

# royal trux

A majestic clattering

by Christopher Howard  
and Gabe Fowler

NEIL SMOKES MARLBOROS AND Jennifer smokes Newports. Cigarettes certainly are a more tamer substance than those they've experienced in previous years, but the duo is no less potent with their music. Royal Trux takes its fame by always walking the fine line between pure bliss and total self-destruction, constantly exploring the boundaries of what we know as the underground. They are 'rock stars' in the truest sense, almost mythical characters that the general public will never entirely understand. The band consists of Neil Haggerty (guitar/vocals/instruments), Jennifer Herrema (vocals/more instruments), and whatever secondary musicians they happen to pick up, whether it be extra guitars, bass, percussion, or synthesizers. RTX draws on familiar rock, but warp it, twist it, and screw it around so much as to create the most frustrated, lonesome, and engrossing "music" found anywhere. It ranges from the hazy blues of their past two releases to the paranoia of double LP *Twin Infinities*... If you've heard it you know what I'm talking about. If not, you're really missing out.

The two met in Washington D.C. in the mid-eighties while Jennifer was still in high school. She saw Neil's band at the time, they hung out, eventually moved in together, and started writing songs together informally as Royal Trux. Neil joined the notorious trash-blues outfit Pussy Galore and moved to New York City with Jennifer, sharing a cramped apartment with Jon Spencer and Cristina (both now in Boss Hog). Their rented rehearsal space became their home, where the duo could be found during the entire day, only to return to the apartment to sleep. Neil continued with Pussy Galore while Jennifer

studied studio recording. Songs were finished up and RTX began recording their first album.

Much has happened since then: Royal Trux has consistently put out music on tiny independent label Drag City, and received a major boost from the dark pit of obscurity while opening up for Sonic Youth in the fall of 1992, catching both the band and music listeners alike rubbing their eyes in this new light. *Cats and Dogs* is their most recent release.

We caught up with the band in late September at Gainesville's Covered Dish. Jennifer Herrema spoke with us (from beneath her wall of blonde bangs) following the sound check.

Is Neil going to roll in anytime?

I doubt it. He doesn't like to do interviews too much.

On the latest album and the live show you guys have a full band... How did you start getting other musicians? Were they friends who were hanging out?

No, we actually met the guitar player right here in this club last year. He just showed up, "Hey, what's going on, what's going on." We had a day off the next day and he lives in Daytona Beach: "Hey man, come stay at my house." So we stayed there and so he's in his bedroom playing guitar. We weren't really thinking about it too much. But I was playing guitar last time we were here because we just kicked out our bass player a few days before, so I was taking on the guitar and I don't like to play and sing at the same time. Then we played in Orlando and he showed up in Orlando, said, "in the future if you need anybody, y'know, I'll do it." At that point, I was not happy doing

two things at once and said "Well, if you can do it right now..." He was in school and said, "I don't know..." By the end of the night he said, "Okay, I'll do it." He quit school and then took a bus up to West Virginia and met us up there.

Did he play any of that tour?

Yeah, he played the whole rest of that tour. We met him here and three days later we played with him for the first time up in West Virginia. He played on the new record and we had him up to the beginning of this tour. We decided we didn't want a second guitar player—at least for now.

What do you have going out there, the two other guys?

Drums, we got a full drum kit and a guy who plays second percussion and keyboards.

How was Lollapalooza's second stage? That wasn't an RTX audience...

It was cool. It was always a whole bunch of people that were totally into it and then there was always people that were just not into it. Positive and negative, y'know, each time. Certain shows the positive was a lot more detectable. We played in Toronto, it was crazy. We never played a show before where people were going crazy: slam dancing all over the place and flying over the bodyguards' heads and landing onstage, and throwing gifts onstage, and freaking out. And that was the first Lollapalooza show we did, so I'm like, "All right, man." We did the other ones and it was never that crazy again.

What'd they throw on stage?

At this Lollapalooza thing there was a little shopping mall. They had certain areas on the weekend [where] they have flea mar-



kets, a little mall. You could buy anything. People would throw up keychains and necklaces, rings, candy, weird shit. Not really weird shit, just strange things just to be throwing up, y'know. I was expecting letters...

Lollapalooza was big. What's it like, playing in a very small show? Last year when you played here I was one of 30 people in the audience...

Oh, man, it's been weirder than that. We played one time in Chattanooga, in the National Guard Armory. This guy had rented out the whole National Guard Armory, hired all these walkie-talkie dudes, like real pro, right? And there were fifteen bands and we were sixth or seventh on the fifteen-band bill in the National Guard Armory, seats 5000, and there were six people there, six fucking people. It was insane. There was liter-

ally one guy on the floor with his video camera and the whole huge space. And then there were about four or five people, one here in the bleachers, one there, one there. It was surreal, it was real psychedelic. But we've played lots of shows that were not six people, but twenty people, ten people.

