



The Stool Pigeon

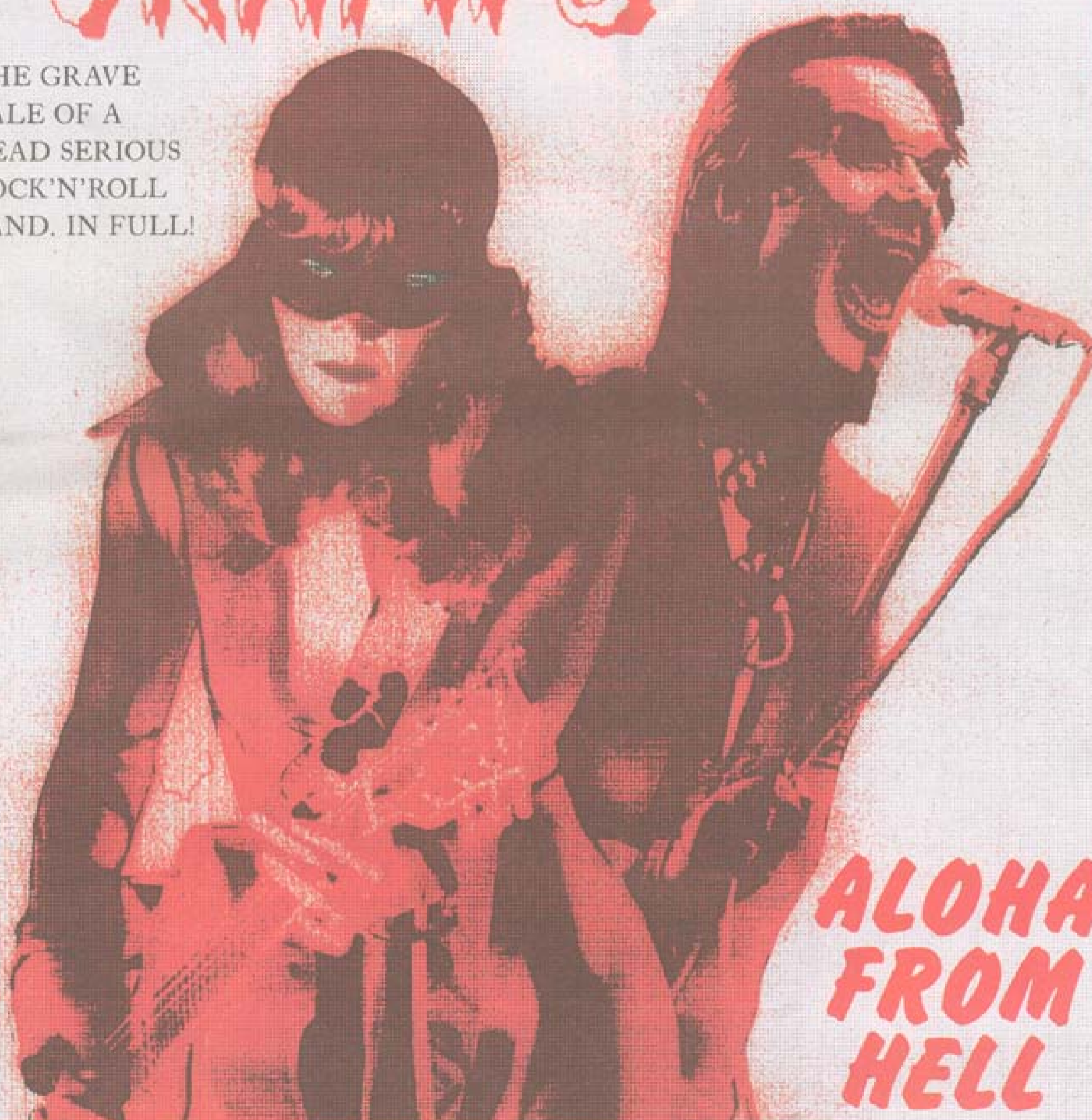
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FREE

THE GRAMPERS

THE GRAVE
TALE OF A
DEAD SERIOUS
ROCK'N'ROLL
BAND. IN FULL!



