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EVERYTHANG'S GROOVY BABY!

Rich Deakin charts 1987: the year that Grebo broke.

"GREBO" – it's a term that can still send shudders down the spine of supposedly more discerning and earnest adherents of 1980s British indie music's golden era, not to mention some of those who were unwillingly thrown under the umbrella of this media constructed genre. Now, almost 25 years after a pivotal NME 'Grebo!' special in July 1987, and following hot on the heels of a recent album and a second tour by a reconstituted Pop Will Eat Itself - fronted by original Poppy Graham Crabb and former Gaye Bykers On Acid frontman Mary Byker (A.K.A. Ian Hoxley, Mary Mary, Mary Montana etc.) - Rich Deakin argues that the rehabilitation of "grebo" is long overdue. Revisiting the year that grebo broke, he puts forward the case that it was more than just a "bit-part irritant" and an embarrassing boil on the arse of British indie music. Now climb on board the Zen Express and read on.

In the latter half of the 1980s, the Midlands of England in particular spawned a rash of raggedy-arse bands that favoured long, sometimes dreaded hair, and a hybrid of scruffy leather and denim clothes, occasionally spray painted, and skate gear. Foremost of these bands were Pop Will Eat Itself, from the West Midlands town of Stourbridge and Gaye Bykers On Acid and Crazyhead from Leicester in the East Midlands. They were similarly informed by an eclectic range of influences in different measures, such as punk, thrash, heavy metal, psychedelia and industrial, with a liberal dose of sampling and hip hop thrown in for good measure. Ironically though, in many respects, PWEI, GBOA and Crazyhead were as different musically as they were similar in appearance. For want of a better label, they came to be known as "greboes", no thanks to a music press eager to create the next big thing.

Although Pop Will Eat Itself provided the genre with its grebo moniker, albeit somewhat unwittingly, it is James Brown (at that time a Sounds and NME scribe) who must largely take responsibility for popularising it. Today Brown explains it like this: "[grebo] was an old word used as an insult for rockers or grease boys – 'Gre Bo' - I found it on a track called 'Oh Grebo I think I Love You' by Pop Will Eat Itself... I can't remember how it became a 'genre' but I did help promote it a bit because it seemed that with Crazyhead, Bomb Party, Pop Will Eat Itself, Zodiac [Mindwarp] and the Bykers there were suddenly a clutch of bands with essentially greasy long hair and a load of noisy rock who weren't metal!"

At first the Poppies were more a traditional guitar-led indie pop outfit, somewhere between Jesus And Mary Chain and Buzzcocks. In May 1986 their first EP 'The Poppies Say GRRrrrr!' was released. It contained five chunks of plucky, but perfectly formed indie pop punk, the lyrics of which were topped with a large dollop of schoolboy humour. It was irreverent to the last, as befitting the reputation for yobbish juvenile behaviour that they were quickly earning themselves in the music press.

Meanwhile, in Leicester two of the other bands referred to by Brown came to define the so-called grebo genre possibly even more so than Pop Will Eat Itself in the end. Taking their name from a cartoon by Ray Lowry, legendary NME artist and designer of The Clash's 'London Calling' album sleeve, they added an "e" to "Gay" as a tribute to Marvin Gaye. Despite the perceived absurdity of the new name, if anything it actually helped to get them noticed. It wasn't long before they were signed to Marc Riley's (ex-Fall and The Creepers fame and now BBC 6 Music DJ) In-Tape label, albeit thanks to a little help from The Janitors. Self-



proclaimed "lo rent house producer" for In-Tape, Jon Langford (Mekons and the Three Johns) describes the first time he met the Bykers: "I was amazed by the look they'd put together. The Janitors and the Creepers all looked like unemployed council workers but the Bykers had this day-glo post-'Mad Max' thing going on before they'd even put a record out. They looked mental and a bit intimidating but I got on with them straight away."

