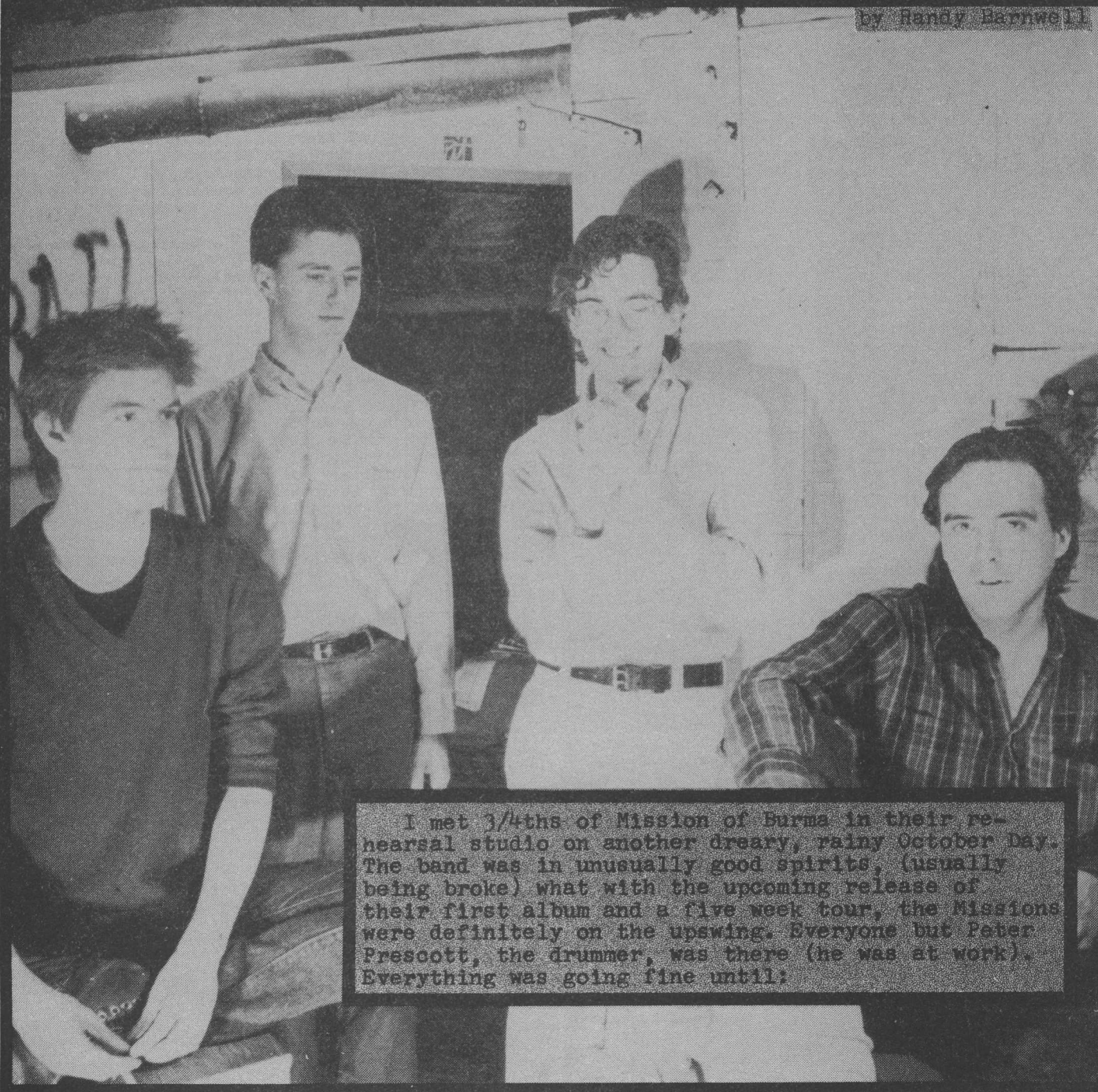


# MISSION OF BURMA

by Randy Barnwell



I met 3/4ths of Mission of Burma in their rehearsal studio on another dreary, rainy October Day. The band was in unusually good spirits, (usually being broke) what with the upcoming release of their first album and a five week tour, the Missions were definitely on the upswing. Everyone but Peter Prescott, the drummer, was there (he was at work). Everything was going fine until:



KEY: Clint(C), Roger(R), Martin(M)

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SR: When did the band form? Who started it?

C: The band started in the winter of 1979. It was started by Roger and me. We had been in a band previously together and decided we wanted to do something different. So we got out of the "Moving Parts", essentially another guy's band. Peter was floating around and he approached us, did some auditions and the three of us got together. We had wanted to add a fourth member, but we weren't sure what.

SR: When did Martin join the group?

