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This is a peer-reviewed, final published version of the following document:

Deakin, Rich (2018) Come Down Heavy. Vive Le Rock! (52). pp. 66-71.

Official URL: <https://vivelerock.net/>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/14518>

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Making their long-awaited return, Rich Deakin meets the newly resurrected and righteously recharged psychedelic garage rock terrorists **THEE HYPNOTICS**.

COME DOWN HEAVILY

EXPLODING onto the UK indie scene at the end of the 1980s in a wall of high-energy, rama-lama Detroit-style fuelled feedback and fuzzed-out wah-wah, Thee Hypnotics exuded the swagger and attitude of street walking cheetahs with hearts full of napalm. Not only was their brand of soulful but heavy psychedelic blues a perfect antidote to the anodyne mainstream pop fodder that was saturating the charts at the time, it was a merciful alternative to the spandex and hair metal hordes who were so prevalent then. Courted by the likes of The Damned, Dead Boys, The Cult and The Black Crowes, they were the first UK band to have a record released on Sub Pop Records, and later signed to Rick Rubin's prestigious American Recordings label. With the world seemingly theirs for the taking, it's a mystery why Thee Hypnotics never hit pay dirt back in their early 1990s heyday. But now they're back, re-energised and righteously recharged with a back catalogue box-set plus extras, and a tour to promote it, singer Jim Jones and guitarist Ray Hanson open up about whether the world is ready for Thee Hypnotics once again. But first, Vive Le Rock looks at some of the highs and lows of Thee Hypnotics' career so far.

The story begins some forty years ago in a small village in Buckinghamshire. Having met at school, Jim and Ray both showed a keen interest in music, and soon gravitated towards the likes of The Stooges, MC5 and New York Dolls. Although they played in a number of bands together at school, Thee Hypnotics was their first serious outfit, and they played their first gig in Chesham in the spring of 1986. Soon they were regularly gigging in the larger town of High Wycombe and its surroundings. Enhanced by a modest diet of weed, speed and acid, and of course the likes of The Stooges, Blue Cheer, Jimi Hendrix, The Cramps and MC5 on heavy rotation, their songwriting talents developed exponentially throughout the following year.

It wasn't too long before they played their first gig – at Dingwalls, in London. Jones recalls, "Our first London show was some random club

night there. But I remember Dan Stuart of Green On Red was there, and made a point of talking to us after the show – 'You are fucking god-heads!' he told us, which was great encouragement for a young band."

Another gig at Dingwalls followed shortly after, supporting Tav Falco & The Panther Burns. Jones now says, "[It] was a thrill, as Tav and the band were definitely on our radar. The show was Panther Burns' first visit to the UK and was attended by many contemporaries we came to know, including Bobby Gillespie and the Spacemen 3." But, Jones continues, the icing on the cake came when, "Tav spoke to us in his fantastic Southern fried way and said 'I believe you will cut a wide swathe into the history of rock 'n' roll'... that was all we needed to hear."

This gig ultimately led to Vinyl Solution, an independent record shop on London's Portobello Road, releasing their debut single on its own Hipsville imprint. 'Love In A Different Vein' was backed by 'All Night Long' - it was pure 1969 vintage Detroit à la Stooges and MC5! They couldn't have made their manifesto more obvious. A line-up change occurred shortly after, when bassist Chris Dennis was replaced by Will Pepper, another friend from Buckinghamshire.

By now, they were playing regular gigs in the capital, and they had already captured the attention of The Damned, who subsequently invited Thee Hypnotics to support them, as well as their 1960s garage/psych alter-egos Naz Nomad & The Nightmares, a number of times during 1988 and '89. Inevitably, it wasn't too long before they were snapped up by Situation Two, an indie label and offshoot of Beggar's Banquet. The band's first release for Situation Two, in spring 1989, was a 12" single called 'Justice In Freedom' – on which Ray Hanson pulls out all the stops and easily gives Hendrix a run for his money with his monstrous guitar break. On the flip-side, 'Preachin' And Ramblin' and 'Choose My Own Way' only served to further consolidate their affinity to the Detroit rock sound of the late '60s.