The results of that first session were amazing. 'Everything's Groovy', 'Space Rape' and 'T.V. Cabbage', were three blasts of sonic mayhem largely typified by guitarist Tony Horsfall's demented Hendrix grappling with Ron Asheton stylee heavy fuzz distorted psychedelic wah guitar onslaught. Robber Byker and Kev Hyde's thundering bass and drum rhythms played a prominent part too, and Mary's vocals alternated between gruff Beefheart growl and Leicester-meets-transatlantic Iggy style howls... and so the template was set. One critic wrote "... it makes you think of Hawkwind getting down with the Sex Pistols and feeling like they've known each other for years", and he had a point: with its sci-fi and Star Trek influences, 'Space Rape' has got to be one of the best space punk records ever! Reaching number six, the single stayed on the indie charts for 33 weeks. GBOA had arrived.

Around the same time, Crazyhead had begun to earn themselves a reputation of their own, and were soon snapped up by former Teardrop Explodes member Dave Balfe's Food Records. Clad in polka dot shirts, scruffy black denim and leathers, and long back-combed spiky hair, they looked every inch a mutant hybrid of 'Don't Look Back' vintage Bob Dylan and Johnny Rotten, circa 'frisco Winterland 1978. Released in March 1987, and backed by 'Snakes Eyes' and 'Out On A Limb', 'What Gives You The Idea That You're So Amazing Baby?' was an incendiary debut single. Spitting vitriol and firing on all cylinders, it was frantic heads down, non-nonsense garage rock 'n' roll with a hefty gob of punk attitude to boot.

As with the Poppies, punk was actually a crucial influence on both the Leicester bands too. Robber recalls: "I pretty much liked all those 1970s first wave of UK and US punk bands, and went to see them all as a teenager, and then '80s anarcho punkers Crass, Discharge..." As well as obvious shared influences like The Stooges, MC5, Beefheart and Velvet underground, the Bykers perhaps cast their net even wider than Crazyhead - citing the likes of Zappa, Funkadelic, James Brown (the 'Godfather of Soul', not the music journalist), Butthole Surfers, Dead Kennedys and Bad Brains.

Gaye Bykers released the follow up to 'Everything's Groovy' in May 1987 – 'The Nosedive' EP. Once again produced by Jon Langford, it's sometimes regarded as the Bykers's finest moment. The four tracks were in a similar vein to their previous release, but there was a distinct hip hop undercurrent running through the new EP and Robber now recalls that for the title track 'Nosedive Karma' he lifted the bass riff from Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean'.

The Poppies were by this time indie chart veterans, comparatively speaking, having already notched up three top twenty indie chart hits, the third of which, 'Sweet Sweet Pie', peaked at number two in January 1987. But, their next EP, released a week after 'Nosedive', was to mark the beginning of a shift in direction for the Poppies. A growing infatuation

with American hip hop and rap was consolidated after they saw Run DMC and the Beastie Boys at Birmingham Odeon that spring. Having acquired some new equipment, the band decided to dispense with a real drumkit altogether and Graham Crabb joined Clint Mansell upfront sharing vocal duties. Few could have predicted how far this direction would soon take them within such a short space of time.

One of the highlights of the so-called 'Covers' EP was a version of Hawkwind's 'Orgone Accumulator'. But it was the lead track, a cover version of Sique Sique Sputnik's 'Love Missile F1-11', that really pointed in the direction they were now heading when it appeared on a subsequent remix 12" as a 'Designer Grebo Megamix' reworked in the style of Run DMCs 'Raising Hell'. It seemed to confirm the Poppies' shift away from the grungier guitar sound that first typified their sound.

The three bands built upon their growing reputations throughout rest of the spring by touring intensively. The Poppies made their first excursion onto the continent, whilst the Bykers and Crazyhead both supported The Cult on various legs of their 'Electric Tour', after which Crazyhead hit the road for a UK tour with Julian Cope. All of them then appeared at Glastonbury during the summer. By this time the 'grebo' word had started gaining common currency throughout the music press. The major record labels couldn't fail to notice the increasing media scrum, and after courting several majors, the Bykers signed up to Virgin, eager to get a piece of the action, for a six-figure sum. With the ink barely dry on their new contract, the Bykers headed Stateside for a prestigious gig supporting The Cult at the New York Felt Forum at Madison Square Gardens, before heading back to start recording their new album and shooting a movie.

