl in an ugly town
She was the only decent thing,
In a good for nothin' town.
He feels sorry, I know,
He had sinned
He switched from rum to whiskey,
(bang bang) bang bang, he put her down
He switched from rum to whiskey,*

(bang bang) bang bang, he put her down

Luckily for those of us who never saw them live, a prolific 19-song recording of their last show has been released by Sub Pop. Entitled, *R.I.P.*, it was recorded on Halloween 2001 in Seattle by Phil Ek (Built to Spill, Modest Mouse). The innards modestly proclaim, "Recorded live at the end of a long tour, at the end of five long years of touring, you'll hear not only the songs, but the sounds of tackled band members, knocked over drums, exploding, broken or missing microphones, stage noise and drunken rambling." *R.I.P.* comes across climactic, jubilant and perfect for those nights that call for a crazed, drunken swagger.

In a time when some are suing anyone they can to protect their "right" to sell over-priced, shiny pieces of plastic in jewel boxes with a handful of shitty songs, it's good to see that we can purchase what could be sacred in a thousand years for \$12.

The Murder City Devils is not the type of band that has to be listened to a few times to "get it". If your poison is good times, good music, dark lyrics and lots of drugs, alcohol and blood-curdling composition, then check these Devils out.

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