

## Interview with Loyd Grossman, 30 September 2008

As comebacks go, this seemed to be one of the strangest. Headlining at Camden's Purple Turtle alongside several hard-core spiky-top punk bands were Jet Bronx, and a new incarnation of his group, The Forbidden.

The band were originally only known amongst the cognoscenti for their 1977 UK Top Fifty single, "Ain't Doin' Nuthin", but Bronx himself later carved out an alternate and extremely productive career under his real moniker of.....Loyd Grossman.

Apart from my revelation that an ex-Swell Maps member is a keen consumer of Mr Grossman's sauces, we agreed to eschew his recognised persona and concentrate on the music behind the man.....

As a Boston undergraduate in 1968, Loyd Grossman channelled his enthusiasm of the thriving local music scene into underground music journalism.

*"As Boston was a university town, it became a centre for writing about music. There was a big attempt in '68 – it almost screwed up everything – by one of the local disc jockeys to get people behind the idea of a 'Boston Sound', alluding to be the East Coast equivalent of the San Francisco sound. There wasn't a distinct enough aesthetic like there was in San Francisco. Where Jefferson Airplane, Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger service all had this discernible West Coast type of sound, Boston had a lot of folk, blues, r & b, progressive rock, psychedelia....."*

John Landau, Rolling Stone reviews editor, fellow Boston native and future Bruce Springsteen producer, invited Grossman to write for Rolling Stone.

*"I got to go to an endless number of gigs – 5 or 6 times a week. There were a lot of interesting people hanging around Boston and Cambridge – the big local band was the J.Geils Band (who had a UK hit with "Centrefold") and there were a lot of other bands coming up like Aerosmith, and Jonathan Richman & The Modern Lovers – Boston (the band) were getting together, The Cars were on the way.....there were lots of 'weirdo' bands like the Beacon Street Union – anyone who wasn't in New York or San Francisco was in Boston!"*

Grossman was treading the boards himself at this point – playing in various support bands opening for Sly and the Family Stone amongst others.

*"Being a touring backing musician opening for much bigger acts was very gruelling, and whilst I had fun it was beginning to become unsatisfactory. It was tough. When you're opening for much bigger bands you are so much at the bottom of the food chain".*

1975, and Grossman arrives in the UK to study at the London School of Economics.

*"Then punk started, and it was really exciting. The conventional wisdom is that the music scene had become so corporate, so homogenised, that punk became the inevitable reaction. I don't buy that thesis a hundred per cent – but certainly the barriers to music were getting very high, so it was likely that a home-grown, garagist type of approach was necessary – there was so much desire to do stuff that was bubbling under that was going to come out somehow".*

Enter Jet Bronx and The Forbidden.....

*"All these new bands started appearing who I shared an aesthetic with – rough round the edges, instinctive, not virtuosos – where did we ever get this idea that you have to be a virtuoso to play interesting pop music? To me it was always about feeling. Maybe because I was never good enough to BE good enough, and getting excited about what was going on, I got the Forbidden together with a couple of friends".*

His previous experiences of relentless, unrewarding tours left Grossman reluctant to perform live with the new group, but they managed to sign to Lightning Records to release “Ain’t Doin’ Nuthin’” and the follow up, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Romance” – until an unexpected hit for another Lightning Records act caused the label’s interest in the group to wane.

*“Once Lightning discovered Althea and Donna – and to me ‘Uptown Top Ranking’ has to be one of the great singles of the 70’s – they were less interested in the hardier punk stuff. So the band just broke up – the rhythm section went to join Kate Bush, one of the other guys got back to producing....”*

Loyd returned to the US and attempted one further stab at claiming a paragraph in music history with a new group, The Commercials – who were signed to Warners in 1979.

*“In retrospect, the band was ‘studenty’, a bit too clever for its own good – rather knowing, slightly ironic. There was a nugget of something there, but it never came out”.*

His hopes for the band’s progression bit the dust down to an ironic display of foresightedness.