**ALOHA
FROM
HELL**

**ARAB STRAP BEIRUT JARVIS COCKER BRAKES PANACEA
JOANNA NEWSOM CLINIC LEE HAZLEWOOD CHAS & DAVE**



ALOHA FROM HELL

*The Grave Tale Of A Dead Serious
Rock 'n' Roll Band. In Full!*

"We've been written off as kitsch, camp, cartoony. But we're dead serious." Poison Ivy Rorschach is not a woman to argue with on this kind of point. Not that the 52-year-old guitarist and co-founder of the living legend that is The Cramps is in any way testy, aggressive or bitchy, despite all those sneering leopard skin dominatrix poses she's struck over the last 30 years. But she knows what she knows, loves what she loves, and has earned the right to let her point stand many times over.

Ivy is the historian of the incredibly strange band she formed in 1975 with the love of her life, Lux Interior, the Herman Munster of vintage minimalist rock'n'roll. If you've never heard The Cramps, or have but don't understand what an impact they've had on global pop culture, then let me introduce you to the human interest element of the Lux'n'Ivy saga. They are one of the great love stories of rock. Met on a California freeway in 1972, fell for each other instantly, have not spent a day apart in 34 years. The couple that plays together, stays together, particularly if what they play is mondo-gonzo dirty blues punk rock'n'roll shot through with the vivid colour, satire and sex of fifties teen culture, stoopid-dumb b-movies, vintage pornography, Vegas Elvis, backwoods rockabilly, sicko sixties garage, iconic burlesque clothing, pink Cadillacs, dirty doings at the eternal American drive-in, Ms Spanks-a-lot Amazonianism, Ed Wood sci-fi and the kind of gratuitous filth that only the most romantic people on the planet can indulge in and understand that the filth is the love, L.U.V. They are The Cramps. And they transcend rock'n'roll because they are a genre of their own.

We're talking to Lux and Ivy because... well, actually, because they're

the goddam Cramps, fchrissake! They have no product to promote, no new album. They have just finished remixing and remastering their 1979 *Graveyard Hits* mini album, to be reissued next year with a slew of previously unreleased tracks from their first legendary Memphis recording sessions. And they have just finished a tour, mainly festivals. "I really enjoy that," says Lux, "because you look out at all the faces and you can tell they've never seen you and don't know what to expect." Lux says everything with a kind of goofy drollness, reminiscent of James Stewart and the way *The Greatest Film Actor Of All Time* could use his down-home drawl and easy likeability to deliver stinging sarcasm while remaining eminently lovable.

Talking to Lux and Ivy about their extraordinary past is not just obvious, but appropriate, because the past is where they live. Or, as Lux sees it: "At the time when we started - and even today - you hear people say, 'We want to do something new. We don't wanna have anything to do with the past.' Well, that's OK. But you sure get a lotta crap that way."

So let's get right into that back story. It is 1972, and an average day on an average highway outside Sacramento, California. A 26-year-old Ohio student called Erick Lee Purkhiser is driving with a friend. They spot a female hitchhiker and gallantly pull over. An 18-year-old Sacramento student called Kirsty Mariana Wallace gratefully accepts a lift.

Ivy: "Everyone hitchhiked in California at that time. It was a very hippy era. We all thought it was safe, but it was hare-brained, looking back. I think we would have met anyway. It was destiny."

So Lux, you pick up this hitchhiker and she turns out to be the woman you'll not just be with, but work with, and create an entire aesthetic world with for the next 30 years of your life. One would imagine that there must have been some kind of psychic earthquake when you first looked at each other. Was there?