Meanwhile, The Cult, who were on the main Beggar's Banquet label, had

◀ just released Sonic Temple. At the album launch party, Jones and Hanson were invited to get up on stage, where they were joined by Rat Scabies on drums. "I don't remember if we had a bass player" says Jones today, "... We did a bunch of covers I think... Stooges, MC5, Hendrix." He then goes to recall wistfully, "Ian Astbury was watching from side stage in full Grizzly Adams mode, complete with beard and Pendleton lumberjack shirt. It was a lavish, sprawling party. In the dressing room Matt Sorum was in high spirits, handing out the coke... I think maybe he had just joined Guns N' Roses."

It was around this time they also supported Gaye Bykers On Acid on a major UK tour, and were asked to record a session for John Peel's Radio 1 show. Later in the year 'Soul Trader' was released as a 12" single. The buzz they were generating continued to gathered momentum when, in September 1989, Jim, Ray and bassist Will Pepper were invited by Stiv Bators to play as stand-in Dead Boys when guitarist Cheetah Chrome was refused entry into Britain.

At the end of 1989, the band's first album was released. It was recorded live at the Powerhaus in London earlier that summer. Capturing the band at their most ferocious and rawest, it was incendiary to say the least. Unsurprisingly, it created a stir, and its UK release was instrumental in Situation Two, aided and abetted by Mark Arm of Mudhoney, brokering a licensing deal with Seattle record label Sub Pop who subsequently re-released it in the States in early 1990. The original five live tracks on the UK release were now bolstered by additional tracks from the A & B sides of their first two 12" singles.

It made sense for the band to jet off to the States on the back of the Sub Pop deal to raise their profile there, but not before simmering discontent within the ranks resulted in long-time drummer Mark Thompson being replaced by Phil Smith of indie band Bambi Slam. Basing themselves in Seattle, they toured with Tad and hung out with bands like The Screaming Trees and Mudhoney, who were at the time the cream of the

★★★★★

"I never left rock 'n' roll, and rock 'n' roll never left me!"

Ray Hanson

★★★★★



Below: The early Hypnotics lineup which recorded the first single and played the first important shows circa 1988. L-R Jim Jones, Mark Thompson, Ray Hanson, Chris Dennis

nascent "grunge" scene.

Returning to the UK to record perhaps what is their first album proper, 'Come Down Heavy', they adjourned to a recording studio on London's Wardour Street, where Dick Taylor and Phil May, from the original 1960s R&B bad boys The Pretty Things, even contributed guitar and harmonica on a couple of tracks. The album is a fully charged battery of high energy rock 'n' roll worthy of their beloved Detroit influences. With wah pedal in meltdown, Ray Hanson gives all the right guitar licks... and then some – just check out 'All Messed Up', 'Bleedin' Heart', or the amphetamine surge of 'Release The Feeling'. 'Come Down Heavy' climaxes with 'Revolution Stone', on which Jim Jones comes across all Jim Morrison over an epic ten-minute psychedelic soul stew, with flashes of saxed-up freeform brilliance.

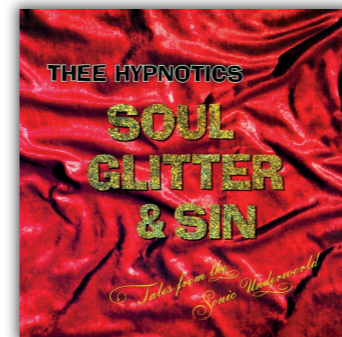
Following a number of live dates in continental Europe, Thee Hypnotics returned to the States with their star seemingly in the ascendant. Tragedy struck not long into the tour though. Having already played a number of dates with The Screaming Trees, Thee Hypnotics had just embarked on the next leg of the tour in Minneapolis where they played a gig with Smashing Pumpkins. On their way back to their hotel the band's van, with all of them in it, was hit at speed by a drunk driver who had jumped a red traffic light. Although most of the entourage escaped with relatively minor injuries, drummer Phil Smith was not so lucky. Sustaining a ruptured bladder, smashed pelvis and damaged vertebrae, Smith was in intensive care for four days, and spent a lengthy period of time recovering in hospital.