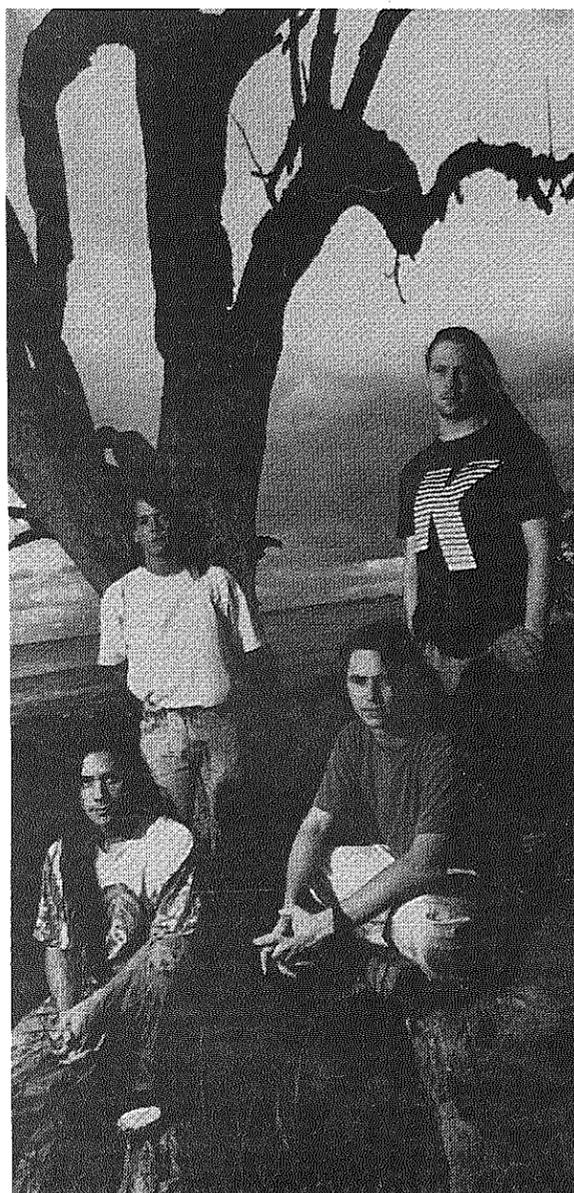
What's the progression between albums... each album has a distinct, totally different sound. Is that planned or does it just happen?

It just happens. I think we would probably just make ourselves crazier to try to think "this is the way it's like." You try to make it this way and then it's never the way you think about it in your head and you get all fucked up. I wouldn't be able to do it. I'd drive myself wacko. It's been seven years, y'know, like evolution and time...you

start... I don't mean to sound all esoteric. It kinda happens that way.

How do you guys feel about recently being compared to the Rolling Stones?

When I first heard it: "Cool. Totally cool." And then it kept happening. At first I thought it was that somebody had picked up on this subtle thing, and then it splashes the pages and it doesn't even make sense anymore. And then I started thinking about the job of a writer. See, this can drive you crazy, too. I do these brief moments of thinking about it. The conclusion I've drawn is that the writers' have this strange job and unless they're really prosaic or great fiction writers and not just straight reviewers, what they're gonna end up doing is comparing it to something that's real popular, something the general



# cynic

Don't believe everything you hear.

by Jeremy Wernow

THE BEST WAY TO DESCRIBE Cynic would be to say they are a group of four incredible, young and imaginative musicians. This Miami-based band might accidentally get lumped in with all the death metal groups on the market—just by looking at the album while you were in the store you wouldn't know just how creative they are. Someone looking for another extreme noise band might buy the album and wonder what the hell is going on.

On the other hand someone looking for something new and original might pass it right by, not realizing it even exists because it's thrown in the metal section. So where does metal come into perspective for Cynic? "We grew up on that stuff. We were into the totally underground scene back in '87, '88, actually '85, '86 really," replies guitarist Paul Masvidal. "Our roots are there in that heavy scene; we were always into that style of aggressive music, we were aggressive people. That's a whole stage that everyone goes through. We ended up changing a lot, mostly in the last few years. We grow as musicians and people, since the music is a direct reflection of ourselves. The music ended up covering more territory and expanding just as our personalities had, and we ended up

incorporating other elements. The aggressive elements you hear on the record are definitely more from our past than from where we stand now. Now we are writing more chord-related and clean-sounding stuff and experimenting... There's no real formula for Cynic, it's kind of an unconscious thing. Those other elements just started coming out more as we lost that aggressive thing."