"Yes. It was exactly like that. She was somebody really special when I met her, we immediately got along and we've never spent any time apart since. She's just... smart, and interested in all the things that I was interested in. When we first met all we wanted to do was go to rock'n'roll shows. And at that time, going to rock'n'roll shows in southern California was great 'cos everybody got dressed up like crazy and... it almost didn't matter who the band was. The audience was more interesting than the bands. I'd wanted to be in a band and she played guitar and we got this idea within days of meeting each other: that we should have a band."

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. It took a while for this idea to reach any kind of reality, and it didn't happen in Sacramento, where, in one of a set of bizarre post-hitchhike coincidences, Erick and Kirsty happened to be enrolled in the same art class. It was Art and Shamanism. Of course it was. Ivy: "The primary text book for it was a book called *The Sacred Mushroom and The Cross*. It said that *The Bible* was a hidden code for magic mushrooms. I didn't see Lux until the next semester. He walked in the class and I said, 'Sit by me, sit by me!' It was my

birthday and he gave me a drawing as a present. And then the next time we met in class we ended up sticking together for ever and ever."

What happened next is that Lux and Ivy up and moved to Lux's hometown of Akron, Ohio in 1973. "There was a, uh, legal issue in California," Ivy recalls, darkly. "But I don't want to elaborate on that. We just had to get out of town."

Their mysterious fit turned out to be fortuitous. Akron is one of those apparently anonymous small towns which over-achieved in the field of punk/new wave/art rock and all that. Christie Hynde and Devo are both Akron alumni, and Pere Ubu were stationed just down the road in Cleveland. Ivy: "Akron was very inexpensive to live in. So we had this gigantic three-storey house for the two of us. We used the attic for rehearsals. We must have talked about the band in Sacramento, though, because I actually bought Lux the fuzz pedal we use, which is a Unibox Superfuzz, from a pawn shop. His brother sent him a Student Prince guitar and I taught him 'Baby Strange' by T.Rex."

"We were both working in a circuit-board factory. Really boring. A really fascist boss. We weren't cut out for that kind of work. We're too delicate and sensitive. Although one of the early interviews we did was with Nick Kent, a really cool writer, and he thought we said surfing-board factory. I kinda hate to say that's not true, 'cos I imagine we'd be sanding and waxing surfboards. That's too cool."

Words by Barry Mutholland



"Through record collecting we were getting more and more passionate. Being exposed to music that most people weren't. There wasn't much going on in the seventies that really thrilled us... the New York Dolls had broken up, T.Rex wasn't what it was before. I think being together, not just as a couple but as partners in crime, that you can get each other wound up in a way that a person alone can't. We convinced each other that it was a viable option to have our own band and that everybody would think it was really cool. It was kind of a delusion. Except that we succeeded with it."

What Lux and Ivy were doing, at this point, was developing a perfect pop-art aesthetic, an amalgam of pop-cultural trash elements drawn from fifties rock, B-movies, glam, and the original sixties strain of punk rock. Ivy: "It was a natural, organic thing. People think we're more image-conscious than we are... it's really more self-expression of our personal tastes. And we didn't know who else would be in the band. We didn't know anyone who even knew who The Sonics were, and they were a must as an influence. We had to do rockabilly songs. When we first went into the basement of the Musical Maze record store with Bryan Gregory and his sister Pam to jam, we didn't know how we'd sound. So we just did it. We didn't have enough going on to discuss it! When we met Bryan we just connected. It was a chemistry thing. There was never a plan."

But if it was so organic, how did little Erick and Kirsty wind up with those brilliantly conceived stage names?

"I was Poison Ivy in Sacramento. I still have a driver's licence that says that, and this was before any thought of a band. Lux was Flip Flop on his driver's licence. When we went to Ohio he was Raven Beauty and eventually changed to Lux Interior. For some reason that doesn't make sense to me now. I thought I needed a last name, and Rorschach [named after the inventor of those infamous 'inkblot' psychiatric tests] came to me in a dream. But I was already Poison Ivy before The Cramps. We were reinventing ourselves, but not because of the band. Only our shrink knows why."