With the rest of the tour curtailed, so too was the opportunity to break America. With Smith recuperating in a Minneapolis hospital the remaining Hypnotics returned to the UK. Against their own wishes, but because of contractual obligations, they were forced to undertake a UK tour to promote their next single 'Flyin' In My Hoodoo Dream'. Their old mentor and friend Rat Scabies bailed them out by stepping up to the drum riser at the last minute.

Soon after Phil Smith had convalesced and was able to return to the UK, Thee Hypnotics entered Rockfield Studios in the summer of 1991, with John Leckie producing. Perhaps not surprisingly, heavy drinking and even harder drug use had become even more prevalent within the band by then. These factors, combined with their recent bad experience in America, would have a significant bearing on the outcome of 'Soul, Glitter & Sin'. But so too did the music they were now listening to. The Gun Club, Sonic Youth, Nick Cave, Tom Waits, Roy Budd, and John Barry all figured in that list, among many others. Certainly songs like 'Shakedown' and 'Point Blank Mystery' still retained an air of high-octane supercharged Stooges and MC5 style urgency at their most cataclysmic, but the judicious use of a moody brass section, saxophone and organ also conspired to create what has accurately been described as "cinematic". 'Soul, Glitter & Sin' is indeed at times akin to both a deeply dark but atmospheric movie score, and a film noir soundtrack.

Whilst touring the new album, Thee Hypnotics' path crossed with The Black Crowes, at an acoustic show at Ronnie Scott's. The story has it that Crowes' frontman Chris Robinson had become so enamoured with Thee Hypnotics after hearing 'Come Down Heavy' whilst tripping in his own band's tour van the year before, that he used to buy boxes of the CD and give it away like some kind of proselytizer. It therefore didn't take much to convince Robinson that Thee Hypnotics were the band to support them on the forthcoming leg of their UK tour that autumn. No sooner had that finished, they were playing stadiums in Europe supporting The Cult, who had just released 'Ceremony'. Somewhat bewilderingly though, despite such high profile tour activity, and favourable reviews from the critics, commercially 'Soul, Glitter & Sin' was still less successful than 'Come Down Heavy'. Thee Hypnotics crossed the Atlantic once more to try and make a fist of things in

the States again. The dates were successful enough, but drugs were figuring more highly in the picture than ever before. Tour fatigue and the rock 'n' roll lifestyle eventually took their toll on Will Pepper who left the band in 1992, after completing the US tour dates.



Pepper was replaced by Craig Pike, an American bassist, who had

pedigree with The Cramps and Iggy Pop, and the band began to steadily rebuild their reputation as a live draw, touring the States and Europe extensively. Tragedy struck once again though when Pike took the maxim of living the rock 'n' roll lifestyle too far, once too often, and was found dead from an overdose in the squat he shared with Jim Jones.

It was at this juncture that Pepper rejoined on bass, and yet again the band headed back over to the States, this time to record a new album. Chris Robinson played a significant part in organising this, and even helped them secure a deal with Rick Rubin's American Recordings. Craig Pike's death might have served as a wake-up call of sorts, but proved to be anything but! Taking advantage of the opportunities that hanging out in LA with A-list rock stars and movie stars afforded them, they soon found themselves drinking and drugging more than ever, if that was possible. This in turn apparently created friction throughout the recording process with Chris Robinson, who also produced the album.

Recording and production differences aside, the finished album was still an accomplished affair. Although there were still vestiges of the Detroit sonic rock influences, 'Heavy Liquid' in particular, 'The Very Crystal Speed Machine' was quite a radical departure from all Thee Hypnotics' previous outings. There was a distinctly more Southern fried vibe about several of the numbers, no doubt due to the influence of Robinson and the other Black Crowes who contributed. It also had a more of a 1970s British good time rock 'n' roll feel, à la Faces, and even an early-mid '70s Stones sound in some places. But, it wasn't necessarily what the diehard fans wanted to hear. And even if they did, a major legal wrangle between their record label, American Recordings, and their European distributors meant it wasn't necessarily easy to get hold of in the UK.



