

SKA FROM OUR NATION'S CAPITOL!

Steve Jackson and Tommy Goodin of

THE PIETASTERS

May 18th 1997

The Main Street Armory

Rochester, NY

The Pietasters' modern ska-soul sound has gained them a reputation as one of the more well-established and popular acts today. Their shows are regularly high energy as illustrated on their latest album, entitled "Strapped...LIVE!", released last June. Since then, the band has been touring incessantly, just completed big shows opening for The Mighty Mighty Bosstones, and has high hopes. I spoke with vocalist Steve Jackson and guitarist Tommy Goodin recently, for Hoi Polloi's first-ever hometown interview, about the live record, the future of the band, traveling, and DC hardcore, circa 1981.

Interview with Steve 'Pietaster' Jackson, take one.

Give a brief history of The Pietasters, starting in D.C. or starting where? Virginia Tech?

SJ: Well it was a bunch of people that there were, we all grew up in D.C. Everybody in the band grew up in that area, and we'd see each other at shows, some of the guys knew each other from high school, that type of thing, and then we were in college, we were in a bunch of different punk rock bands. This guy Taol that we hung out with (he was on the first record) came back to town, he was away and he's like why don't we play ska, we like ska, and we had never really thought about it. So about six years ago we played our first show, we just kept playing different venues, and I don't know.. Everything happened sorta by accident, and we went through a lot of different lineup changes, all in all managed to keep the core members, and here we are with The Bosstones, just a bunch of friends that are playing music.

(Background Yeller) Swingin' Utters Rule!

SJ: Exactly, Swingin Utters Rule... And you know, it just kind of got out of hand.

What's your soft drink of choice?

SJ: Right now its Diet Coke, but I'm driving back to D.C. tonight, so it'll be Mountain Dew later on. I like the Diet drinks because they don't rot your teeth as much.

That's Nutra-Sweet. I'm a Classic Coke man myself

SJ: Gimme a tumor, just don't gimme a cavity...

What next after you go back home? Anything in particular?

SJ: We've got a lot of practicing to do, we've been working on a bunch of new songs and we want to go into the studio and start recording them. But we want to get everything totally ready to go and then go into the studio and just knock it all out, 'cause we don't like to spend a whole lot of money and time in the studio. Yeah, I hope in June we'll be recording so that we can have a new record out by September/October. If we get that done, then in July and August we'll just probably play the northeast. I know we've been talking about comin' up to Boston, Cape Cod, in up through Massachusetts and hopefully we can get Ithaca or Buffalo or something in there. But not too much stuff. We've been out on the road since March, even before that we played like every four days to get money together for the tour, then we went out on the road and spent it all.

How's the tour been as a whole, now that it's over?

SJ: Really good. Every night the Bosstones have brought in like 2,000+ people, so how can you go wrong? It's been a lot of fun and they are really nice guys, totally took care of us, and it has been cool for us.

How's the live record doing in terms of sales?

Would you say it's been a success or hasn't it?

SJ: They're doing really well. When we first wanted to do a live record, Bucket [Moon Records] was like, 'nah it'll never sell, live records suck and they never sell,' and I was like *OooLooLoo* doesn't sound very well, and we wanted to get across what the band really sounds like and it was kind of like pulling teeth to get him to do it, but finally Moon agreed and put it out, and I think it's been selling... As of November [96] it had sold around like 10,000 copies or something and that was in 5 months of sales.

Wow that's pretty good

SJ: Yeah, I think personally that live album is definitely the best all-around thing. On that *OooLooLoo* record there are so many mistakes and bad production errors, and things that we fuckin'....backing vocals that sound like shit. We recorded that whole record in about six days, we left for a tour the next morning, Vocal [Rice, producer] took it to New York and mixed it in like an hour and a half or two hours and it shows! (*laughter*) So I guess do the best ya can with what ya got, but we're excited about going back into the studio this summer to finally put together something that we're really happy with, and totally sounds like we want it to. We got some cool songs written, so...

Looking forward to it. How do you feel ska in 1997 is doing?

SJ: Obviously really well if all these people are here. I think it's doing cool. Say what you will about different bands being more successful than others, at the same time Hepcat, The Slackers, The Smooths (from Baltimore), Isaac Green....There's just so many good bands playing right now. Whether or not you like the fact that a lot of people come to shows, or whether or not you like the fact that Goldfinger used to be a heavy metal band, there's still some really good bands playing now, and that's the coolest part about it. The Bosstones' new record, *Let's Face It*, I really like it a lot, I liked their first record a whole lot, and I think this new one has some of their best songs on it. Ska today is a cool time... At least there are some good bands playing.