C: Martin was living in the same house as Roger and me.

M: I was working with tape loops and a guitar and Roger asked me if I wanted to try something on one of the Burma songs, it was sort of similar to what I was doing at the time. I tried it and it gradually expanded to a more active role.

R: At first it was sort of a 3 piece band and this other person, but it's gradually developed into a 4 piece band.

SR: What are your musical backgrounds? What bands do you listen to now?

C: I'd like Roger to give his background 'cause all I do is ditto it.

R: I got into Rock, Beatles, Who, Stones, etc. In 1969 is when I first started writing for bands. The first band Siroten Laver came at the end of the psychedelic era. In '70 we were at our so-called prime when the world was already going under. Like how the punk movement is going under and we're entering an era of just sound. Before that I had played piano in school orchestras to get out of other classes, more or less. In the 70's, when rock was very much dead, I got into free jazz, then went to music schools and got interested in Stockhausen, Bartok, stuff like that. Then when the punk movement came along, well... I moved to Boston inadvertently to become a piano tuner. I met Clint through an ad for "Moving Parts" and we soon decided we could work together.

SR: How about you, Martin?

M: This is the first band that I've ever been in so I don't have that much musical experience. I like Brian Auger quite alot, Roger mentioned Stockhausen, and then alot of English music is fascinating. I really don't know what to say. The first two Pere Ubu albums really knocked me out.

C: I think their ideas now are a little too pre-figured. (General agreement)

R: We love the Fall.

C: I'm in a Gun Club race right now, and we like hardcore alot, too.

SR: Shortly after you formed, you took off on a cross-country tour, how'd you do that? I thought that was amazing, so soon.

C: So did we. But really, with a little help from our record company and everything, it wasn't financially devastating. And I even think it helped the band, even though it was ludicrous touring the country on a non-existent single. The distribution just wasn't that great at that time and we were playing Seattle and New Orleans.

R: But people had heard of us and the response was really good in some places, like New Orleans, Austin, Texas, and San Francisco.

C: Having not had that much press, we were really just going by on a kind of scam, but I do think it was beneficial.

R: It made us look like, "Hey, they're actually

doing something, there's no reason to do it, but they just keep on doing it."

M: Yeah, there are too many bands in the northeast that play this one area, sometimes go as far as N.Y.C. playing colleges and such, but they're just never able to break out of it. And we did that tour, I think it gave us a weapon to begin to crack that wall.

SR: How did you get signed for the first single?

C: Ric (Ric Harte, Ace of Hearts Records) came to a few of our shows, began hanging around our house. We were anxious to do something with Ric, he had begun proving himself with the success of the Neighborhoods' single. It was a great opportunity, cause we were just doing our usual stuff, floundering.

SR: How many singles were sold?

R: We're not really sure, it's somewhere around 6-7,000.

C: I think it would have sold better had we gotten better distribution when it first came out. The reviews were all mostly favorable across the board.

M: Yeah, except the NME.

C: True, but two weeks later it was the single of the week. Typical fickle English press.

SR: How happy have you been with artistic control?

C: We've had control, unfortunately, all the way down the line. Ric acts as an equal partner with a little more weight on his side, it's pretty much a real cooperative effort. There have been things we'd like to correct, but we're learning all the time.

SR: When will your album be out?

R: Hopefully within a couple of weeks- things have really been taking time. (Note: It's out now.)

SR: Are there any specific ideas behind this record?

M: Yeah, we've picked up on the Flock of Seagulls heavy dance beat.

R: We put down a rhythm machine track the length

of an album, then put music to it.

M: Yeah, we're really happy with it. (Laughter)

I guess it's a retrospective.

C: Stuff we definitely wanted on vinyl. The approach was to make it looser, the ultimate goal was to really make it sound alive or vibrant.

R: In the past we've had a problem with a really sterile sound.

M: That's the trouble with 24-tracks, in that everything can become very isolated. This time the band basically recorded live with live vocals with microphones set up around the room, we played in mini-sets of 4 songs each- so it was very much a live situation.

R: We kept about half of those live vocals.

C: Some of them we just had to replace the real klunkers- we wanted to keep them for authenticity, for a real document, but at times it was impossible.

M: Something different from the other recordings were the mini-sets instead of one song in 6 takes til you get the right one. I think that really worked out quite well.

C: Yeah, you can hear the sweat falling on the strings.

SR: So you're planning a tour at the end of October after the record's release- where do you plan on going this time?

M: We're going down south to alot of neat places- Atlanta, New Orleans, Texas, then up into the Midwest and back across the northeast.

C: Dig on some waves of fruited plains.

M: Then come home and collapse.

C: We'll still have 2 or 3 days time for the sanatorium and detox centers before Thanksgiving.