To compound matters further, increasing cash flow problems due to the ongoing legal battle, meant that apart from releasing the record in the States, American Recordings eventually pulled the plug on any more promotion for the album or the forthcoming tour. Inevitably, this affected attendances at subsequent live dates in the States, and whereas a year previously they'd been living high on the hog as rock stars in waiting, they were now hauling their own arses around the States in an old yellow school bus without any air-con.

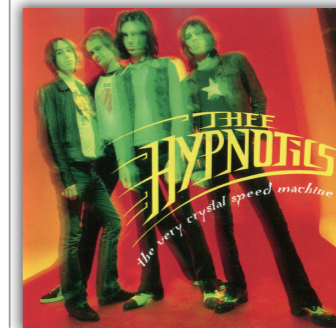
Returning to the UK, broke and demoralised, they received a further blow when they realised the landscape of the alternative music scene had altered significantly – Britpop was now flavour of the month, and they didn't necessarily taste right anymore. Thee Hypnotics persevered though and, after Pepper was replaced by Jeremy Cottingham from Goldbug, they limped on for a couple more years. In 1998, they undertook a final UK tour, supporting Britpop band Shed Seven, which culminated at Shepherd's Bush Empire, and saw them bowing out for the last time. Although the time old factors of tour fatigue, too much sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, bad management decisions, and being screwed over by record companies figured in the band's eventual demise, it appears that other old scourge of bands since time immemorial – "musical differences" – didn't. Musical indifference did maybe: Jim now says with more than a tinge of bitterness, "The last nail in the coffin was me leaving the band... Shed Seven offered us the whole tour, which included some great venues like Barrowlands in Glasgow. I was excited to get out to these kinds of venues and play but we only did two or three of the shows... both Ray and Phil said they couldn't be bothered to drive all the way to these shows... so I ended up throwing my hands up with it all, you know, 'if that's your attitude, I'm done!' But, in honesty, I think the band was already over, we just didn't know how to walk away."

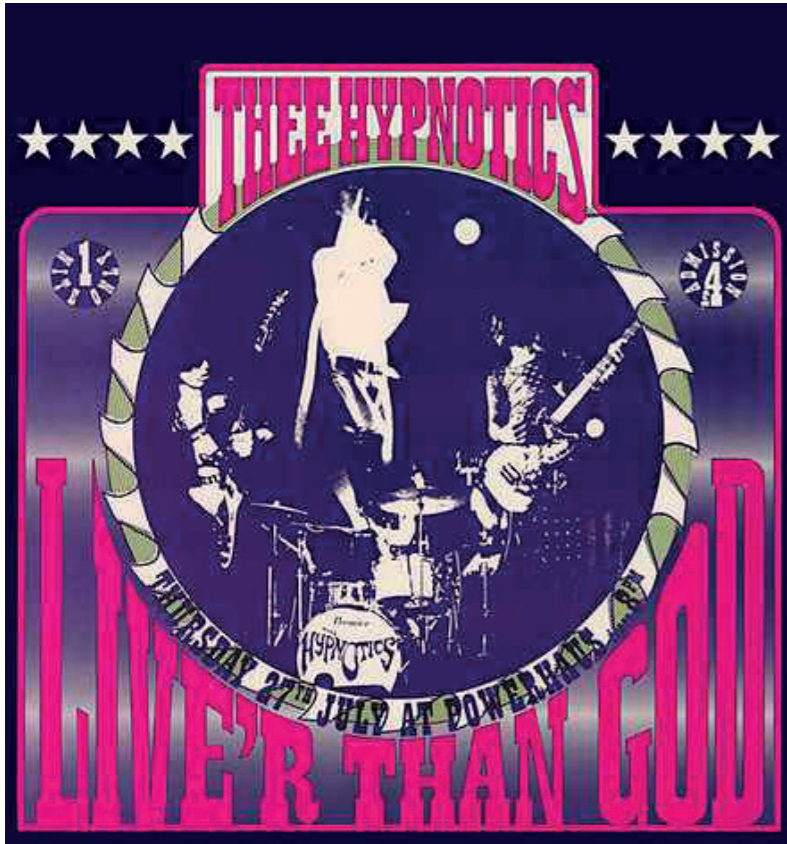
Jones now says, "I tried to put music to one side after Thee Hypnotics split, but within a month, I was climbing the walls, really. I realised I couldn't live without music, recording and performing." He then began travelling to Bristol to work with The Heads, and started working on new songs, which was the genesis of his next band Black Moses. Similarly, Hanson couldn't just forsake music entirely either, and says "I never left rock 'n' roll, and rock 'n' roll never left me! Never will!" But, whereas Jones made a point of sorting himself out and getting out on the road again, Hanson continued down the road of narcotic distraction. Although he became involved with a number of bands between 1998 and 2003, including one with the late Nick Marsh from Flesh For Lulu, and another with members of Kula Shaker, drugs always seemed to get in the way. He now reflects, "... yeah heavy heroin use etc. I became very hermetic and a bit reclusive, but within that I always was recording at home." This is where, over the years, he has recorded thousands of songs as part of his long term-project Ray 'Sonic' Hanson's Whores Of Babylon, a fraction of which can be found on Soundcloud. Having come off heroin the best part of a decade ago, Hanson now maintains, "I still am on prescribed drugs – methadone and codeine... but junk and street drugs, smack and coke, crack etc. [I] haven't touched since 2010 or somewhere round there... I just hate the scoring process as well. Boring as shit waiting around for the man, rattlin'. Thank God I'm out of all that sordid bullshit... but I still have my warm blanket of stonedness... it's just more 'official' now I guess ha! I'm just 'officially' comforted now, as opposed to 'bootleg stoned'."