No sooner were they back in England than the NME ran a 'Grebo!' special, in which James Brown's article 'Q: Are we not men? A: We are Grebo!' was disdainful and laudatory in equal measure. It was nevertheless evident that Brown thought the Bykers, Poppies and Crazyhead were a cut above their contemporaries. Brown argued that it was their "wit, attitude and personality" that also really stood them apart from "the grungy glut of cockrocker in leathers that are jumping at, but missing, the bandwagon and the point." Whereas you could pretty much choose to ignore grebo before this, love it or loathe it, there was definitely no escaping

it now. The article proved to be something of a watershed for grebo, and arguably polarised opinion in the ensuing feeding frenzy that spread like a rash across the pages of the British music press inkiies which, in the long run, was possibly more detrimental than it was good for the bands' reputations.

The Bykers and Crazyhead accepted the grebo label with resignation, perhaps adhering to the credo that any publicity was good publicity, and for a while they were indeed undoubted press darlings of the British music weeklies. Today Mary says: "At the time we never really thought that much about it [the grebo label], we were getting so carried away with what was going on around us. It was typical English journalism in that they like to create a movement. I think it helped in as much as we were getting written about a lot, and that obviously helped our profile." Ian Anderson, the lead singer of Crazyhead, is still less





accepting of the term though, recalling, "The publicity really helped us at first, but we were fucked up later by that tag even though the Bykers and especially Poppies escaped easier from it I feel." Kev Reverb, Crazyhead's rhythm guitarist, similarly says, "It got boring and pissed us off, and affected the way we were regarded by the press."

Melody Maker also ran a feature earlier in the summer of 1987 called 'Rock Of Ages', in which various members of Gaye Bykers, Crazyhead, Bomb Party, Batfish Boys, '60s psychedelic revivalists Voodoo Child and goth rockers Rose Of Avalanche and All About Eve went head-to-head in a summit chaired by MM scribe Mick Mercer. Mercer was primarily concerned with the escalating trend for bands to exhume and regurgitate aspects of 1960s and '70s rock, as if punk had never happened. There was also a '60s psychedelic revival then currently in full swing, largely centred on the London club Alice In Wonderland, and coupled with the ever increasing popularity of goth, it was inevitable that there would be some comparison with the grebo upstarts.

Phil Morris of Rose Of Avalanche found the idea of being associated with the grebo scene "appalling" and was clearly vocal in his dismissal of the Bykers and Crazyhead, accusing them of "reverting back to shit punk, not even good punk". Mary Byker took it all in his stride though, sanguinely countering such accusations with "You know what 'shit' means? It's a Freudian message for gold."

Mercer seemed to acknowledge the merits of the bands present on one hand, yet appeared disparaging on the other, before concluding "All good things come to those who hate. Take a good look at what's happening and marvel at what a hopelessly lacklustre 'happening' it is..."

As if to confirm Mercer's worst nightmare, the old guard collided with the new at an all-day event called Acid Daze in the Finsbury Park Supertent at the end of August. Headlined by Hawkwind, the original psychedelic warlords themselves, the rest of the line-up was shared by another '70s rock act - the recently reformed Pink Fairies; The Damned in their '60s garage band guise Naz Nomad and The Nightmares, as well as new psychedelic bands Dr And The Medics, Voodoo Child and Ozric Tentacles, and inevitably Gaye Bykers On Acid and Pop Will It Itself. The Bykers were joined onstage by PWIEI singer Clint Mansell who, in typical Poppies fashion, proceeded to strip off, but only to his pants. It probably didn't win either band any favours from the music press though. If NME scribe Barbara Ellen managed to muster up some enthusiasm at least for the Bykers and the Poppies, other reviewers were less favourable.

Judging from the reviews in the weeklies, it was becoming apparent that open season was now being declared in some quarters.

