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GODS OF THE HAMMER

THE TEENAGE HEAD STORY

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first edition

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In memory of Francis Hannah Kerr,
a.k.a. Frankie Venom, 1956–2008.
Gravity never got the bastard.

Preface

At approximately two-thirty on the afternoon of June 2, 1980, Gordie Lewis stepped off the streetcar that delivered him closest to Ontario Place. It was a beautiful late-spring day in Toronto, with the kind of sunny vibe that might prompt Gord's old buddy Frank Kerr – more famously known as demonic monkey man Frankie Venom – to lead into a song with his best Linda Blair *Exorcist* impression: 'Nice day for a party, isn't it?'

It sure looked like there was a party in the making. As Lewis, his prized Les Paul Special in hand, made his way through the tidy provincial theme park toward the public amphitheatre where his band Teenage Head was performing free of charge that evening, he saw hundreds of kids. Several hundreds. Thousands maybe. It was like the teen version of that scene in *The Birds* where Rod Taylor and Tippi Hedren notice there aren't just hundreds of angry birds perched on wires from here to kingdom come – there are, like, *millions*.

But the show was hours away. Could all those kids actually be there to see the band Lewis had formed with his high school buddies Frankie, Steve Mahon and Nick Stipanitz back in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1975? And which had now spent nearly three years steadily gigging as part of the so-called punk scene in Toronto? True, by June 1980, Teenage Head finally had hit songs on the radio and an album called *Frantic City* that had gone platinum, but Gordie and the boys had never played to more than a few hundred people at once, tops.

Shit, he thought, maybe they *were* here to see Teenage Head, in which case it was going to be the biggest gig in the band's career. As another hard-rocking, Hamilton-minted Canadian band named Crowbar might have put it in one of their own songs: *Oh, what a feeling, what a rush!*

By the time that day ended, Teenage Head would be firmly installed as a local pop-culture phenomenon and Canada's most notorious rock act. Their biggest audience ever would be estimated to be in excess of 15,000 people. Far too many for the polite government-operated theme park to comfortably accommodate,

and enough to warrant the calling in of cops once the overflow of kids started tearing down fences, swimming from the shore to the island where the park sat, overturning police cruisers and generally engaging in what one newspaper would indelibly call a 'Punk Rock Riot.' Ontario Place would ban rock music from its premises for years after the Teenage Head show, and the hard-pop quartet would see its album sales jump stratospherically in the days following. They were the most exciting and well-known Canadian rock band of the day.

June 2, 1980: this was their day. It was the biggest show they'd ever put on, and it was also Teenage Head's peak. They'd never have an opportunity to draw a crowd like this again, never enjoy the same kind of album sales and radio exposure, and never again become front-page news. Instead, they'd soldier on toward long-term cult mythology, all the while hauling behind them the conspicuously tenacious reputation of being the best rock band this country had ever produced.

Introduction
The Endless Party

When I saw the 2013 version of Teenage Head play in Etobicoke, Ontario, on a hot July night, some thirty-five years had passed since I first fell in love with the band. Two things struck me: the songs that had first seized my devotion sounded as good as they ever did, and so did the band. I mention this because, as anyone who's fallen in young love with a band knows, time can be merciless. Sometimes the music isn't as good as it once seemed, and sometimes an older band just makes you feel old.

Teenage Head still rocks. By which I mean, practices that traditional form of guitar-drums-bass-vocal amplified noise delivery that hits, with irresistible precision, a primal place in your solar plexus and pleasure centres, and makes you want to jump around and holler for more. It's that simple, and that profound. If anything, Teenage Head rocks on record harder now than ever. Even their first album, once so widely denigrated by fans for its murky recording quality, now sounds like a certified punk-era classic. And live, they're still capable of sweetening and shredding your eardrums at the same time.

I've written this book to tell the story of the best rock band I ever saw, period. It was the band I saw more times than any other, the band that gave me more consistent and enduring pleasure than most, and the band whose almost-famous reputation sticks in my craw more than any other. While anyone who ever saw them, or anyone into punk rock in general or Canadian rock specifically, knows that Teenage Head had something rare and special and real, their rep remains largely the domain of cult enthusiasm and subcultural fascination. If it tends to bug the surviving members of Teenage Head that they've never been nominated for that dubious achievement the Canadian music industry calls a Juno Award, the same fact simply makes the award that much more dubious. Or maybe plain irrelevant.

Even though the band's outlaw legacy is perfectly legit as far as it goes, it doesn't go far enough. Teenage Head probably inspired more bands and instilled more insane devotion than any other

Teenage Head in full sonic flight.

band this country ever spawned, and the only thing they did wrong was to do it in the wrong country at the wrong time.

'There's definitely nobody in Canada that had more influence on the Doughboys than Teenage Head,' John Kastner tells me of his celebrated Montreal band. 'They had the best songs and they had one of the greatest frontmen of all time, combined with one of the greatest guitar players and greatest guitar sounds to ever be put on record. They're the Canadian Ramones.'

