

The (ex) Cat Heads

Our Frisco

HIGH FIDELITY

RECORDED IN SAN FRANCISCO

IT WAS SUMMER, 1985, and the issue of the day was whether Sam Babbitt was going to play guitar for the Cat Heads full-time, or stay with the Ophelias. Oh, it was a big deal, all right: It felt like everyone in town was talking about it and if they weren't, well, they needed to rearrange their priorities.

Sam ultimately chose the Cat Heads—a four-piece that specialized in a kaleidoscope of ramshackle rock'n'roll. The band was an apt representation of the past, present, and future San Francisco Sound if ever there was one: Sam was the be-scarfed one; Mark Zanandrea (guitar, vocals) and barefoot Melanie Clarin (drums, vocals) were the hippie children; and Alan Korn (bass, vocals) was the sensible one. Between 1986 and 1989, they made two albums—the first, *Hubba*, produced by ex-Rain Parader Matt Piucci and the second, *Submarine*, by Camper Van Beethoven's David Lowery—for Restless, a fairly large West Coast indie label. They were what showbiz people call a draw and their pedigree was finer than that of a purebred Devon Rex.

But the power of love and pizza alone was not enough to sustain them. And so the (ex) Cat Heads had to be formed, out of the frustration Alan and Sam felt at having recorded and toured with the usual (lack of) label support for their fine, fine combo. "We did a lot of work for about three or four years . . . we did everything we could on our end with very little reward. In the end, we had no distraction from our personalities," explains Sam.

The story I want to tell about the (ex) Cat Heads starts at a Sunday afternoon/evening Cat Heads gig at Nightbreak in San Francisco in 1985. Nightbreak was where the weekly neighborhood party started (it ended sometime Tuesday morning after the Monday night I-Beam gig). Traditionally, we didn't pay much attention to the Sunday bands but I was knocked out by the four-piece on stage—girl drummer, tall singer (was he in a dress or tie-dye that night?), guitarist with an obvious enthusiasm for Keith, and boyish bassist—and the idea that those four could be in a band together. They wrote good songs. And they rocked like Jehovah. I knew my friend Yvette would fall in love with them and though I don't remember if it was me or Ted who ran across Haight and Shrader Streets and up the stairs from Happy Donuts to get her, we convinced her to come down. As predicted, she loved them, and some time over the next few weeks, the Cat Heads, the rockiest little band in town, convinced their newest fan into becoming their manager. I mention this story not just because it puts me in the middle of the Cat Heads—and thus (ex) Cat Heads—history, although I like that part too. I mention it because it demonstrates exactly what I remember things being like in mid-'80s San Francisco—the neo-Wild West and Barbary Coast days of the pre-dot com era: This was Our Frisco.

The clubs were packed then—I don't remember too many noise, rent, landlord or Alcohol and Beverage Control complaints; there was no shortage of places to play, the cover was low, and the liquor flowed. There were the usual parking problems, but if you loved guitar rock, you'd figure out a way to get inside—especially if Scott or Jackson was working the door.

The Cat Heads were at the center of a musical universe that included beat group Flying Color, surreal folkies Camper Van Beethoven, the shy but mighty Donner Party, and the primitive Furies, among many others. If you liked those bands, you were probably also into the frilly Ophelias, hungry i

throwbacks the Muskrats, the curiously named Harm Farm and X-Tal, plus Spot 1019, one of the impossible to peg Pitch-a-Tent bands. Songstress Barbara Manning (fresh out of 28th Day) and Chuck Prophet (just starting to pull away from Green on Red) were also in our orbit. American Music Club was the underdog, though they had the last laugh on everyone when they went on to achieve out-of-town notice. The guitar band underground and the acoustic music movement that was bubbling underneath it was centralized at the V.I.S. Club, the Farm, and the backroom at the Albion.

Best of all, the city was still the kind of place musicians and artists could afford to live in—a whole bunch of people per funky Victorian flat—without having to hold down a day job. The bands shared houses, rooms, members, girlfriends and boyfriends. There were no cell phone or internet charges to figure into the monthly expenses; heck, we barely even had CDs, or players to play them in. It sounds idyllic to me now but then hindsight usually does. . . Granted some of us were scofflaws, and we were plagued by the usual problems of young adulthood.