The first completed Cramps line-up from 1975 featured Lux, Ivy, guitarist

Bryan Gregory (The Cramps, famously, were the first primal rock'n'roll band to dispense with bass) and Bryan's sister Pam Ballam on drums. But even though Akron produced great bands, the fledgling Cramps were not part of the cool art rock scene. "One thing people assume," Ivy continues, "is that we knew those people. We didn't. We weren't aware of them playing, except that we saw Rocket From The Tombs [precursors to Pere Ubu] supporting Television in a hotel in Cleveland. We didn't meet any of them until we moved to New York. We didn't know anything in Ohio except our stupid jobs and mainstream gigs. We didn't know there was an underground. So we had to get out of there."

In America at that time, there was really only one place for a pack of proto-punk weirdoes to move to. In September 1975, The Cramps hit New York. Ivy again accesses her total recall and sets the scene. "We'd done the 9-hour drive from Akron twice and seen the Ramones and Television, so we knew it was all there. Get a few days off, take speed, drive there, see the bands, drive back and there'd be nothing left of us when we got back to Ohio. But those two trips convinced us we had to move. We had enough money for a hotel for two days, and couldn't find a place to live. So we slept the third night in the car at a truck-stop in New Jersey and said, 'If we don't find somewhere tomorrow we'll have to forget it and go back to Ohio.' That day we found our apartment. So we moved and proceeded to starve. But that was OK. We had to be there."

The 1975 lightning conductor that was Hilly Kristal's CBGBs, which finally closed its doors in October 2006, yet another victim of the post-Giuliani disinfecting of New York culture and nightlife, provided instant focus and opportunity for the nascent Cramps, as they quickly found like minds, got gigs and printed up the posters and flyers that invented the term 'psychobilly'.

"It was easier than you'd imagine," reckons Ivy. "That's why we feel so grateful and so fortunate with the scene that was there at the time. Monday night was audition night at CBGBs, but not everybody could get on. We did straight away because we'd made friends with The Dead Boys, who were really hot at the time. So The Dead Boys headlined this audition

night, and we played our first show to a packed house. A lot of people saw us, as chaotic as we were, including Peter Crowley who booked Max's Kansas City, and he loved us, and immediately booked us. Hilly Kristal thought we sucked, which we probably did. But Peter loved us and we started playing Max's regularly supporting Suicide. We got a following just from that. We put these flyers up all over town, and that's where the 'psychobilly' tag came from... we thought it up just to get people interested in us. We clicked straight away. The biggest break was when the Ramones saw us, and dug us, and then they let us open for 'em. Their audience loved us. New York was just a magnetic Mecca for people and there was just this swell of energy. We were hanging out at CBGBs and Max's every night of the week, and so was everybody else. A swirl of creativity. It must be so hard for bands now. People are much more jaded."

Supporting two of the counter-culture's most influential bands also helped The Cramps find their own peculiar X-factor. "The Ramones were just like this blast of light onstage. The energy influenced us. And Suicide's Alan Vega intimidating the audience. He showed us that antagonism could be fun."

I ask Ivy if the story of her working as a New York dominatrix was truth or fiction. "That's true. It was a very interesting time. I was making way more money than anyone else in the band. And the work suited me. We didn't struggle in the way we would have if I'd just stayed waiting tables. It enabled us to be independent."

I realise more salacious info is not immediately forthcoming. I prod, warily.

So... no horrible, sleazy nightmare moments from your stint in the sex industry? "No, not at all. I was cut out for the work."

There is a finality about the statement. Guess we'll have to wait for the uncensored autobiography.