Moe Berg, songwriter and lead singer of Edmonton's The Pursuit of Happiness, tells me about an early-'90s New Year's Eve gig in Toronto where his band opened for Teenage Head. This despite the fact that by that time TPOH enjoyed a far more successful recording career than the Head. Their signature hit was a scorchingly sarcastic pop-punk anthem called 'I'm an Adult Now,' and it might have been transcendently coverable material for Teenage Head were it not for the fact that they hardly ever covered anybody else's songs – save those of such early-wave precursor punks as Eddie Cochran or Iggy Pop – and the sentiment was all wrong. As lead singer Frankie Venom scribbled in a notebook a few years before he died at fifty-one in 2008, 'I don't wanna grow up.' These were lyrics for a song Frankie never

finished, and they tell you something about what adulthood meant to Teenage Head.

'Moxy Früvous opened,' Berg says, 'and then it was us and then it was Teenage Head. We were pretty popular at the time and I said, "No matter how much popularity we got, we're still opening for Teenage Head." And I thought I'm completely fine with that. Give them their respect. They work hard for it. And I just remember writing on a piece of paper, "Fuck the Rest: Head's the Best," and I taped it do their dressing room door.'

As a teenager in Kingston, Hugh Dillon, future lead singer of the Headstones and movie and TV actor – his most famous role being that of the intensely Venomish aging punk Joe Dick in Bruce McDonald's 1996 punk-rock road-wreck movie *Hard Core Logo* – saw Teenage Head and heard the sound of his life falling into place. 'The impact the band had on some of these tough little Ontario towns was phenomenal,' Dillon tells me. 'It was liberating. They did something the Pistols or some more hardcore, more aggressive bands couldn't do, because they were so foreign and their message was so nihilistic you couldn't quite catch it. I'm sorry for the Monkees reference, but they were the stepping stone to everything. They changed the face of rock 'n' roll, opened the door to all the American bands, the Ramones and everything else. It was Teenage Head first and then I discovered everything else. I wouldn't be here without them, period.'

Bob Segarini, born in California but resident of Toronto by way of Montreal, has been in the music business since the 1960s. When he came to the city in the late 1970s, he was immediately alerted to a new scene emerging in the underground clubs around Queen West. Despite being older than most of the regulars at the gigs, he was a fixture. He can't remember the number of times he saw Teenage Head, and his band Segarini would eventually open for the Head at the notorious 'Punk Rock Riot' at Ontario Place. Over the years, he had seen and played with some of the most mythologized rock acts in history, and he believes Teenage Head was as good, and often better, than any of them.

'They were one of the few bands that took the stage with authority as opposed to hubris,' he says. 'They brought a sense of

professionalism. And of course Frankie was a firecracker. He did some pretty strange shit onstage that in some bands would look like a desperate attempt to get attention, but in this case, this is just what Frank did. Frank would just go over that line every single time they got onstage. And the great thing about the band was that they understood what was going on. They also understood their place in the scheme of things. And their place was to play really well.'

When *Perfect Youth*, Sam Sutherland's history of the birth of Canadian punk, was published in 2012, the book not only culminated with a chapter on the Head, it kicked it off with this: 'Teenage Head is the greatest Canadian rock and roll band.' Even though I wholeheartedly concur, I ask Sutherland to tell me why. 'Teenage Head start playing in 1975,' he says. 'They're playing at the same time that the Ramones start playing and they hit on the same really important ideas musically. They took what was great about '50s rock 'n' roll and played it louder and with a little bit more energy. It was an evolution in rock 'n' roll that I don't think '70s rock ever quite was. And so for that reason alone I think they belong with the Ramones in the upper echelon of punk respect.'

Sutherland also points out that the Head's distinctly Canadian earnestness put them in a different category. 'There was this trend in punk at the time where everybody had to cut their hair,' Sutherland says, 'and everybody had to dress a certain way. You had to have short, spiky hair and straight jeans. Teenage Head kept their hair long, they still had their flared jeans, and there was something truly honest about them that they expressed not just through their music but through the way they didn't change. They looked like these heshers from Hamilton, and when it stopped being trendy to look like a hesher from Hamilton, they refused to sell out that part of themselves because it was such an intrinsic part of their identity. Hamilton – 'the Hammer' – is different from Toronto and has its own traditions with blues and rock 'n' roll and King Biscuit Boy. That combination of a new sound and an original aesthetic birthed from something so completely honest is something you don't see very often in art. And there are few bands that reach that mantle.'

I don't think Colin Brunton would disagree, although he'd put it differently. Now a TV producer and filmmaker who began as a club bouncer and beer slinger in Toronto's brief punk heyday, he saw Teenage Head shortly after they first arrived in the city and played the Colonial Underground. And he saw them many, many times after that. When it came to making his epic subcultural Toronto music documentary *The Last Pogo Jumps Again* (2013), Brunton cast Teenage Head as the most consistent, professional and inspirational band on the scene. In a movie where every surviving veteran of the Toronto punk scene seems to nurture a still-festering resentment, no one speaks ill of Teenage Head. It's the one thing everybody in *Jumps Again* can agree on: Teenage Head were the balls-out, no-contest, we-are-not-worthy, unplug-and-go-home *best*. They were the ones who compelled all the others to be as good. But equally impressive to Brunton was the Head's utterly unfashionable indifference to fashion: they played because they liked playing, and could care less whether or not anybody thought they were authentically 'punk.' You could like them or fuck off. They were in it for the long haul, not the short burst. 'They're the Jack Nicholsons of punk,' Brunton tells me.