What do you think about political-correctness in ska today?

I know in Gainesville, you had a little incident.

[when he was attacked by a mace-spraying lunatic protesting the band's stage girl]

Or are you sick of talking about it?

SJ: Pretty much I could care less about what anybody thinks, you know?... If you don't like us - There are SO many bands out there, Hepcat, Slackers, Skinnerbox, go see one of them play. We put on a good show, we write songs about all kinds of different things, and none of our songs advocate anything for any one person to go do. I choose a lifestyle, whatever it may be, I'm a married guy, if you don't like people who are married, whatever.... I just don't.... I think it's bullshit to even discuss that kind of thing. I think its just fuckin' stupid. If there's a racist nazi skinhead band then of course it's fuckin' stupid and it's ridiculous. I just don't like preachy people, no matter who it is. We toured with H2O and Toby's real straight-edge, toes-aligned and everything, and we got along totally fine. We're both the same kind of people, have the same kind of morals and stuff, but I like to drink beer. I'm just so tired of this stupid shit.... The guy in Gainesville, he was some stupid little kid who had a problem. First of all, if you got a problem with somebody, you don't just go and attack them... A women's rights advocate, an anti-racist advocate would say violence begets violence. Guy sprays me with mace, I fuckin' put him in the hospital. And if anybody tries to do that again, I'll do it, then get back on stage and finish the set. Whatever. It's just stupid fuckin' people. If you don't like us, fuck you, don't come and see us, I don't care. There are a lot of other people that will.

When I first heard about that I was shocked that someone would take something that far. It's just pointless.

SJ: It's ridiculous... It's as stupid as some idiot in front of an abortion clinic attacking people. I don't understand civilized people trying to get their point across like that.

Do you get many interviews?

SJ: Yeah, usually what happens is people call for interviews and we put them on the guest list and the security guards don't let them back for the interview, so we end up loading up and driving out of the parking lot and we end up talking for about two minutes before we leave. But we try to do as much as we can.

(Enter Tommy Goodin, guitarist)

What's the best part of touring?

SJ: We can do a couple weeks here and there, maybe run up to Cape Cod, stay up in the north where it's cool in the summertime. When it starts to cool off in the north around fall, go down to Florida, spend some time, maybe go to California or something like that. That's the nice part about touring, even though we don't make any money or anything, we can still choose. This tour was so nice because it was the first day of spring everywhere we went, and we went around the south, it was nice... we get to Boise and it was like (*in local yokel voice*) "This is the first day it's been over 70 degrees all year!" It's really nice to travel.

TG: It used to be we'd be going through Canada in November and there would be full foot-high snow drifts, blizzards for 800 miles in a row.

SJ: Then we'd do Phoenix and Florida in August and it was (*local yokel voice again*) "We've never reached 130 in Phoenix before, Uh, you guys have to play two hours tonight"

TG: We'd be in this big bus with the windows rolled down, no AC, middle of the night and there's 115 degree winds blowing through our windows, that's the coolest we could get it.

SJ: It was like a blast furnace

TG: A hair dryer

SJ: We were driving L.A. to Phoenix in August and we had decided to drive at night so the van wouldn't overheat. Swear to god it was 115 degrees at the gas station at 3 AM, the wind was like 50 miles an hour. It sucked man.

I've been through Needles, California in July and it's like 105 in the shade!

TG: Florida in July or June, they have bugs like the size of... Like the size of my head, man. Or if you go to Minnesota, with all the lakes in springtime... when all the mosquitoes are out, thousands of em!

SJ: Swarms...well you guys get that up here I guess.

TG: We sleep in our van or in our tent and we just get mauled by these mosquitoes. That's the most important thing to us anymore is making sure we avoid certain places at certain times of the year.

SJ: This is probably our fourteenth time we've been across the continent, so by now we've learned the right time to go everywhere and how long it takes to get from one place to the next, and we've actually been on time all except for what, one show this whole tour so... well that was Barry's fault.

"We write songs about all kinds of different things, and none advocate anything for any one person to go do."

— Steve Jackson

Is Maggie Mae a real, actual existing bartender?

TG: Maggie Mae is just the ideal bartender, sort of.

SJ: And not to everybody in every bar that we always end up playing in....We go back to bars four months later and we're like, "Sorry we forgot to pay our tab last time we were here."