In the same week that Acid Daze took place, Crazyhead crashed into the indie charts with their second single 'Baby Turpentine'. It was accompanied by two more original compositions 'That Sinking Feeling', 'I Don't Want That Kind Of Love', plus their take on Cher's 1965 hit 'Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)'. The single may not have made quite the same impact as its predecessor, but the lead track was another blast of high velocity garage punk of the highest magnitude, capturing them at their raw best. Crazyhead's Anderson now says, "The early singles were done quickly - almost copying the demos we had done with Rick from Diesel Park West (another Leicester band), and his demos were put on the B-sides." Kev Reverb adds, "... basically live takes, which is the way we wanted it... We didn't need to piss about in the studio, we had worked really hard at the arrangements and we were very tight, as anyone who saw us live at that time will testify to." Reverb does have a point, as Crazyhead were reaping some really wild plaudits in the music press for their live performances by this time.

In September the Poppies released 'Beaver Patrol' as their next single, and caused a furore in the press due to the perceived sexist nature of the title. The track was actually a cover version of a song by an old '60s garage band called The Wilde Knights, reinvented to reflect the Poppies' new hip hop oriented direction. By the time their debut album 'Box Frenzy' was released in October even that doyen of usually anti-censorial principles John Peel had reportedly been lobbying radio show producers to ban playing the track. But if anyone had been in doubt following the 'Designer Grebo Megamix' of 'Love Missile F1-11', the ensuing album more than confirmed their change in direction, and it only really included a few nods towards their old style such as 'Inside You', 'Ugly' and 'Bubbles'. Such a sudden transformation from grungy guitar-toting indie grebo punkers to rock rap crossover artists with techno aspirations within the space of less than a year could have been disastrous for them, but it was a gamble that paid off.

Meanwhile at the end of October the Bykers embarked on the 'Soft Toilet Paper And Locks On The Bog Door' tour to promote the release of their first Virgin single 'Git Down (Shake Your Thang)' and their debut album, 'Drill Your Own Hole'. Following the popularity of the first two singles, expectations were high, particularly from Virgin who were hoping for a considerable return on their



six-figure investment. A number of review copies of the album came with no hole in the centre and required hapless hacks to do exactly what it said on the cover. Unfortunately it was met with mixed reviews from the press and received a generally indifferent reception from the record buying public too.

Bob Stanley gave it just two stars out of ten in NME, and concluded his review by saying "[It] should have come in a scratch and sniff cover - I'll leave it up to the reader to choose the relevant odours." On the other hand, when reviewing it for Sounds, Mr Spencer likened it to "Mad Max with a rocket-pack and a head full of hallucinogenics" Mary now says "Well, my thoughts are that we chose the wrong producer. We ended up programming all the drums so it lost any of the energy we had playing live. So it sucked the life out of it."

Robber Byker muses "Some folks love that first LP but I hate that Drill record! There were some great songs - 'All Hung Up', 'So Far Out' - but ideas we had played live since we started were ruined by being over produced into bad techno turds... What were we thinking?", before continuing "I think our ex-manager was keeping us far too busy touring for us to get a grip on the musical creative side of things. That and the 'Drill Your Own Hole' film we made at the same time, which although was quite a laugh making, cost us a small fortune... and distracted us all!" Overproduced 'Drill Your Own Hole' may have been, but it's still got more than its fair share of highlights. Just check out 'All Hung Up', 'Motorvate', 'Zen Express' or the bouncing punkadelic cover version of 'Liar' by the Edgar Broughton Band. But, even if it didn't live up to the pre-release hype it generated, it certainly wasn't anywhere near as bad a stinker that it was portrayed as being at the time by some. Listening to it again twenty five years down the pike, it's probably stood the test of time far better than the Poppies' rap rock direction defining album 'Box Frenzy', and a lot of what else qualified for indie rock at the time too. I'd stick my neck on the line by saying it's one of the great lost, unsung indie rock albums (okay, it was on Virgin, but you know what I mean!) of the 1980s.

