

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The three-day rule in China dictates that after the three continuous days of freezing temperatures, the authorities will turn on the central heating for the municipality. Until this day, the general population is subject to the whims of nature or their personal means for finding comfort from the cold. This had been the only topic of conversation for the past month, as everyone suffered biting nights and occasional freezing days, too, and conflicted between the desire for comfortable warm fronts to stave off the onset of winter and the acceptance of the inevitable winter so that the government would simply turn on the heat. When the vast system of steam pipes that lie under the labyrinth of streets finally rumbled into action, and the massive power plant hidden in the back hills silently coughed its black coal fired breath into the air, pumping its steaming blood through the underbelly of the peninsula to feed the frigid cement buildings that had been want of warmth for the past months, the denizens of northern China settled in for the long winter. Inside the structures, the sounds of the heating systems creaked and moaned until they acquiesced to their roles. They slowly began to radiate warmth, which arrived at an agreement with the cold ambient air and compromised as water droplets on the windows. The Dalian winter had arrived, blowing off the Korean Bay with its terse temperament, firmly gripping its frozen hand over the land for the next six months. Winter on the Liaodong Peninsula is lock and key. The dry air drops its remaining moisture and the arctic stream squeezes the molecules together so tightly that they burn your lungs when you breathe. Life recedes to a wilted brown. Trees stand like emaciated watchmen as they patiently wait for their budding leaves to wave winter back to her den. Outside activities cease. And the rest of us begin our lives in the confines of buildings cuddled by the red warmth that flows silently under the earth and into the many structures that dot the barren landscape. And there is no better time to make a Rock 'n' Roll album.

I produced seven songs from late October to April, the first year that we were residents of the international school outside of Jin Shi Tan, a development zone in the area of Kai Fa Qu, which was located about an hour east of the megacity of Dalian, euphemistically named 'the most beautiful city in China'. The Chinese are all about marketing. That winter was one of the coldest, with even the locals mentioning how even they couldn't remember the last time that the ocean had frozen. Indeed, one indelible image that continues with me today was the sight of massive ice chunks floating around the unfinished aircraft carrier in Dalian Bay. On the frozen plains where we lived, there was little to do except work, drink the piercing distilled rice beverage *baijiu* and figure out how to entertain yourself. In a silly act of bravado, I once ventured out on my bicycle to the nearest town, convinced that I could overcome nature's paper tiger of cold and snow. I paid dearly and sincerely thought I might lose a couple of toes to frostbite. Luckily, I found solace in the strings of my guitar, never having to leave my apartment. As they say, creativity is borne from hardship.

I became involved with music in high school after I was invited to play with two of my neighbors up the street, Nate and Aiden, and another one of my childhood friends who I'd known forever. Jed and I played peewee soccer together as soon as we learned to walk. At that time, the early nineties, my musical tastes revolved around the renaissance of hippy music that had enjoyed a resurgence, the likes of the Grateful Dead and what not. The drumming circle was a staple for the parking lot for the concerts that I was seeing, and I easily found my rhythm in these preshow celebrations, fascinated by

the energy and spontaneity of group drumming. However, as I began to understand the nuances of the circle, I found the drumming a bit sloppy and disappointing because of the lack of order and knowledge about how to play the hand drums. When I discovered Carlos Santana, I knew that there was more than meets the eye when playing a Latin drum. So, I sought Conga lessons from the extremely scarce population of Conga musicians* in the greater Akron area and learned some Afro Cuban slapping that quickly set me apart from other percussionists my age. I was the missing piece to the band.

The four of us were acoustic aficionados on track for something greater. That's all true, because this early conception of the Andy Johnson Explosion soon evolved into a seven-piece electric band that played shows from Akron to Cleveland on a semi-regular basis. A lot of us came and went over time, including myself, but we eventually became a core group. We cut an album, had groupies, appeared in local newspapers, and opened for headlining bands of the area. None of us could have ever imagined our trajectory as we humbly practiced on the second floor of Jed's garage, the dark attic of Bob's Nursery & Greenhouse. This is how I learned about music and being in a band.

