

19th August 2018 A few minutes with the Dictators' Andy Shernoff



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Photo by Hanna Toresson

Andy Shernoff isn't often lumped in with the Beatles, or the Rolling Stones, or even the Sex Pistols. But with a legacy like his, he doesn't have to be.

Chances are, if you were ever interested enough to check out Garagerocktopia in the first place, we likely need not explain who he is or his place in Rock and Roll. But just in case you need a little clarification, he started a band in New York back in the early '70s called the Dictators. That band may never have sold as many albums as they or their record company might have liked, but the sound they cranked out has yet to stop resonating.

Shernoff was the singer, bass player and perhaps most importantly, the songwriter for the Dictators. At the time, the phrase "punk rock" had not yet been growled. The music that would earn that name, though, was being birthed, and few bands were more responsible for what eventually popped out than were the Dictators

"It's not like we're part of the public discourse or anything, but we did play a transitional role in the history of rock," said Shernoff, who talked to Garagerocktopia by telephone from his upstate New York home and by e-mail. "The first Dictators album was released in 1975 a year before the Ramones and two years before the Sex Pistols. Joey Ramone was wearing glitter when he used to see us wearing leather jackets at The Coventry in Queens."

Other members of the band included lead guitarist Ross "the Boss" Friedman; rhythm guitarist Scott Kempner; drummer Stu Boy King and singer Richard Blum, better known as Handsome Dick Manitoba.

The Dictators' history more requires a book than an article, so we'll just give you a quick recap.

Many contend the Dictators, when they formed in 1973, were the first real-deal punk band. We'll leave that to the rock historians and music geeks to hash that one out. There's no dispute, though, that with their aggressive guitars and beats, wisenheimer lyrics, and many a night spent plugging away at CBGB's, the Dictators would blaze the path for punk rock on both sides of the Atlantic. Today many refer to bands like the Dictators as "proto-punk."

As part of a band that at the time was far from being very well-known, at least in the mainstream, Shernoff says he never expected his music to be so relevant this many years on. To hear Shernoff tell it, by all rights Rock and Roll should never have become his career at all.

"I was faking my way through college when I dropped out to start the Dictators," recounted Shernoff. "My parents were worried because rock was definitely not a career path at the time. You need to understand that in the early 70's there were no rock musicians older than 30. It was still a baby business with an uncharted future."

"All I know is that I was directionless and saw the light at the end of the tunnel of my life when we started the band."

Much like the MC5, or the Stooges or the New York Dolls, all hard-rockin' bands a sound too tough to pigeonhole, the Dictators never threatened to change the character of the Billboard album charts. The conventional wisdom about all these bands is that they didn't sell many records, but everyone who bought one ended up starting a band themselves.



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“Those bands came a little before us,” said Shernoff, “but they influenced me and inspired me to pick up a guitar and start a band. To be considered in that company, I’m honored.”

Through the ‘70s, Dictators would release more albums, generally loved by critics and musicians, and develop their own following. In the ‘80s and early ‘90s, most of the Dictators lineup would record as Manitoba’s Wild Kingdom, playing songs written by Shernoff.

Over time, though, members drifted different ways. For a short time Shernoff was a member of the Fleshtones and he also wrote songs for the Ramones, amongst others, has done more cool stuff than we could possibly list here completely. Manitoba owned a bar and has gusted with many bands. Other Dictators gravitated to bands as divergent as Manowar and the Del-Lords.

The Dictator’s last studio album was 2001’s *D.F.F.D.* That album by many accounts was the band’s most polished and best crafted, helping Shernoff and company introduce themselves to yet another generation. Later in the decade, the band would headline some of the final nights at CBGBs before the legendary club closed its doors in 2006.

By the end of the last decade, though, the Dictators were no more. And, as sadly often happens in rock and roll, a lot of legal squabbling ensued over rights to the Dictators’ music and name. Members have also found themselves in court over other matters as well. Perhaps we’re abdicating our journalistic duties here, but there’s plenty of information elsewhere should you wish to get into the minutiae. The one good thing that has emerged from all of this is that Shernoff now has the rights to some of the very music he created.

“We just got back rights to a few Dictators albums,” said Shernoff, “so any time you listen on a music platform like Spotify, you’re supporting the band.”

More than forty years after the fact, though, the Dictators’ music and so much of what Shernoff has written still echoes through rock and roll. The energy and sheer fun of the music seems as vibrant today as it did in the ‘70s.

Here at Garagerocktopia we do our best to get the word out about music that sounds like the people who make it love it more than anybody else, and few can argue the Shernoff’s music, with the Dictators and beyond, still rocks like crazy.

“We were influenced by what came before us and influenced what came after us,” said Shernoff. “I’d also like to think that the quality of the music played a role.”

But Shernoff is far from yesterday’s news. He still writes and performs, and often has newer artists asking him to write songs or participate on their albums. It would take a lot of time to calculate just how many artists and bands have either straight-up covered Shernoff’s songs, or at the very least have emulated aspects of his music. Shernoff says it doesn’t take him long to find someone new who’s singing one of his songs.

“It’s truly flattering when people cover your songs,” Shernoff admitted. “I particularly like the amateur stuff like the bands doing ‘Stay With Me’ on YouTube. My favorite is three little girls singing along to ‘Who Will Save Rock and Roll?’ at a backyard party.”