Throughout the interview, you could sense that Masvidal had a philosophy of getting away from labels. He avoided terms like metal or jazz, keeping most of the conversation vague but clear enough to get the point across. "I think that labels are really limiting; everyone seeks to define a band, everyone has their own description of our music, I don't want them to be misled. I want them to hear it for music. It's inevitable: everyone has to define something just so they can identify with it. I always like to use vague terms like 'modern,' 'ethereal,' or 'experimental,' at times aggressive or others real mellow and gentle. It'll keep us open to different genres. When a lot of people think of metal, they associate it with a limiting style and we definitely use different elements that cover other territory. I guess I haven't really been too clear on names; you would probably get confused if you saw our CD collections. We have everything from

Bach to Zappa, from classical to extreme jazz, stuff like Tribal Tech, and Pat Metheny, Alan Holdsworth, pianist Keith Jarrett. We love that stuff, it's just so inspiring, so diverse, I even like some commercial music. There's a whole other side there that we can't deny. The album is real sensitive, to where you can tell what song you would want to put on depending what type of person you met. For musicians, 'Textures' would be appropriate. More aggressive songs like 'Eagle' or 'Uroboric' for a brutal kid. There's a lot of diversity there. I hear that Billboard is reviewing us in the Jazz section!"

Amazingly enough the band ranges in age from 22 and 23 years old, and they're already very accomplished and respected by others in their field. "Everyone in the band has been playing quite a while. I've been playing guitar about ten years. Sean Reiert, the drummer has probably been playing longer than that... There's people who have been playing for thirty years who suck. I studied classical early on and then jazz, and I've just studied classical again recently at school. For the summer, I was in UCLA taking 12 credits. We're [Paul, Jason, and Sean] still trying to finish our second year of college, but with all our projects we get thrown off track. We would have regis-

tered for fall but we have this tour with Pestilence in Europe coming up. Shawn Malone, our bassist, has been in school for six years. He just got his B.A. in composition and now he's going for a master's. He's hardcore—he's done, he's ahead of us.

"We want to take advantages of these opportunities," continues Masvidal, "to tour and make albums because you never know when it will happen. School will always be there, we'll gradually get that done. School's great, you have the Ensembles, you can play with other musicians. The competition is great too, it's inspiring, it's challenging. We have all been studying jazz for the past three or four years at college. That's when you really understand the mechanics of your instrument, and really get into knowing what you're trying to say. The whole voice of expression just comes into play with jazz. It's real important to us to understand our instruments, and I think that's why it was such a big inspiration to us. The artists who play jazz are really in tune with their instruments and what their saying. The more we understand this language, the easier it is for us to play what we hear in our head."

Activity is really starting to pick up in the lives of Cynic, now more than ever. They have been

public can get a grasp on. Therefore I conclude that if it wasn't the Rolling Stones it was gonna be something else. There have been more accurate comparisons done, but they're not real mainstream comparisons, so a lot of people might end up scratching their heads about it anyway.

[Neil Haggerty walks in the dressing room and starts rummaging through the refrigerator.]

Since you've been together for seven years, there was an overlap period of Pussy Galore and Royal Trux. What was it like when you first started out? Was there enough time for both?

We were writing songs together when Neil was still playing for that band.

[Neil shouts, "Before!" and leaves.]

Yeah, well, when he was still in that band. Before Pussy Galore even started, they all lived in D.C. and Neil and I lived together for a while and were writing songs then and continued on while he was playing in Pussy Galore. They just picked him up, y'know, like people telling them that Neil was the guitar player for them, and he just did his thing. We just kept working on our songs. We rehearsed four times a week, even when he was in Pussy Galore. He wrote songs for them and stuff, and did his thing.

Was Neil more into what you were doing on a personal level than in Pussy Galore?

This [Royal Trux] is the thing he wanted to be doing. We were gradually working out the song, figuring stuff out. I think he got what he could out of it and that's when he quit. It did in fact take up a lot of his time, but

keeping busy as hired musicians for the group Death, and just generally trying to get their lives in order. "We toured Europe with Death a while ago. That's one of the reasons it took so long for the album to come out. Coming back from Europe, our equipment was taken by this promoter in England. It was on its way to the cargo place we were on our way home. This guy from the promotion company intercepted our equipment and held it for six months in England because Death owed money to this bus company. It was this big mess because our equipment was held as if we were members of Death. So those six months we were just hanging out, writing tunes, trying to do as much as we could without our equipment; it was hard because we couldn't really rehearse.