As for the film, it was regarded as an ambitious folly by some too. Mary now says, "We had a major break when 'The Old Grey Whistle Test' played a video that we made with a mate from Leicester Polytechnic, Dave Bartram. It cost us next to nothing. So, when Virgin said that they had given Boy George £250,000 to make a video we stupidly said we could make an hour long movie for half that amount. Suffice to say it eventually went over budget! We knew absolutely nothing about filmmaking but somehow we managed to persuade Virgin to fund the movie. The songs from the album would be the soundtrack. So we had to write a story that would work as songs with all the crazy ideas we were



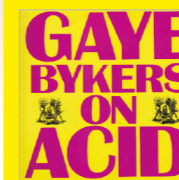
having for the film. All very ambitious! The film was a homage to lots of films and books that we were digging at the time, 'Tron', 'Mad Max', 'Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas', the Monkees movie 'Head', 'The Blues Brothers', Ken Kesey's 'Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test' and lots more." The film certainly didn't receive any Oscar nominations, nor the Bykers for their acting skills. But it's an entertaining enough romp through their fertile imaginations made celluloid, and in spite of all the American movie influences, it's still somehow quintessentially English and well worth checking out if you can get hold of a copy. The release date was intended to coincide with that of the album to maximise impact, but it was delayed by a couple of months, thus losing them some momentum in the process.

On the whole though it had been one hell of a rollercoaster ride of a year for all three bands, and as 1987 rolled into '88, the initial clamour surrounding grebo started to diminish as the music press began to turn its attention elsewhere, hoping to discover or invent the next new big thing again: Seattle grunge and the Madchester scene were both looming large on the horizon by this time, as was the Acid House rave scene. Ironically enough, out of all these three bands it was only Pop Will Eat Itself, so instrumental in kick-starting the grebo genre in the first place, who really managed to shake off the label and escape the "great grebo train wreck" that the music press had created. Continuing to pursue their sample infused rap rock indie-techno-funk direction; they were finally signed to a major label, RCA, in mid-1988 and went on to achieve considerable mainstream chart success over the next few years, until they split up in 1996. They reunited in the mid-noughties, and more recently with Mary Byker co-helming them. Clint Mansell, of course, has since gone on to achieve international acclaim scoring soundtracks for successful Hollywood movies like 'The Wrestler' and 'Black Swan'. The ride wasn't quite over for Crazyhead or the Gaye Bykers either though. During the next year both bands went on to record some of the best work of their careers. Crazyhead released their debut album 'Desert Orchid' in August 1988, and the Bykers reinstated Jon Langford for their second and final, and some might say best, album for Virgin released in February 1989 - 'Stewed To The Gills'. But the moment had passed. Dropped by Virgin, following the departure of their manager and a lack of commercial success, the Bykers released the experimental concept album 'Cancer Planet Mission' on their own Naked Brain label in 1990. They also put out an album called 'Sakred Anus' under the guise of an East German thrash metal band with the name of Rektum in the same year before heading into a more dance-oriented direction as PFX, with considerably less commercial or critical success than the Poppies, before finally grinding to a halt in 1992. Mary became involved in a number of bands post-Bykers, most notably with electronica outfit, and mainstream chart frequenters, Apollo Four Forty, whilst Robber Byker gravitated towards dance culture, sound systems and music production, and he's still DJing today.

Crazyhead forged on for a number of years, and, along with Jesus Jones, were one of the first western rock bands to tour post-revolutionary Rumania in 1990. Also dropped by their label, Parlophone, when they didn't conform to the label's expectations for them to become more like Bon Jovi, Crazyhead's second album 'Some Kind Of Fever' on Revolver Records failed to capture the public's interest in the same way that those early singles or the 'Desert Orchid' album did, and they continued to perform intermittently until 2000. Today Anderson fronts a punk covers band called Stiff Little Punx in Phnom Penh, Cambodia where he now lives, and teaches English. Reverb still resides in Leicester and now plays in a garage style band called Scaley Fuego with original Crazyhead drummer and occasional Zodiac Mindwarp sticks man Rob Vom. Arguably then, Crazyhead and the Bykers both became victims of the English music media's making. In many respects the relationship between the bands and the press had been symbiotic at first. But it was inevitable that they would eventually fall prey to the music press's time honoured tradition to "build 'em up and knock 'em down", and by the end of 1987 grebo had become a byword for "novelty" or "comedy" in the music press. Who knows how different things might have been for both bands if it hadn't been for the nonsense written when the backlash eventually happened?