TG: It's always a big blur, until a couple days later....Oh great!

SJ: We always remember like three cities later, we're like "Aw fuck! I forgot to pay the guy in Toledo!" Call the club and be like "John! I'm sorry! I'm sending the check, I feel really bad." Ha Ha!

TG: I think really it was just sort of about the girl bartenders that used to run The Cellar in Blacksburg.

SJ: Yeah, there was this bar that we always used to go to before they turned into assholes and kicked us out, we spent collectively 15 grand there in a period of four years, and then they decided they didn't like us anymore, So we're not allowed in the fuckin' Cellar after all that. Maggie Mae doesn't work there anymore. Oh well.

What's the ska audience like in D.C.? Pretty big?

SJ: Yeah man, the Checkered Cabs split up which sucks, but there's Eastern Standard Time, The Smooths, The Decepticonz, Instigators....

Skunks?

SJ: Skunks, yeah, they're usually out on the road too, so like us, we hardly ever play in D.C. really because we're rarely there, but definitely the shows are great. There's this band Lickety Split, has this guy Chuck who used to be our drummer for a year or so, we were in-between drummers. They're good, a pop-punk-oi sort-of ska thing.

TG: Our old bassist plays in Eastern Standard Time. They're more traditional sounding.

SJ: All kinds of stuff going on.

What about the clubs?

SJ: The clubs are cool, but there used to be this place called D.C. Space and a place called the 15 Minute club, that would just have, not small bands, but small shows... And now all that's left is the 9:30 Club.

TG: The Black Cat used to have shows, but they canceled ALL ska shows due to a little fight there. So....

I recognize those names from D.C. hardcore, and while we're on that subject, have you guys ever been to the Dischord house? Does it exist anymore?

TG: Well they have a distribution house. To answer the question, yes there still is one.

SJ: Back in the day there was a Dischord house, and H2O and all those guys were in a band called Outcrowd, and they were down with all those Dischord guys. When we were growing up, all those bands were playing in D.C. You'd go to a show and Government Issue would play with the UK Subs and the next day it was NY Citizens, and then the next day The Reply would be there. So you'd go to one show and all the punks would be there, but so would all the mods and skinheads. Then the next day all the same 100 people were there. It was a cool little scene, and so in that sense, we always saw the Dischord guys, and I know a lot of people who were in bands at the time, but I wasn't really. We were busy getting drunk and being stupid and fighting and stuff, and they weren't about being drunk, stupid and fighting, so... D.C. is a small place. Dante, who runs the Black Cat, he used to be the drummer for Rites of Spring, Iron Cross, also Dave Grohl owns part of that club, the Foo Fighters dude, but he was also in Scream. It's a tight-knit community. There used to be a Dischord house in Arlington, no wasn't it in NW?

TG: Fuck if I know.

SJ: I've never been to the Dischord house, there was a house, there may still be a house. I dunno.

TG: Back in the day, people were like "Dischord, who's that?" There were so many bands back then, tons of 'em.

SJ: They were all huge and everybody loved them and everyone went to see 'em.

TG: Dischord is like the sole survivor from that period.

That brings me to the next question. As far as music periods go, you have a favorite band from the 2Tone era?

SJ: I really like Bad Manners

TG: Bad Manners!

SJ: They get underrated, everybody always says Specials and Selector. Obviously, The Specials are a great band. The Selector had good songs, but Bad Manners kick ass as far as what we play and a kind of influence, the feel of our music.

TG: Back when The Pietasters originally started, we played some shows with Bad Manners and they were a huge influence then. They were huge parties... We had big keg parties after every show in Blacksburg.

SJ: We played like 5 shows with them and just had so much fun, even though we totally sucked. You can't even imagine how bad we were. We were playing Atlanta, D.C., Baltimore. After one of the shows we played with them, Buster Bloodvessel was being so cool and taking us out to the hotel with him, and out to dinner and buying us food, we just sucked out loud so fucking bad. We'd be like "okay, we're going on, let's drink nine cases of beer, get up on stage and try to forget how to play" (*slurred speech*) agawwwwwaaeeoo! and I hadn't figured out how to sing yet at that point either.

TG: That's how we did every show. We didn't know how to do it any other way.

SJ: And if you as an audience member didn't like it, we'd just jump out and club you with a mike stand, you know the routine...

Ha ha. That should be about it, thanks a lot and good luck with the new album!

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