"We finally got our equipment back and Hurricane Andrew hits the day after. Jason's house goes, our practice area was trashed, the city was a mess, so there were another three or four months lost. We had to get insurance to fix the warehouse, Jason had to get his life back together! The city just had to function again".

Getting on to more current issues, we started to talk about some of the actual recording of the album. "I've been doing all the vocals and up until this past

in the interim, this is what he was doing.

When you record and write songs, who does what instrumentation and who writes the lyrics?

I play the piano; I played the Moog when we had the Moog. I played a lot of guitar. As far as writing the lyrics, the lyrics are a mishmash. There was only one song I can think of ever that we sat down and said "Hey, we've got this song. Let's write a 'song'." Other than that, I write, he writes, and then on occasion, like once a week, once a month, I'll pick up his book, he'll pick up mine. It kinda comes together. I'll pick some lines, he'll pick some lines, figure out the context. That's pretty much the way it is for songs.

What was that one song?

"Hallucination."

This is kind of a silly question, but are those baseball jerseys that you guys wear... are they sort of a uniform? In pictures I see of you guys, somebody's wearing a Minnesota Twins, California Angels...

I think we can go way back. I think it all started in grade school. I played soccer for years and I had the best goalies' shirt. I had my number one, Herrema [on the back] goalie shirt. You couldn't get it off my back. I wore it every day, religiously, to school. I was always wearing shirts like that; they've been around in our drawers and closets. It's not like a 'thing.' I don't have one on now.

How long was it from the point where you first started playing in the warehouse [in New York] to when you started thinking about recording your first album?

Time periods and stuff I get hazy about. It seems really

year I was tired of singing brutal; I was destroying my throat. We decided to find someone else who could do it better than me. We didn't have any official singer, and I'm still writing all the lyrics. We auditioned singers and ended up getting in touch with Tony Teagarden a month before the record—he used to be in Epitaph. I was going to do all the vocals but then I decided I'd rather not. I figured that we may as well get someone who could do it better. So we ended up calling Tony and getting him to do all the brutal vocals on the album. I ended up doing all the computer dream stuff you hear, and then we had this girl, Sonia Otey, do some of the more melodic singing on the record. Live, it's going to be Tony and me. We'll have the Shawn do some singing, and Tony's going to be playing the keyboards and singing".

Talking to Paul was actually a very relaxing experience. He had been doing interviews all day, but he still managed to remain relaxed and collected. "Yoga is something I do quite often. It's a part of my everyday life, the exercise, the meditation, it's a very important part of my life." His study of yoga manages to make its way into the lyrics and music as well. "I read a lot of eastern philosophy, the writings of Paramahansa, Yogananda, Alice Bailey, Ken Wilbur,

quick. The first album came out when we were in New York, the songs were all written and recorded in there, but it took a long time. See, we wrote the songs, took a long time to get them together, and then we recorded them. We recorded in three different studios. Actually by the end, four different studios. The first record took a long time and we got really crazy about it. We made ourselves insane. Everything had to be so fucking perfect. It's the most anal record.

Did you intentionally make it so the drums are off from the guitar...?

Everything on that record was completely purposeful. It took us godknowsfuckinghowlong to get it...

Has Royal Trux gotten any interest from major labels?

We're dealing with Drag City as far as we know, as far as I'm concerned. Dan [Koretzky] is our manager; he's like a buffer from all sorts of things. So everybody calls and contacts him if they've got anything to say. Major labels have called him and talked Royal Trux, they've just talked. Until the day somebody walks up and just hands me the contract of my dreams, which rarely happens to any of these bands... until that day I'm not even thinking about it. We could get all sorts of offers. It's gotta be the way we need it to be. A lot of it's about money, but a lot of it is not about money. I think we'd be really wacko and anal about any kind of contract that we would ever sign in our lives. That's why Drag City is so cool 'cause it's whatever we wanna do Dan is into, and it's good and he gives us good money. I mean, there's really nothing else we could ask for. ■

Krishnamurti. A lot of that inspires me, and it just confines this medium where we can express through words what the music says. It ends up coming out with that kind of imagery, and the lyrics just kind of flow into that. It's not a conscious thing, it's just an expression of what the music saying in human words."

The future of Cynic is basic but admirable. "Right now we just want to reach people, to expose ourselves and tour. Just to get a chance to keep growing, to keep learning and growing as artists. To grow and to change is the utmost priority in life, it all ties into Cynic. As artists, that's our biggest intention. To have that voice that's unique to us. That will probably be the future of Cynic, a constant growth and evolution—and also involution for our inner self." ■

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