Since getting clean, Hanson has clearly become less reclusive, and the Whores Of Babylon project eventually realised fruition when they appeared live at the 2015 Portobello Film Festival. It is still an ongoing concern, and Hanson now says, "Of course I wanna get Ray 'Sonic' Hanson's Whores Of Babylon on its feet gig wise and records etc."

Since the demise of Thee Hypnotics, Jones has maintained a considerably higher profile with all his subsequent outfits, especially The Jim Jones Revue. But his latest band, The Righteous Mind, still has a lot of mileage left in it, "We have live dates and plans for a new LP this year... Righteous Mind is really just starting to grow some claws and a bit of hair on its balls, God only knows what it's gonna be capable of!"

Which begs the question, if both Hanson and Jones have high hopes for their own respective current musical endeavours, why a Hypnotics reunion now? It's twenty years since the band last played together, so how did it come about? ▶





◀ The answer it would seem is a case of parallel evolution.

Whilst Ray was investigating the possibility of releasing some previously unreleased Hypnotics recordings from his extensive archive on Spanish label Bang! Records, Jim had the idea of approaching their old label Beggars' Banquet to ask about how licensing their old material would work.

Jones now says, "The idea to get back out on the road, and play together again has always been there I guess, lurking in the shadows [but] the thing that brought the planets into alignment, that triggered it was Beggars' Banquet, our original label." Says Ray, "I started the ball rolling with this 'Lost 4th Hypnotics Unheard Tracks' album – boom! In come Beggars." Jones picks up the thread again in relation to licensing the back catalogue, "I spoke with Lesley Bleakley, who'd been there back in the old days, and she just said straight away, 'why don't you let Beggars' Banquet put it out as a box-set... would you consider doing some live shows?', which took me by surprise. I got on the phone to Ray, and we both thought, 'Fuck it... why not?' If there was ever gonna be a time to let the beast out of the cage again this had to be it!"