*“The one thing I’m happiest about – this was in ’79 or ’80 – I wanted to do a punk cover of Abba – so I recorded a punk version of ‘Mama Mia’! I brought it to the then head of Warners and told him I was really excited about this. I played it to him – all the blood drained from his face, and he said ‘You’re out of your fucking mind!’ In a way I’m happy that early on I recognised the longevity of Abba, because I do think they are the most brilliant songwriters, but that put an end to my musical career. You can’t be too far ahead of the public!”*

The intervening years passed; Loyd Grossman embarked on his ongoing, highly successful alternate career – and aside from a memorable guest appearance on BBC2’s “The Danny Baker Show”, where he performed a creditable cover of The Kinks’ “All Day And All Of The Night”, his guitar playing days ground to a halt.

Early this year came an unbelievable announcement – Blackpool’s Rebellion Punk Festival was to include Jet Bronx and the New Forbidden!

*“Three or four years ago my youngest daughter wanted to learn guitar, so in order to keep her company I thought I’d play as well. After three weeks, unsurprisingly, she decided it wasn’t for her – but by then I suddenly realised how much I love playing. I like to play electric guitar – but there’s only so much playing you can do by yourself in your kitchen – it’s not that thrilling! Just as I was getting frustrated, I got this email from Brad Shepherd asking me to get the band together to play at the Rebellion festival. I couldn’t do that as the band had scattered far and wide, but I was having dinner with a friend of mine (Valentine Guinness) who had sung and played in bands, and is a great songwriter. I’d always wanted to play with him – we’d known each other for about 30 years. I showed him the email, and we began to put the band together last December”.*

Valentine Guinness fronts the New Forbidden – relieving Grossman of his original vocal duties in the ’77 line-up.

*“I never really liked singing and I only did it by default – working with a vocalist is so much better. It enables me to concentrate on my playing, which I need to do! I find it so much more liberating and enjoyable for me just to play guitar”.*

Once the news that Loyd had formed a new group began to sink in, some regrettably became cynical. Grossman’s high-profile status alongside Valentine Guinness’ connections to the legendary stout-brewing family caused one newspaper to term the band as “Toff Rock”.

*“That is just dumb. That’s inevitable and it misses the point. By the time you’re my age (this interview took place on the eve of his 58th birthday) we’re all doing this because we love doing it. We’re not trying to prove anything, we just want to do it as best we can. I really look forward to every rehearsal and every gig, and that makes a huge difference. We’re gigging very seriously at the moment”.*

Alongside slots with Dr. Feelgood and the Dakoids, Jet Bronx and the New Forbidden have played several shows alongside hard-core punk bands.

*“We’re much more new wave/indie than punk, but what we share with these bands – I hope – is that we have a lot of energy and enthusiasm, and we want to get that across to the audience.”*

Loyd’s current musical interests include:-

**“Guitar Shorty:** *‘Jimi Hendrix’ brother-in-law – mind-blowing high energy Texan style guitarist.”*

**Clarence Spady:** *“Very much like Robert Cray – very sophisticated but very powerful”.*

**Rilo Kiley:** *“I like them a lot in that indie, slightly artsy, post-Talking Heads kind of way – great singer, great lyrics, very musical”.*

*“Now it seems Ok to say you like Country music! I like Country music – I like the honesty, the lyrics - the way they’re not afraid to be cheesy, and a lot of these country players are very good musicians. I also love to hear a lot of these Saharan-African guitarists – especially Rachid Taha”.*

Jet Bronx and the New Forbidden are definitely “a going concern” and they will be recording in November – an album that promises to be a mixture of reworked Grossman penned seventies tracks and present Guinness/Grossman collaborations. No famous names will feature – “No, Eric Clapton is not guesting!”- and prospective label deals have not been discussed.

*“I just want to record something that I think is worth listening to”.*

The inevitable curiosity and perceived novelty value of seeing Loyd Grossman perform live soon dissipates. The genuine enthusiasm, fine songs and credible musicianship culminate in worthy, accomplished performances.

If you see the band for the first time trying to reconcile the idea of Loyd Grossman playing in a punk band, you’ll be back for future gigs solely on the strength of their live shows.