See, the place was loaded with talent and egos and drugs and, well, perhaps that's why things were so darn combustible—it's part of why the Cat Heads inevitably had to become the (ex) Cat Heads and it's why you're holding this disc right now. One scene simply couldn't handle a David Lowery and a Mark Eitzel, not to mention Hector, Dale, and CvS from Flying Color, the Ophelias' Leslie Medford, and the four singing and three songwriting Cat Heads.

The solution? For Alan and Sam it was to form another band! But this time, they would record lo-fi and keep control of the business side. It was only natural that they'd turn to engineer-on-the-scene Greg "Tool of the Devil" Freeman to handle production. "The ex-Cats' record was intended as an exercise in 'let's record at Greg's relatively inexpensive 8-track studio so we can spend as much time as necessary,'" explains Alan. "Recording at an expensive 24-track recording studio with a limited budget never left us time to finish the songs to the point where we were happy with them."

Alan established a label, Twitch City, to release songs that he and Sam developed with the new band in mind and to cut the ones they had worked into the Cat Heads' last stand. They recruited a third member, Barry Hall, a songwriter, vocalist, guitarist, and old friend of Sam's from Braintree, Massachusetts. "My first impression of the scene was that people in bands in SF were a lot mellower than in Boston," remembers Barry. "The club people were really laid back . . ."

The crew needed a drummer so they used John Stuart (of Flying Color) for the recordings, though Boston buddy Mike Clark logged the most time with the group.

"In the paper it always said ex this and that and it always irritated me so I thought we'd use the name and take advantage of any cachet we had before anyone else did," says Sam, referring to the band's moniker. I have to admit I thought he was insane, though I played along. These days, I



recognize what a bright idea it was: “the (ex) Cat Heads.” Brilliant!

Hall’s evocative opening and closing theme, “Fog Rolls In/Fog Rolls Out” has nothing at all to do with the (ex) Cat Heads unwieldy rock’n’roll sound, and yet it’s the perfect intro for an album that’s of a piece, a rare thing these days and even back then. A trend was developing here and the (ex) Cat Heads were way ahead of the curve. Isn’t that always the way with bands you were convinced should’ve reached more people and yet somehow slipped through the cracks?

Leading off the album is Alan’s “Too Little Too Late”—“the one that said it all, really,” he says. “It was goodbye to the band and the girlfriend at the time.” The lyrical bass, jangling guitars, and Alan and Sam’s tangled vocals epitomized the guitar-rock sound of the day. Its broken-promise sentiment is in perfect juxtaposition with the bouncing melody—a trusty songwriting trick that national heroes the Replacements were working in spades. Sam’s “Home” also goes for that raspy voice/chunky riff/sweet melody mode.

“The Replacements exerted a strong (too strong?) influence over lots of late ‘80s indie rock bands,” says Alan. “I was in awe of *Hootenanny* and *Let It Be* and their live shows at the I-Beam and Berkeley Square circa 1983, 1984. At the time, I wished for nothing more in life than to be in a band like the Replacements or Mekons, only later realizing both groups were probably at least as dysfunctional as the Cat Heads. I was eager to make the comparison back then. Now I’m pretty embarrassed by it.”

No need to be: the Replacements are still the hidden influence on contemporary alternative rock and the (ex) Cat Heads sound remains right on time.



Sam’s “Always Welcome Here” is another melancholy break-up song that the writer says sprang from his personal life. Then there’s “Nothing”—in stereo. The first take is in hyper-drive while the bare-bones arrangement of the second seals the obsession: not only were these exes working out their personal relationship woes, they were reckoning with the end of their band at the end of their twenties. This of course is a lonely hearts trifecta. And how many of us can relate to that?

“Something in the Way” is more Husker Du than the ‘Mats with its swirl of Zen Arcadian guitars: *Something in the way you move... / Something in the way that is keeping me from you...* Could it be a nod to the Beatle

Sam identified with most (and can you hear a hint of his trademark slide buried in the song’s final choruses)? “I always felt like George Harrison in the Cat Heads,” says Sam of his one-song-per-album status with that band. And yet, in the (ex) Cat Heads, he remained steadfast in his ambivalence toward writing and performing. “None of these songs were ones I wanted to do with the Cat Heads—if I did that, I’d have to sing them and I’m not a showman. If the Cat Heads hadn’t broken up, I probably

wouldn't have written the songs at all."

"Sam's a musical genius and I love his songs," says Alan. Putting Sam to work on songs was part of his objective in getting in a band with him again. "I still miss playing music with Sam and Barry."