Nevertheless, the initial fifth and fury of punk rock had pretty much come and gone before The Cramps, now with Pam Ballam replaced by Nick Knox, made their first record. For the 1978 sessions that became *Graveyard Hits*, the rockabilly obsessives went straight to the source: Memphis. With Box Tops/Big Star cult legend Alex Chilton as producer. With half of the sessions recorded at Philips

Recording, the post-Sun studio owned by Sam Phillips, the man who didn't just discover Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash and Jerry Lee Lewis, but signalled the birth of the modern world by putting out records by fifties legends both black and white on the same label, from the same studio. Were the novice Cramps in awe? Lux: "By that time we had almost collected every Sun label single. We'd gone to the Sun warehouse. When I first met Ivy we drove all the way across the country to visit Memphis. So we were really in awe of that building and Sam Phillips. And then we met him. We had to stay overnight in the studio because we got locked in and we met him. It was like a dream or something... could this be happening? We were told he never comes to the studio, but he showed up with a chainsaw to cut down the vines that had grown up over his name plaque. It was a magical experience."

What was he like? "A million laughs. We didn't talk to him too much. But we told him that we had every Sun single, and he says, 'Well, you know something?' And we said, 'What?' And he just says, 'You're lucky.' He had these huge glasses on that magnified his eyes until he looked like a monster from outer space. He's a real character."

The first flurry of Cramps releases, from 1978's debut *The Way I Walk / Surfin' Bird* single through to 1981's *Psychotic Jungle* album, remain the band's greatest, and felt like a punch in the gut at the time. The Cramps found a way to merge the wildest backwoods rockabilly of the fifties and the freakiest beats of the sixties with the art punk of the late seventies, allying a comic sexual mania with white noise feedback fuzz and a feral rhythmic buzz that seemed to sum up every rebel rock genre that had ever made a square squeal. "But that's not music! It's just noise!!!" at a budding teenage hedonist who really didn't care because they'd just been shown a place better and realer than the so-called real world. But even as legions of kids - particularly in Britain and Europe - fuelled a rockabilly revival, adopted and adapted the term 'psychobilly', merged The Cramps' horror show threads with their own punk or goth or futurist accessories, and made 'Human Fly' and 'Garbage Man' into hardy alternative clubbing perennials, the band were facing two major crises which would prevent them taking advantage of their instant cult status and scoring mainstream hits.

The Cramps had signed to IRS, the label owned by Miles Copeland, infamous

former CIA man and brother of The Police's Stewart. Band and label fell out, and Copeland played hardball, freezing payments owed to the band, and legally preventing them from either recording or leaving for another label. I ask Lux if this was the worst time to be in The Cramps.

"Absolutely the worst time. We'd just toured Europe and they made up this stuff about Bryan leaving our band to join a voodoo cult! Crap that we wanted nothing to do with because it wasn't true. That was terrible. And it ended up breaking up that line-up because Bryan couldn't take it anymore. We weren't getting our money... people think we sued them for money but the only thing we wanted was off the label. We couldn't record and it went on for a long time.

"We learned the lesson about not getting involved with anything like that again. There's plenty of places to record cheaply, so we decided to pay for our own recordings and license records to labels. So that was the lesson - stay away from the music industry."

The Cramps decided all this too late for Bryan Gregory. One day in May 1980, after a Cramps show, Gregory drove away with the band's gear and never came back. "We didn't see him for years after he left," Lux recalls. "Then in the late nineties he got in touch with us again and we were writing letters." The reconciliation was brought to an abrupt end when Gregory died suddenly of a heart attack in January 2001, at the age of just 46. "I enjoyed the first line-up," Lux says, "which a lot of people love because Bryan was in the band. Actually, the Bryan and Nick Knox line-up wasn't the first, but I consider it the first line-up. They're all really great memories. Bryan could just do so many weird things, he was just such a weirdo at first. Later on he became... more of a rock star, unfortunately. But at first he'd go out onstage, fold himself up in the yoga lotus position, and run around on his knees. Then spin around on one knee and jump into the audience, which was so dangerous. He really frightened people. That band was a real four-pronged attack."

Gregory has had many replacements down the years, but the best-known was Kid Congo Powers, who spent time in The Gun Club and Nick Cave's Bad Seeds. Powers has an online journal, in which he says that joining The Cramps was a shock because Lux and Ivy ran such a tight ship. Lux proudly agrees.

