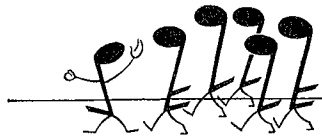


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NOT DEAD YET DEPT.  
A PUNK REUNION



It has been twenty-three years since the Dead Kennedys released their first single, “California Über Alles” (which envisioned President Jerry Brown flanked by “the suede-denim secret police”), and since their singer, Jello Biafra, ran for mayor of San Francisco (his platform called for all downtown executives to wear clown suits during business hours) and came in fourth. And it has been sixteen years since the band broke up, after playing what was supposed to be its final show, in Davis, California. “We all agreed not to carry it on, but the thing about punk rock is, it’s against having a set of rules, and here we are,” East Bay Ray, the band’s guitarist, said. This was the other night at L’Amour, a club in Brooklyn, where the DKs, touring for the first time since 1986, were about to play a midnight show. Their reunion is incomplete, however, as Jello has been estranged from the group since 1998, when Ray and the others—the bassist, Klaus Fluoride, and the drummer, D. H. Peligro—sued him for unpaid royalties and for the rights to license their music. (Biafra has accused them of wanting to let Levi’s use the song “Holiday in Cambodia” in an ad. The band denies it.) In Jello’s place, they have hired Brandon Cruz, who’s

on loan from a band called Dr. Know.

“My involvement is controversial, obviously,” Brandon said, drinking a beer in an unfinished broom closet that was being used as the greenroom. “Now Jello is suing Dead Kennedys, accusing me of impersonating him and emulating his stage act. I’ve had death threats from fans. I’ve been called a scab and a trust-fund baby—because of my background, I guess.” When Brandon was six years old, he began playing Eddie in “The Courtship of Eddie’s Father,” a sitcom that ran on ABC in the early nineteen-seventies and starred Bill Bixby as a widowed father. “Bixby was an amazing man,” Brandon said. “In 1981, I did a Dick Clark special called ‘Whatever Became of . . . ?,’ and I showed up with green hair and he hugged me. He said, ‘Are you on drugs?’ and I said, ‘No.’ So I lied to Bill Bixby, but it was O.K.”

Brandon, who has small eyes, tight skin, and short platinum hair, wanted to make it clear that, despite stories about Jello living in a large Victorian house in San Francisco while the rest of the DKs were going broke—Klaus had been driving a DHL truck—this tour is not just



Brandon Cruz

about money. He said, “I didn’t write these lyrics, but I believe every fucking word of them.”

“Surprisingly, most of the lyrics don’t feel dated, because so little has changed,” said East Bay Ray, who, like the other original members of the band, doesn’t

like to give out his age or his real name. "We took a line that goes 'When Cowboy Ronnie comes to town,' and made it 'When Cowboy George W. Bush comes to town,' but that's about it."

Ray disappeared and returned with a man and his daughter. "They were waiting in the audience, and I saw she had one of our old T-shirts," he said. "Check out this story."

The man, whose name was David Schachter (brush cut, chinos), said, "O.K., I work in a conservative financial field, but imagine it's 1981 and I'm just a kid from Queens, right? I go to Irving Plaza to see the DKs on a Friday, and I love them so much I have to see them again the next night. But I feel guilty. What, go out on Saturday night and leave the wife at home? So I stay home awhile, I give the wife a little something to remember, and then I'm out the door and at the show. And, exactly nine months later, we get Lisa."

"Hey, wow," Brandon said.

"I didn't drag her to the show tonight," David said. "She loves your music. Tell them what album you've been listening to all week."

Lisa (newsboy cap, artillery belt, dark eye shadow) said, "Dead Kennedys."

"But which album," David said hopefully. "Fresh . . . Fruit . . . ?"

"Oh, right," Lisa said. "'Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables.'"

"Cool," Ray said.

When it was time to perform, the group tore through the old standards—including "Police Truck," "Let's Lynch the Landlord," and a slightly altered cover of "Viva Las Vegas" ("Lady Luck's with me, the dice stay hot/Got coke up my nose to dry away the snot"). Brandon kept rhythm by pounding his forehead with his microphone, drawing blood. When he introduced the number "Too Drunk to Fuck," he said, "Beer can do a lot of good things for you. But this song is about how bad things can happen to you, too." They finished the set with "Holiday in Cambodia," their best-known song, a satire of bourgeois slumming. The audience chanted along with the coda: "Pol Pot, Pol Pot, Pol Pot, Pol Pot."

Afterward, the Dead Kennedys headed out into the rain. Brandon put on a jean jacket with the sleeves cut off and used a paper towel to dab at his fore-

head, which was still bleeding. "One guy just told me, 'You're not Jello, but you're pretty good,'" he said. "That's O.K."

—Eric Konigsberg