



## the truth about the truth about devolution

an Interview with Devo founder Bob Lewis by Rob Warnowski

*From the zine Wind-Up Butter Cow, 1995. Copyright Liz Clayton.*

Let me get one thing clear immediately: No single group of musicians or artists changed my life more completely than Devo. The fascination began when their 1978 television performance on Saturday Night Live leaked into my living room and all over my 11-year-old primate brain, where echoes of that impact resound to this day.

This rock band managed to, all at once, exhilarate and scare the living crap out of me. They began by showing a snippet of the Devo film "The Truth About De-Evolution." I will never forget that feeling of sheer terror at the unacknowledged, unexplained sight of Booji Boy loping up a fire escape to the General's conference table, set to the tortured groaning sounds of some flea-bitten Moog synth. The visual impact was akin to finding a cockroach in your salad, and it sounded like the credits / theme music for an elementary school educational film gone horribly wrong. I remember an overwhelming desire to turn on the lights in the dark living room when the band came on and stopped me in my tracks, blurring the most crawly, murderous sound I had ever heard. My neurons fired furiously, watching these nuclear technicians with guitars. Not a motion or sound wasted. It made sense. It meant everything. It was over too quickly.

The next Monday at school, I embarked on a journey of social devolution that continues today. New Wave, schmoo wave, the polarization was much simpler then: you either knew that "We're all Devo," or you didn't and kept on air-guitaring to Kiss courtesy of MusicRadio WLS. For me, key alliances with the few young primates who were similarly enlightened led naturally to fringe cultural exercises like punk rock, reading books, and personal computing.

As I became more involved in music and its making, I dropped the juvenile idea that Devo recorded their records in full suit, and thereby opened a whole new line of thinking: Devo was five guys. They were out there, somewhere, doing something at any given time. But what? They weren't Devo all their lives: what the HELL could they have been before? What in the world could they have seen that caused them to make this glorious din and gripping film work?

And, depressingly, as their recorded career progressed past the records "Freedom Of Choice" and "New Traditionalists", into the Dark Era of Plastic Synths, new questions arose. "Why are they beginning to suck?" "What happened to the guitars and drums?" Magazines were no help. Asking the spudboys themselves was a complete impossibility to me.

Skip forward more than a decade, past their ignominious breakup and ascendancy of Mark Mothersbaugh into megabuck film & TV scoring. Enter the Internet.

While hanging around on the Usenet newsgroup alt.fan.devo some months ago, I received an e-mail reply to one of my posts from a fellow with a username of "bobdevo." His reply seemed cogent and, well, knowing. Any spud worth his salt knows that there were two Bobs in Devo. Immediately, I regressed into a twelve-year-old. Could it be...? Is that...? Oh my GOD....

I calmed down and asked for some qualification, and received so much more than I could have hoped.

Bob Lewis is a 47-year-old entrepreneur based in Akron, OH. He is a business consultant and media developer. He's a scream. He's the unknown co-founder of Devo. I had found the missing Bob.

Spuds carefully examining their Devographies will note that the classic Devo song "Be Stiff" is credited to one B. Lewis, as well as are other songs on the Rykodisc "Hardcore Devo" selections of basement tapes and whatnot. He functioned as guitar player in the early days to Gerry Casale's bass anchor, and was the originator of the Devo concept in its anthropological context.

Bob's anonymity in the public story of Devo is in no way a result of lack of contribution; in fact, legal reasons connected directly to the great size of his contribution account for much of it. Silent all these years, Bob Lewis spins a tale of collaboration at Kent State University that reaches much farther back than any official Devography. He relates the origins and progression of Devo in a way somehow left unuttered by Mark or Gerry over the years. Manager, co-founder, guitarist, writer, armchair anthropologist...the story of



Devo is incomplete without his chapter. Hear now the Truth about the Truth about De-Evolution.

## The Beginning Was The End

The time: The late 1960's. The arena: Kent State University, soon-to-be target range for the Dick Nixon Precision Riflemen and campus creative hotbed for Bob Lewis and Gerry Casale, Devo's founding members.