"No Deposit, No Return," is one of Alan's country songs; like "Saved by the Bottle" (recorded for *Hubba*), it was a live favorite. And Sam reels off a traditional "CC Rider," arranged Leadbelly-style (years before Messrs. Cobain and White got back to their blues roots).

But the (ex) Cat Heads' best and most enduring number just might be Alan's "Anti-Song," with its "Truckin'" twirly dance vibe and the verve of a psychedelic protest song à la Country Joe and the Fish. By not being about any of the things it namechecks, "Anti-Song" is about everything: *This song doesn't want to sell you an identity / This song doesn't want to tell you what you want to hear / This song doesn't make you want to love your country / This song doesn't bring the revolution any nearer . . .* The (exes) borrowed Mel from It Thing for the essential harmonies.

As the album winds to a close, the mood is decidedly downbeat. Okay, so it's a little odd Alan wasn't thinking Velvet Underground (though he admits he was listening to them, as we all were, at the time) when he wrote "There She Goes." Alan's friend Frank Kogan penned "Waterfall" (which sounds like it flowed from the fountain of Lou Reed as well). The "Fog Rolls Out" and it's a wrap.

With a clever album design based on some old instrumental easy-listening LPs (*San Francisco: My Enchanted City and Our Paris*), Our Frisco parodied the genre with its fine-art photo and cheeky liner note. Not everyone got it. And by the time the record started making its way beyond San Francisco, the (ex) Cat Heads were also history. "We sort of hit a wall," says Alan.

And the fog rolls out, yet again. Barry formed the Goldenrods with Jen Gunston; Sam and Alan were both involved at different times, but together Sam and Alan formed the Mudsills. The bonus tracks here are culled from (ex) Cat Heads outtakes and Mudsills recordings. The Mudsills' "Come to Me" and "I Hate Myself" were recorded with Florence Dore who had replaced Barry in the lineup. Alan says, "Both were written while Sam was in Seattle, post (ex) Cat Heads. He had a bunch of trashed cassettes full of amazing tunes that I was always pestering him to perform or record."

Sam is back in Massachusetts now, rebuilding antique boats on Cape Cod. Alan practices law and is the bassist for rabble rousers She Mob; he's also been known to sit in with solemn songwriter Richard Buckner and Mekon Rico Bell. Barry lives in England and heads a design firm. And time marches on.

The San Francisco of the '80s is officially part of the predigital Old World. Those of us who spent our youth there may try to pass on our experience to the younger generation; predictably, they'll look at us as if disbelieving we were ever young or did anything vaguely associated with rock, rocking, or rock'n'roll. If you were lucky enough to have been there with us, you know the days and nights and mornings I'm talking about. And if you missed it, well, you're still in luck—because the enchanted sound of our Frisco is forever etched in the (ex) Cat Heads' free-spirited grooves.

THE (EX) CAT HEADS are to San Francisco what sourdough, cappuccino, and Rice-a-Roni® are as commodities—the best and the most popular. This album is their introduction to North America, and in it they display the lyrical touch of their emotions in a program of songs that are San Franciscan favorites.

From the first moment until the last note of lovely music has faded away, there is thrill after thrill in the words and music of this fine album. Accurately and affectionately it describes the true life and spirit of our enchanted city. One is tunelessly and lovingly escorted through San Francisco's famous streets and landmarks—South of the Slot (“Nothing,” “Too Little, Too Late”); the Marina district (“Waterfall”); the Haight (“Anti-Song,” “Home”); the Tenderloin (“I’m Broke”); and Nob Hill (“There She Goes,” “Something in the Way”)—with perfectly blended voices and instruments revealing clear and vivid musical pictures. Because these carefully selected melodies are unmixed with the spurious “San Francisco” creations of Tin Pan Alley, because they are truly the choice of the public at home, these (ex) Cat Heads arrangements and performances paint an excitingly authentic portrait of San Francisco.

Significantly, the members of the (ex) Cat Heads spent their early teenage years pursuing the study of music. In the early 1980s they moved to San Francisco and met through their involvement with the local Symphony. Simultaneously, they became interested in the “new wave.” They abruptly quit their jobs and learned not only to play drums but, more importantly, to arrange and compose. These new skills enabled them to play the city's fashionable lounges and supper clubs, and later led to long, exhaustive tours of North America. Not until 1989 did the (ex) Cat Heads return to San Francisco to organize the ensemble they had planned for years, and achieve an imposing success with a tasteful and entrancing sound of their own. Now, for all of America, they capture the spirit of today's San Francisco as only her finest popular musicians can.