When Steven Leckie first saw Teenage Head, he was already notorious as Toronto's first fully formed punk iconoclast. He called himself Nazi Dog and his band the Viletones, and he had a vision that was based on music, fashion, shameless self-promotion and giddy, fuck-it-all disregard for anything status quo. He was Toronto's Johnny Rotten, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood all rolled into one skinny southern Ontario teenage package. When he first heard rumblings of the new noise rolling out from Hamilton, he waited like a home-turf street brawler for an opportunity to show these guys how it was done in *his* town. But when he actually saw them, he dropped the switchblade. Instead of defending his vision, he expanded it – it *had* to include Teenage Head. They had to be part of the gang.

'Wow,' Leckie remembers of that first encounter with Teenage Head in performance. '*That's* what you could put at a world level and say, "This is what this team is offering up, this city is offering up."'

As calculating a stylist as Leckie was, he'd never seen anything quite so perfect as the crew from the Hammer. 'I loved the name the second I heard it,' he tells me. Then he saw the band. Frankie knocked him sideways. And Gordie Lewis? Jesus. 'Man, I'll tell you. That stance that Gord had in his prime, from fucking head to toe. Man, oh man. Fucking spot on. Just a look you'd envy. I always loved a guitar player that didn't need to look at his fretboard all the time. He's just kinda looking down. Hair's perfect. He would have been a great add-on to the Ramones. I mean, he just fit that. As concise as Johnny.'

Tom Wilson, currently one of Hamilton's most prized musical progeny, and steeped in the tradition of Steeltown punk and attitude that Teenage Head forged, never misses a chance to pay due respect to the band that inspired him. He has performed with the band often, cites their influence devotedly and even wrote a song, 'Lean on Your Peers,' that includes these words about the long, dark shadow cast by Frankie Venom: 'I still remember the first time I saw him sing/Two black eyes, from a knuckle and a biker's ring/Climbing up the speakers/Hanging from the Bala rafters/Hamilton punk king swinging to his own disaster.'

After Frank's death, Wilson said this to Hamilton's *View* weekly: 'Nobody fills Frank's shoes. I watched more Gord Downies, Hugh Dillons and Tom Wilsons standing in front of the stage at Teenage Head shows learning to put heart into rock 'n' roll, and most of my career I've just tried to be as good as Frankie Venom on a bad night. He was the greatest rock 'n' roll singer I ever saw.'

As Gord Lewis has reminded me more than once, the same year the mob-stirring *Frantic City* went platinum and tore up Ontario Place, Canada's most celebrated recording artist was the soothing college-dorm acoustic troubadour Dan Hill. Teenage Head were called punk when the Canadian recording industry had no idea what to do with a punk band. As a result, the band suffered from too little exposure outside of the country and too constant bar-band exposure within. Their sublime skill at writing, recording and performing some of the catchiest, no-nonsense, two-point-five-minute pop-rock songs ranks with any of those bands they're

so constantly – and misleadingly – compared to: the Ramones, the Buzzcocks, the New York Dolls, the Flamin' Groovies or even Cheap Trick or the Clash. The shit they did was their own shit, and it deserves to be credited as the great shit it was.

It's a story that abounds with what-if scenarios, alternative might-have-been speculation and strikingly divergent interpretations of the same events. For instance, when one comes to the intersection where the four boys from Hamilton cross paths with the veteran music promoter Jack Morrow, the story takes on more perspectives than *Citizen Kane*, with the late Morrow being variously characterized as a genius, a crook, a visionary, a hustler, a one-man star-making machine and a southern Ontario Colonel Tom Parker. Some call Teenage Head one of the finest punk bands that ever plugged in, others insist they were punk only by circumstance and that the appellation itself thwarted the wider popularity they might otherwise have attained. Some say you can take the band out of Hamilton but not vice versa, while others see their appeal as a more universal form of pure rock 'n' roll mojo. You'll be told that Gord Lewis's near-fatal car accident in 1980 sunk any possibility the band ever had of breaking out, but you'll also be told that the man's sheer determination to get back up and out in front of the band again is proof Teenage Head simply *couldn't* be stopped. Then you get to the big-picture analysis, the retrospective musings on whether Teenage Head was an unfulfilled failure and victim of industry fumbling, or a resounding triumph, a band that transcended all that was stacked against it simply because they were too fucking good for any of that shit to stick.

But all you need to really do is listen to that first album again, or maybe listen to *Teenage Head with Marky Ramone*, a ferociously good re-recording of a lot of early tunes produced by Ramones studio vet Daniel Rey and released just a few months before lead singer Frankie Venom died. When I hear either recording, all questions of whether the band got big enough melt away. If they did this, if they leave *only* this, there will always be evidence that, once upon a time, Hamilton let some amazing noise loose in the world.