I have no clear recollection of the best Rock 'n' Roll show that the Andy Johnson Explosion ever played, but there are a couple of salient shows that stick out in my mind—the CD release party; rocking an athletic cup cock solo at Kent State University; playing the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame stage in Cleveland; the show in Bedford where people were throwing objects at us until we nearly ended in a fist fight; and opening in front of a thousand people for Acoustic Hookah on the Agora stage. The last one was most special for me, and I might say, for purely personal reasons, was the highlight of my time with the band. Who could have ever imagined that I'd be playing on the same stage where ten years earlier I saw Perry Farrell and Dave Navarro nearly make me cry as Jane's Addiction came on stage? I have a long history with that theater that I'll reserve to tell at another time.

In these years with the Andy Johnson Explosion, I learned so much about playing music and being part of a group, and I never understood why so few Rock 'n' Roll bands stay together until I was in one. Bands, like the music they make, are temporary. Personalities can be difficult; and the remuneration is poor. Perhaps that's just the nature of the business, but nobody ever does it for the money anyways.

The truth is that everything about our band was somewhat illicit and clandestine. There are other adjectives that could be tagged on as well. Impetuous, crude, exhilarating, abusive, gratuitous, grungy, loathsome – all of this applies and more, which is where the real fun came in. Even the lyrics to the songs leave a gritty taste in your mouth. That was Aiden; that's just the way it has to be, or we'd have called our music something else.

In one of our early shows, while we were still figuring out how to be a band and not just a bunch of individuals playing instruments, I fell into a moment during one of the songs. As I cranked off a couple

*I took conga lessons from a guy in Tallmadge, Ohio named Craig Sarich. I haven't thought of him in years; and as I sat to write out this mini bio, I thought I'd do a quick search to see what he was up to, only to discover that he passed away last year "from a short illness". Craig was most known for his interpretation of the Hartville Muck Monster, an urban legend that he captured in a short comic book. A daily reminder of how quickly it all passes. May you rest in peace, Craig Sarich (1946-2019).

of strangely timed fills on the conga drum, Nate looked askew at me and winced an eye in pain. We cranked through the rest of the set and pulled our instruments off stage when Nate tracked me down. “What are you doing out there?” he asked. “You can’t do that shit. It’s not about you. You have to respect the song,” he said. Respect the song. It took me a while to understand what he meant. I don’t mean in the superficial sense of dealing with the immediacy of the show or the band, but in a deeper sense, in terms of the philosophy of a song. It wasn’t until years later when I began writing my own music that I grasped the significance of what a song is and how each person can respect it without throwing it off.

In a strange way, a song is an ethereal incarnation. There is an emergence of a moment in the mind of a writer, a songwriter in this case, which is captured on two fronts—the musical and the lyrical. This may happen simultaneously by a single person, or in a group of people who are exploring, or it may occur in separate instances that are then later married in an evolving union, but it always happens. The instrumentation and lyrics are morphed into a single, fluid motion that seamlessly grasps a moment, or creates a moment, that exists in the form it was given by its owner. Once this happens, the performance of that song attempts the most perfect and accurate recreation of the original moment, tweaking elements here and there to improve the overall flow and feel, possibly diverging in small doses, but always maintaining the integrity of the song itself. And it’s the reason that bands must rehearse. They discover and learn to respect the flow of the song to honor it.

The second part of the lesson I learned even later still. A song is intrinsically linked to the people who are playing it. The song may take on different guises, but the underlying essence is its virtue—recognizable, relatable, desirable. There are versions that arise, but the song maintains its quintessential elements that acknowledge its very existence since its conception. They are something recognizable, like the human species—identifiable in structure but as unique as the many races that make us up. This is what makes the song good. And this knowledge is respecting the song, as Nate had eluded.

I digress from the backstory of my music and return to China for the conclusion of this tale. The Infamous Dics was mine...mostly...as much as none of it was; for none of that music would have ever existed if weren’t for the folks who came together in the freezing winter of northern China to crank out the one, and only, The Infamous Dics album.[†] If you’ve ever played in a band, you know that nothing is truly yours, and the essence of the music that comes out is a strange, eclectic mixture that assumes the personalities, histories and talents of its individual members. But the core starts with the song, and those *are* still mine.

[†] The names of the members of the fleeting band, The Infamous Dics, can be found in the liner notes on the website.