Even if their hearts were no longer in it when they split up in 1998, there was always a shared love of the music they were playing and listening to even at the very end, and this must surely bode well for the 2018 reunion. The current line-up of Thee Hypnotics features all four members of the last incarnation of the band that played that final gig at Shepherd's Bush Empire in October 1998. On bass is Jeremy Cottingham, who, when he first joined the band, had "almost identical musical references" according to Jones. Phil Smith is back on drums. But what has he been doing in the intervening years? Jones says, "He's kept his hand in, playing with British country/folk legends Alan Tyler and the Lost Sons of Littlefield, and cool super authentic ska band the Estimators." Having retrained as a teacher of film, Smith has also worked on documentaries for the BBC according to Jones, whilst Hanson is quick to add, "He's put a great amount of effort into making this documentary about us, with his passion for being a filmmaker/film editor... So that will be coming out, unfortunately not in the box-set, as we had planned, but certainly on the 'merch table' and newly set up website."

As it stands, tickets for the London and Brighton shows sold out within days of going on sale. Ray proudly says, "The response has been terrific! Hypnotics fans are very loyal and committed type of folk. We have always had the coolest audience, spiritually, soulfully" and then adds for good measure "... and they're a sexy looking bunch of motherfuckers too!" Jones, concurs, "Yeah, it's great!", before elaborating, "During my trav-



els with Black Moses, Jim Jones Revue, and The Righteous Mind, I'll often meet people who'll ask about Thee Hypnotics. They want to tell you about the times they saw you play, and changed their lives. Seriously, Thee Hypnotics meant a lot to the fans, many people have told me that's what inspired them to become musicians, so we were hopeful that a string of dates would be well received. It's looking good so far!"

More live club and festival dates are being added all the time, including one in Spain with the surviving members of their heroes MC5. Jones adds, "We're chatting with promoters about more in Europe, Norway, Croatia, and possibly something Stateside."

So, what can we expect from the re-energised 2018 version of Thee Hypnotics? Jim is careful not to reveal too much, "I won't ruin any surprises, but some cool guest appearances to look out for. We've begun rehearsals and started putting together a set list and, I'd like to say we're quietly confident, but it's as loud as fuck!" Hanson is guardedly optimistic, "... and things I always wanted to get back then, like horns... to compliment the mainly 'Soul, Glitter & Sin' tracks. Yeah... and the odd guest guitar and keys... I'm hoping for that anyway."

Apart from ongoing live dates this summer, the back catalogue box-set release, the "Lost 4th Hypnotics Unheard Tracks" album, and the aforementioned video documentary, are there any plans to make this a more permanent reunion, with new recordings? Jones is cautious in his response, "No plans as yet... it's a very delicate thing to do; record new material. Off the top of my head, I can't think of a band that's done a reunion LP that was anywhere as good as their original catalogue." Hanson, is equally circumspect, "Well, who knows? This is a 'window of action... who knows what the near or middle distance future holds?" Whatever the long-term future really does hold for Thee Hypnotics, some things are more certain perhaps – the ties that bind the pair.

Although Jim and Ray's paths took distinctly different directions following the demise of Thee Hypnotics in 1998, they never really lost touch with each other, even during Ray's "deep, dark, heavy times", as he puts it, throughout the "noughties". Ever since they met at school, they've always shared their love of music and various bands. Ray enthuses, "We talk for hours, inspiring each other... we still do and always have. Joined at the

hip at school and, I think, spiritually joined at the hip for eternity – that's life baby! We'll be talkin' to each other long after the shell that houses our souls has turned to bones and dust." Jim is just as impassioned when it comes to the subject of their friendship, "We're always on the phone shooting the shit about this or that... there's quite an intense bond there, it runs pretty deep. I suppose we'll be brothers to the end."

Getting back to the here and now though, and the important matter in hand. Both Jim and Ray are just looking forward to getting on with the reunion and taking it from there, "Thee Hypnotics has been chained up in the basement for a while... seems like the time is right for a bit of a run around the exercise yard". Ray concludes somewhat matter of factly, "It's unfinished business! Hopefully we can come full circle and cross the Is and dot the Ts [sic] on this bitchin' machine of a unit!"... and you can't say fairer than that. Keep rollin' on brothers! **VLR**

'Righteously Recharged' is out in April on Beggars Arkive
Thee Hypnotics tour the UK in April

★★★★★

"We'll be brothers to the end."
Jim Jones

★★★★★