Sure, bands like the Gaye Bykers and Poppies were slapstick at times, but at least they weren't pretentious and didn't take themselves too seriously, unlike some of the more po-faced indie and goth miserabilists then doing the rounds. They also provided a refreshing antidote to the manufactured Stock, Aitken and Waterman pop pap, the spandex-trousered hair metal brigade, and dour politico pop acts that were dominating the mainstream charts around that time. But, at least, for eighteen months or so, they injected some well needed anarchy and real excitement into the British alternative music scene, particularly throughout the summer of '87: I for one wouldn't have missed it for the world. **VLR**

GREBO GURUS: A TOP TEN



Gaye Bykers On Acid - Everythang's Groovy

Both the songs from the b-side of this single ('T.V. Cabbage' and 'Space Rape') could easily have made this list too, but it's the lead track with its relentless wah guitar onslaught, thundering bass line and pounding drums that just edges it.

Crazyhead - What Gives You

The idea That You're So Amazing Baby?

An incendiary debut single delivered with the precision and ferocity of a Stuka's payload - frantic heads down, no-nonsense garage rock 'n' roll with a hefty gob of punk attitude to boot.



Pop Will Eat Itself - Poppiecock EP

Five tracks of near perfect, breakneck guitar-led punk pop each clocking in at under two minutes. Poppiecock spawned the classic 'Oh Grebo, I Think I Love You' which unwittingly provided the music press with the name for a new genre.

Gaye Bykers On Acid - Nosedive EP

Hip hop break beats, Michael Jackson bass lines and more Star Trek samples (On 'Golf Trek' they even cover a song from a 1968 episode of 'Star Trek' - in their own inimitable style of course!) collide head on with brain melting guitars and heavy punk riffage to provide the Bykers with what is arguably their finest moment.



Crazyhead - Baby Turpentine EP

Equally rabid as its predecessor, and with more of Ian Anderson's surreal lyrics, the title track 'Baby Turpentine' captures the band at its raw best as they career full-tilt through nearly three blistering minutes of pure adrenalized garage punk.

Zodiac Mindwarp & The Love

Reaction - High Priest Of Love EP

Blatantly pillaging Hells Angels' chic: with their tattoos, ripped leather and denims, and an attitude to match, it was inevitable that Zodiac Mindwarp would also be tarred with the grebo brush. The title track of this 1986 EP is as good a representation of anything they ever did.



The Bomb Party - Make Way For My Motorbike Baby

Another bunch of Leicester longhairs, oft cited by the Bykers and Crazyhead as being their main inspiration in the first place, Bomb Party captured the grebo zeitgeist with this track from their 1987 album 'Liberace Rising'.

Pop Will Eat Itself - Love Missile F1-11

As if to confirm the Poppies' shift away from the grungier guitar sound that first typified their sound, this cover version of a Sique Sique Sputnik single captures the Poppies at the beginning of their transition to successful rock rap crossover hip hop artists.



Gaye Bykers On Acid - All Hung Up

The Bykers' debut album was not exactly the dead loss that its detractors made it out to be. It certainly had its fair share of high points, and with Mary's trademark falsetto "pom pom pom poms" firmly at the fore, this second single from the 'Drill Your Own Hole' album and film proves this point admirably.

Batfish Boys - The Bomb Song

Proving that there was life outside of Stourbridge and Leicester, former March Violets' front man Simon Detroit's Batfish Boys from Leeds predated the likes of GBOA and Crazyhead by a year or two, but were still lumped in as grebos anyway.