"We've heard people say that we're the band that can't play and that our schtick is being amateurish. But that has never been what we are. We always wanted to be a good band that plays powerfully and tight. It's like movies that are labelled as trash - the people who were making those movies thought that they were making really great movies. If someone watching doesn't think so, that's too bad. All of our songs have specific parts and if someone's gonna be in our band they have to play those parts. Before we started a band that's what we thought a band was. We went by the Creedence Clearwater Revival

model where there's a perfect lead part for a particular song and that's what gets played, as opposed to some bands who just... jam." Lux sneers the word 'jam'.

"The idea that it's different every night is boring. You should find the perfect thing and just do it. People who do that jamming stuff... it's just an arty attitude that I'm so special that whatever I play people will love. Anyway, The Gun Club had only played two or three times before we saw Kid play with 'em, and they were amazing."

So you stole their bassist? "Yep. And got rid of the competition in one fell swoop. Heh."

The Cramps got through the early eighties and refused to get bitter about missing the pop boat. They've made 13 albums in the last 26 years, including the definitive 'best of' *Off The Bone* and their most recent, 2004's double CD of rarities and live material, *How To Make A Monster*. More importantly, they've played around the world and spread the word on an aesthetic they invented. In every major city on the planet, and particularly cities where many counter-cultural youth go out to party, there will be a club. It will be called something like Born Bad or It Came From Outer Space or Voodoo Lounge or Untamed Youth. It will play titles rock'n'roll, sixties punk and kitsch mambopop/blues, and the boys and girls will be dressed in a magnificent mutant strain of vintage-chic and DIY gothic fetish wear: Posters and films of Bettie Page, Mamie Van Doren, Elvis, Russ Meyer and Vampira will provide the visuals, and an atmosphere of pervy innocence will pervade. And the boys and girls, whether they're old enough to know it or not, will be living, in those few hours, in *The House The Cramps Built*. And I dare say new boys and girls will be doing something similar long after you, I or the Cramps have joined the legions of the undead. How many bands invent an entire culture? "I do totally agree, and I hope that doesn't sound too arrogant." It doesn't, Ivy. It doesn't. "I think it wouldn't exist if we didn't. However, it's been around so long now that some of the later versions are innocent in the sense that they maybe don't know it came directly from us. But without us setting that ball in motion, it wouldn't be around. I'm sure of that."

Is your LA home still a shrine to The Cramps' obsessions?

"Yeah, it is. We had to have some extensive remodelling about 10 years ago, because... it wasn't quite as bad as the guy's house in *American Splendor* where the house is sagging, but it was starting to sag under the weight of paintings and records. So we had to jack the house up and put more posts under the floor. There's a lot of leopard-skin. We've got a very Polynesian thing going on."

It's tempting to conclude that The Cramps are pioneers of 'the trash aesthetic'. But our perfect couple don't see it that way. Take it away, Lux: "People will never understand the blues. And they understand it less today than they did back then. Even black people today, a lot of them disown the blues. When people say trash, they're saying that they think the blues is trash, because that's all rock'n'roll is. When people say trash they mean you're not doing

something like Pink Floyd. You know, good music. It's probably worse here in America than it is over in Europe for people understanding what rock'n'roll is. It's not trash. It's a folk art. Which makes it more important than anything that comes out of a major studio. I'm more interested in Marcel Duchamp taking a bicycle and jamming it in the top of a stool than some artist who's spent his life in front of an easel perfecting his brush-stroke."

Ivy: "For us it was like, the sixties were great - the sixties bands who were influenced by blues and rhythm'n/blues. We loved the early Rolling Stones, The Kinks, Pretty Things, Yardbirds. Later on, it turned from rock'n'roll to rock music, the more progressive, suburban, and more commercial thing. It seems a lot of that is revered now. We loved Led Zeppelin, but we also know the blues music that it came from. Now people only go as far back as Zeppelin... even Aerosmith." She can't resist a dismissive snort. "So everything's just watered down. What Neil Young represented in the seventies was panhandling hippies singing 'Heart of Gold'. It's just weird. It's confusing to us that there are punk bands who say they're influenced by Stevie Nicks! Hal! What the hell!"