Our Frisco is, of course, everybody's Frisco, as enchanting in the 1990s as it was in the 1950s. It's still the city of romance and art and music, of good food, plentiful drink, and steep hills lined with leafy shrubs. Unlike any other metropolis, San Francisco exerts an emphatic and undeniable “personal” quality, a mood that makes a visitor regard himself as a virtual native within a few hours of arrival. Perhaps it is the cosmopolitan North



Beach with its cafés and shops, or the intimacy of the crowded nightclubs and restaurants (nightly at Cha Cha Cha's on Haight Street, the waiter interrupts the female guests from their meals, insists they stand erect on their chairs; then he courageously lifts the skirt thigh-high and deftly wraps a gay-colored garter 'round the upper leg to mad applause from the other diners—and the victims love it). Whatever the reason, San Francisco abruptly becomes possessive.

It holds none of the enmity of Los Angeles, for example, to the young, hand-holding couple honeymooning far from home. Our Frisco, divided into many neighborhoods, somehow retains its warmth despite its size and fame. Originally a port town inhabited by miners, sailors, and prostitutes, San Francisco has since been besieged, occupied and liberated. Today it is a complex and many-colored city. Thousands have painted it—and each painting is different from the one before it.

A ride on Muni (as the municipal transport system—comprising buses, streetcars, and, of course, cable cars—is quaintly known) will also help uncover San Francisco's many aspects, but one must never, never leave graffiti. "There is a fine of \$100 if an inspector boards and perceives you," Yvette warns. "But whether you stop in a bistro, spend the afternoon in the narrow streets of Chinatown, loiter in one of her cool parks or gardens, or while away an evening sitting on the terrace of a sidewalk café, the kaleidoscopic mosaic of the people of San Francisco will always fascinate you."

"Because the Californian has his particular brand of exuberance and ironic gaiety all his own, seems to take things less seriously than he really does, easily shrugs his shoulders, he and more particularly the San Franciscan is not always understood by the outsider.

"The girl in the shop, the scurrying midinette, the sophisticated mannequin of the Haute Couture, the bus conductor the beatnik, the garçon in the café or restaurant—these are only a few of the San Franciscans with whom the stranger comes in contact. There are the professors in the Bay Area's famous institutions of learning, the researchers in her great laboratories, her artists and artisans, her hungry and homeless, so many others whom the visitor rarely sees but who nevertheless make an important contribution to the prestige of the city.

"They are as anxious to meet you as you are to meet them." This observation obviously does not apply to the cabdrivers, who look over a prospective fare with calloused, cynical eyes and, more often than not, dash off, still at liberty, for a more promising cargo. But for all their crassness, they are as inseparable from the charm of Our Frisco as its lovers, its shrubs, and the saucy sound of the (ex) Cat Heads.



- 1** Fog Rolls In (Prelude) **2** Too Little, Too Late **3** Always Welcome Here
4 Something in the Way **5** No Deposit No Return **6** Nothing (electric) **7** CC Rider
8 Nothing (acoustic) **9** Anti-Song **10** Home **11** I'm Broke **12** There She Goes
13 Waterfall **14** Fog Rolls Out (Reprise) **15** Nothing (psych mix)
16 Told You So **17** Come to Me **18** I Hate Myself

Sam Babbitt Guitars, Bass, Dulcimer, Percussion, Vocals

Barry Hall Guitars, Bass, Percussion, Vocals

Alan Korn Guitars, Bass, Vocals

John Stuart Drums



With: Matt Royston (fiddle, mandolin); Jeff Grubic (saxophone); Melanie Clarin (vocals); Greg Freeman (mouth harp, percussion); Jenny Gunston (vocals on 16); Florence Dore (rhythm guitar on 17 and 18).

Tracks 1-16 recorded by the (ex) Cat Heads at Lowdown Studios in fall 1989 and winter 1990. Produced by the (ex) Cat Heads and Greg Freeman, and engineered by Greg Freeman.

Tracks 17-18 recorded by the Mudsills (formerly the (ex) Cat Heads) on 16-track at The Wally Sound in 1995. Digital remastering by The Wally Sound (Oakland, CA) in September-October 2003.

Songwriting: B. Hall (1, 14, 16); A. Korn (2, 5, 9, 12); S. Babbitt (3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 15, 17, 18); Fisher/B. Hall (11); F. Kogan (13). All songs administered by Bonefish Music (BMI), except 8 (Copyright Control).

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