R: The idea behind the tour is to hit alot of new areas.

M: I don't know what Oklahoma city's going to be like.

C: It's going to be hot, man.



R: Yeah, hot and flat.  
 SR: What, or any, direction do you see the band going in?  
 C: I think we work without a program as far as artistic direction. There's no plotted chart.  
 R: It's the floundering technique.  
 C: On the creative end, people just write the way they want to write. There's 3 writers, now 4, Martin's introducing a song to the band, and there's no controlling 4 minds. By the time it's finished, it does have a Burma sound. Objective-wise, we just want more exposure to more and more people.  
 M: More and more money. (Laughter) I think there's a sense of everyone doing what they want to, as well as they can. It's very much a cooperative effort.  
 R: That's very much our strong point, being as there are so many ideas- the weak point is- that when nothing can be decided upon, that's where the floundering technique takes over.  
 C: Yeah, decision by committee can be really rough. After 32 years, there have never been any ego problems- it's miraculous that we're still going so strong.

SR: What are your views concerning seeking a major label deal?

M: With the majors, the sort of look for the packageable band, a sort of manifesto band, that has a definite attitude of what they want. If the label figures they can use that, they'll pick up on it. We don't fit in with that because we don't have an attitude or just one idea. X is the only band I've seen that has made the transition well.

C: What would be an ideal situation would be if Ace of Hearts got picked up by a major label on the distribution end- that would be pretty hot. We're able to put out product as well as any major, it may take a little longer, but distribution is all we worry about.

SR: Does the band plan on a European venture anytime soon?

R: We've thought about it. Once again, distribution hasn't been good over there. We're working on a licensing deal that would be retroactive from the album and get the product out over there more first.

C: Yeah, we'd all scatter, we'd end up in Algiers.

M: Some hashish dens, hopefully.

SR: When you're writing material, what do you usually have in mind?

C: Complete, self-centered satisfaction.

R: We write the material and hope people like it. If it sounds right to us, we think someone will like it.

C: I'm alot more nervous introducing a song to the band, than when we play it live. I mean we hope people will like it but the real substantial hurdle is down here with us. If the band likes it, the nervousness goes.

SR: Why would you want a listener to like the band?

R: I guess we're doing what we want- and we do everything we can to do what we want and bring it out without compromising.

SR: Who writes most of the lyrics?

C: Usually, whoever writes the music does the lyrics. All the arranging is done by the band. Usually whoever is singing is the writer of the song. We do have the problem that we don't fit into any pigeonhole. People do find it easier to digest music if they can classify it- whether it's hard-core or New Romantic or whatever they call a Flock of Seagulls. People have a hard time with us sometimes, they don't know where to put us. I think alot of people respect us for that- that we don't have a party line. Not that we're trying to be incredibly esoteric or anything, we're not trying to be anything. Every song is a different song. We like to think we don't work on formulas.

SR: I know some bands in Boston seem to try and copy your sound. Try to be what you've been...

C: Well, they're following us into hell, into poverty- following us into depression. (Lots of laughter here)



SR: Are you guys all pretty much depressed?

R: Well, it comes and goes. I don't think any of us off-hand are excessively depressed.

C: We're pretty up about things.

R: It can be depressing at times because we are doing what we want. Like in Cleveland we played 2 sets quite well and had only polite reaction. It can be frustrating.

C: Yes, we do have the capability of playing quite badly, but that night we just didn't fit into any of their schemes. I think lots of people come to see us because we're fashion plates, to see what we're wearing. (Note: an evening of heavy sarcasm)

R: Yeah, we're all Bloomie's men.

SR: Who did your jacket, Martin?

M: My mother.

C: Usually I'm in all my father's clothes.

SR: In the next year or so, what would you like to see M.O.B. doing?

C: We have some stuff in the can- we're going to try and record more before this tour.

M: The Gun Club album is a perfect example of what we're not doing, unfortunately. It was recorded this summer, and it's out now.

SR: What slows you down?

M: The floundering effect- we argue alot. There's alot of discussion going on. There's alot of time spent just trying to determine what will be put out. Ric Harte is also quite a meticulous man.

working and re-working the situation making it as fine as it can be, that also adds to the slowness. It's hard cause he's a one man company, practically.

SR: Well, well, anything else?

C: I have some relatives in Winter Park who might be beatniks by this time. I'd like to say hello to Uncle Pete and Aunt Claire, Melissa and Aunt Nanette.

M: I'd like to say hello to Bo, who runs the bus company down in Winter Park.

C: Yeah, Bo's a good pal of ours.

M: Bo's my cousin.

C: Oh, yeah? He's a junkie, I saw him...

The Floundering Technique Continues...

Next: The Question-

Who, What, are the Birdsongs of the Night?

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