Lux: "I think it would be great if we were considered the band that made people pay attention to the past again. The blues is something different from other music. It's the music of real crazy people, and it's different from popular music. Sometimes it becomes popular music, but it's a whole different thing. And the thing with those old movies and Bettie Page and custom car culture... I think we had a lot to do with making people pay attention to that. And once they pay attention they realise that that's not something to be thrown away and forgotten about. We made people turn around and think about where things came from."

Our time with The Greatest Living Rock'n'Roll Band is coming to an end. There's just time to ask about some of the curious byways of Crampsworld, of which there are many. For example, in the build-up to this feature, *The Stool Pigeon's* esteemed editor travelled to see The Cramps in Norway. Your correspondent received a delighted text: "Cramps brilliant, as always. Lux got his dick out, as always." Indeed, Lux is probably second only to Iggy Pop - with whom The Cramps have toured and collaborated - in terms of rock penis sightings. Does Ivy ever say, "Oh, put it away!"

"No," Lux draws. "Only when the cops are at the show. Then she'll say, 'Don't do anything tonight. Those cops don't look friendly.' But no, it's really not a part of the show. It just happens sometimes 'cos... I don't want that to be part of the show. We're not Marilyn Manson or one of those bands who are there to shock people. That's not our main message."

How did you end up doing a song for the *SpongeBob SquarePants* cartoon? Lux: "Our nextdoor neighbour does the background artwork.

And he just came by and said, 'I've told my boss that we live nextdoor and he asked if you would do a song for us.' That simple. It was a lot of fun."

Lux: Is it true that all the screams in Francis Ford Coppola's version of *Dracula* are you? "Well, not all of them. We did go to his house and record me screaming, sobbing and sighing for three hours. But I don't think all the screams are me. Sofia Coppola is a really big Cramps fan and came up with the idea: 'Daddy, The Cramps would do a beautiful job.' We've been around long enough now that the little monsters who came to see us when we started out are now in positions of power. It's a wonderful thing that these people come to us."

Nonetheless, you have no major hits and have remained resolutely cultish. Have you ever got disillusioned, and wanted to give up? Ivy: "No. Because we really love playing, we love writing songs, and I love playing guitar. It is hard work doing gigs but we're outside the music business so we don't have all that dispiriting crap to put up with. As far as income, we've done quite well... you can look at it and say, 'We deserve more.' Or you can look at all the bands who crashed and burned and didn't get what they were entitled to and say we did really well. We're paid well for gigs and we have a couple of songs in commercials which are very lucrative. There's one in a Cadillac commercial at the moment. We do well enough that this has been worth doing in every possible way. We do what we love for a living and live a good life. Some people go on about having a big house... 'cos Lux and I are both psychic that would just frighten us 'cos all those empty rooms would be full of ghosts. Maybe it's because of our awareness of musical history that we're aware there are so many unsung heroes who never got anything, and we're sure doing better than them. Entitlement is a stupid thing for anyone to feel."

That's what makes you different from the Ramones. They were desperate for that big hit.

"They stuck together when they hated each other."

The Cramps never seemed like that. "It'll cost you your life. It'll eat you up, and to not realise that is just deadly. And... they're dead."

If I had to pinpoint a single thing that makes me admire Lux, Interior and Poison Ivy Rorschach as much as any living rock band, it's the idea that two ordinary kids could, and did, create an entire self-contained world out of nothing more than music, movies, clothes, working-class history and... love. Big, romantic, lustful, lifelong love for each other and for the things they both adore.

Ivy, you live on Planet Cramps, a fantasy world that you made into a reality, don't you?

"We do. And thank you for understanding that, because some people think it's a band with a career. It's not. It's our life. It's about the right company and creating an atmosphere. It makes us happy but it also promotes creativity and... vision. It keeps us free."