Shernoff is still a sought after collaborator. Artists too young to remember when the Dictators came up have come to the venerable musician for both his voice and his songs.

"I occasionally do co-writes and it's usually friends needing a helping hand or a different perspective on something," said Shernoff. "Last year, the Dahlmanns from Norway asked me write a duet for me to sing with their singer, Line."

"And recently, a producer for a major country artist approached me to contribute songs. I was told that they will be used but we'll see if makes the cut when they actually record the album ... let me tell you the artist is the last person you'd ever expect to do one of my songs."



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Another surprising seeker of help recently was Michael Moorcock. The British author has dabbled in rock and roll previously, most notably with Hawkwind and Blue Oyster Cult. He asked Shernoff to chip in on his latest project, *Spirits Burning*.

"My buddy, Albert Bouchard from the Blue Oyster Cult, was producing a record with Michael Moorcock, the science fiction writer," said Shernoff, "and he asked me to sing a song. I chose an edgy tune called 'Dark Dominion.' It was a real stretch, completely different from any vocal I've ever done before, but good fun!"

Shernoff can boast of something so many other artists and musicians would love to be able to say.

"Most of all," said Shernoff, "I am proud that two members of the rock and roll Hall of Fame – Dion DiMucci and the Ramones – have recorded my songs."

Legions of artists have come and gone in the years since Dictators' music started blowing out speakers. And many amongst that legion have long departed rock and roll. Yet Shernoff remains a working musician. He doesn't claim any particular genius, instead pointing to his various skills that have kept him working.

"I was never successful on any rock star level," said Shernoff. "I knew I wasn't the greatest guitar player or musician so I consciously tried to diversify my skills. I've worked as a musician, producer and songwriter. If gigs slowed down I would pursue a production job and I was always writing. I held onto my publishing and that's a big win when music I wrote 40 years ago gets placed on TV or in movies."

"As far as I am concerned, any day I make music is a good day. So the fact that I can still make music means that I'm ahead of the game. I really don't know what else I could do with my life that would be so fulfilling. I've paid my bills, travelled the world and met some great talents [<https://www.blogger.com/null>] . so I'm pretty happy with the way things have turned out. "

Untold numbers of Shernoff's contemporaries from those early days of punk have passed on, sometimes done in by the demons in their own character, other times by the excesses of the Rock and Roll life, and often by life's bugaboos that spiraled out of control. Shernoff reports he is in a good place in life, having avoided so many of the excesses of the '70s and especially of rock and roll.

"There were a lot of them who were mentally ill, and who were drug addicts back in the day," said Shernoff. "I tend to steer clear of drama. I'm pretty boring actually."

These days, the man considered a prime originator of punk rock spends his days far outside of the crunching metropolis where he spent most of his life and where he made his name what it is today.

"I've been doing this a long time and the business has changed significantly so I don't wake up in the morning obsessing about a new lyric like I used to," Shernoff explains. "I recently left New York City where I was born and raised for the Hudson Valley. It's a laid back lifestyle and I spend a lot of time in my hammock. There are tons of musicians up here, and I'm in three bands so I continue to play a few times a month and I get to sleep in my own bed, so I have best of both worlds."

## The Dictators - Master Race ...



We have some other features already in the works here at Garagerocktopia. Artists have been sending us some very cool stuff. As always, we don't make any guarantees in stone but we're happy to say we've gotten a lot of very promising music sent to us, and we're always happy to spread the word about about bands that are playing the way-out kinds of music we profile here. [Send us a line \[mailto:rkreutzer1963@gmail.com\]](mailto:rkreutzer1963@gmail.com) and we'll talk.

Also, we do have a [Facebook \[https://www.facebook.com/Garagerocktopia-356465031219734/\]](https://www.facebook.com/Garagerocktopia-356465031219734/) page for this blog. We don't put personal stuff on it – no pictures of grandkids or our dinners or politics or anything like that. What we do post are announcements about upcoming features, maybe extra stuff about the bands, and any cool music, movies or TV Shows we stumble across that might have even the most tangential connection with the music featured here. While we don't spend all day thinking about it, we do like "likes" if you're so inclined ...

Posted 19th August 2018 by [Robert Kreutzer](#)

Labels: [alternative rock](#), [garage](#), [garage punk](#), [garage rock](#), [indie rock](#), [protopunk](#)

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**Martin John Butler** [August 22, 2018 at 2:35 PM](#)

Andy is a dear friend, and everything he says is true.

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**spazaru** [August 23, 2018 at 5:29 AM](#)

What a great interview! I was sort of surprised to see him say using Spotify supports his band since most other musicians talk about how they barely get anything from it. Then again, I shouldn't be surprised since he's the one who covered Blondie's "Dreaming" as "Streaming"! I love so much of the music Andy has made and anytime we get to hear from him is awesome.

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**Robert Kreutzer** [August 24, 2018 at 6:25 PM](#)

Thanks for the kind words. I feel very lucky to have gotten the interview. There were about four or five bands whose music inspired me to start this blog, and the Dictators were one of them.

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**Anonymous** [September 15, 2018 at 7:48 AM](#)

The DICTATORS' legacy lives on.... [goo.gl/J3C4Gs](http://goo.gl/J3C4Gs)

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