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ARTS DEVO

by JASON CASSIDY • jasonc@newsreview.com



CREATE OR DIE Arts DEVO turns 50 this summer. I'd like to say this will be the only time you'll have to suffer through me talking about myself leading up to the big day, but I have too much on my mind, and I have a column, so ...

During my time in Chico, music has been my primary artistic outlet, and I've played in 14 different groups from ages 18 to 49. If my foggy calculations are correct, I've composed roughly 100 songs since I scribbled my first lyrics—for “Muffin Girl”—on a notebook while riding Greyhound from Boston to California in the spring of 1992. In recent weeks, I've been listening to old recordings on CDs and warped cassettes, and filtering my life through that musical lens.

“Muffin Girl” was written for my first Chico crew, **Pinecone**, which was actually my second band. (The first one I ever played in was **Household Morgan**, a post-high school group with my Redding dudes. I played bass, badly, and the 31st anniversary of our first show—in a garage under an open parachute—is actually this week, on July 1.) The song was about a pretty barista with dark hair who worked at that long-gone downtown Chico institution **Perché No**, and it's the perfect representation of my life at that time. Just writing the title here makes my cheeks blush at the memory of 22-year-old me, too afraid to speak to women and so insecure that I pawned off the singing of the song to my band's frontwoman, **Tamie “War Eagle” Hallock**.

A couple of years later, after a female human approached me and busted me out of the shell of social awkwardness, the young **Mrs. DEVO** and I joined forces to write songs together as part of a super-hyper poppy five-piece called **Pep Rally** (with old-school pals **Jason Willmon**, **Cindy Lall** and **Jeff “Papa” Ochs**). And those songs ... those freakin' songs from the shaky salad days, with hopeful lyrics about making the best of very meager circumstances (on the ridiculously perfectly titled album, **Puberty**), have been destroying me. I wish I could reach my arms back and hug those scared squeaky-voiced kids.

This extended listening party has been a surprisingly revealing autobiographical exercise—equal parts cringe-worthy and comforting, and really beautiful. There was the blind confidence of **Cowboy**, with more fully realized songwriting prowess (honed in crews like **Mid-Fi** and **Kick 'em**) fueling my late-20s swagger to play loud and destroy what was wrong with the world and replace it with my “better” indie-rock idealism (see album title: **Explosion and Collapse**). The moody, sad-bastard tunes of **The Party** came after the fall, when life got real and absorbing the music of **Cohen**, **Cave** and the mystical **Anthology of American Folk Music** helped me write songs for processing the dark stuff. (“Life is short; I disagree/I've fucked up; I need redeemed ...”)

Years later, as careers settled and life experience filled in, I came to realize that I had been right all along. Partying with your friends while shaking your fist at the universe is the best way to live life. And as I made my way back to playing music regularly—goofing around with short-lived projects like **MURDER** and **Holocene**, and jamming with new friends, like the irrepressible **Ken Smith**—I wrote a song for like-minded lifelong friend **Conrad Nystrom** called “No Bongos.” It's partly a friendly jab at hippie culture and mostly a call to sonic arms—“Let's warm up the scene, let's heat up these amps/Let's pick up a brick and find something to smash.”

Blending that worldview with the peace/power that comes from not giving a shit what other people think about you (a beautiful superpower that grows stronger as you age)—both personally and in my latest musical project, the recklessly noisy **Viking Skate Country** (also featuring Nystrom, **Robert Smith** and **Mike Strishak**)—has been the basis for what's been the most gratifying/humbling love- and adventure-filled time in my life. I don't know if it's the band informing my life, or the other way around. Maybe it's both? We'll see.