*What were the first records you two ever bought that changed the way you did things?*

It had to have been "Charlie Brown," that's the first record I can think of that had an anti-establishment theme to it. Gerry was very much into blues and black music.

*What was Gerry doing musically at the time, at Kent?*

He was playing in a band called Haymarket Riot and wearing puffy sleeve shirts and a Prince Valiant haircut, doing the sensitive poet thing, because that is what the chicks dug at the time. There was a very big beatnik / straightfaced dichotomy at play in what we did from the beginning,

*Your major was Anthropology, and Gerry's was Art. What were your goals back then?*

Well, I wanted to go to Olduvai Gorge and dig up skulls. Gerry came at his Art major from a graphic design standpoint. He was very much into content, into meaning and message. For instance, he would attend art galleries and opening with a friend of his who would wear a rubber ape mask, a real garish thing. Gerry had this guy on a leash, literally. When they came to a piece that they liked, the guy in the mask would leap up and down. But if they didn't —

*Uh oh. The Poot Dance.*

Right, he'd dance the poot. You gotta dance the poot.

*[Note: The "Poot" is referenced in the central Devo anthem "Jocko Homo" cf. "Teachers and critics / All dance the Poot"]*

*Describe the Poot dance, using no more than three phrases.*

Uh, squatting, loping rondo.

*Describe the original meetings at Kent that was the genesis of Devo. Was it fairly common for Art guys to be mixing with Anthro guys? Seems very unlikely by today's standards.*

Yeah, there was a cafeteria in Kent where all the freak types went, there would usually be a small core of people there all the time, that's where we got together most of the time. You had a wide variety of people, most the first from their

families to be attending college...

*So the idea was a bunch of newly liberated kids on a campus, screwing off, across all kinds of lines..*

Yeah. You know, back then it was \$175 a quarter, gas was 20 cents a gallon and I had a couple of jobs where I was pulling in about \$150 a week. That was a shitload of money in those days, that was when there was all kinds of money in America. There was a lot of room to indulge, and a real anarchic atmosphere to indulge in.

*See, I was born two years after you got out of High School, and to me, the idea of a unified art group such as Devo today would be a little unlikely because so many students have to work like dogs at shitty jobs just to pay rent.*

Back then it was all different. It really was like a playground, prosperity was everywhere and prices were low. I don't think Devo could have come out of any other environment.

*What was the first project that you and Gerry worked together on?*

The Honors College at Kent had a literary publication called the Kent Quarterly, and in '69 or '70, they changed the name to "The Human Issue." We hated the name, but we did some art for the magazine. Gerry had a rubber stamp made, a graphic of missionary position sexual intercourse, the "fuck stamp." We made stickers, and stamped these on the magazine envelopes and customized them with dialog.

*That's pretty Devo. Or proto-Devo. When and how did the Anthropology / De-Evolution ideas get worked in to the aesthetic?*

That would have been in fall of '70, because there was a visiting professor from England at Kent named Eric Modrum.. He had some interesting leftist views on stuff, that prompted some discussion, and we then latched on to the joke concept of de-evolution. Of course, it has turned out to not be a joke, we have Clinton and Dole running for president today, I mean... The Devo philosophy was meant to be applied in the same way that deconstructionist theory is applied so that you could at create a Devo spin on whatever aesthetic, event, item, product happened to be in front of you.

*So it was expressed primarily in the form of these "college bull sessions" I keep hearing so much about.*

Yes.

*How did it become tangible?*

It was in the lyrics, the first crude recordings going back to '69. By '72, we were writing it down, treatises, manifestoes, etc. Musically, it was Gerry on bass, myself on slide guitar and a guy named Peter Greg on guitar. Around '70, we'd do primitive versions of "Automodown", "I Need A Chick", "I Been Refused", and "Beehive". There's an acetate somewhere of those sessions, I think Gerry has it.



*How did it become tangible?*

It was in the lyrics, the first crude recordings going back to '69. By '72, we were writing it down, treatises, manifestoes, etc. Musically, it was Gerry on bass, myself on slide guitar and a guy named Peter Greg on guitar. Around '70, we'd do primitive versions of "Automodown", "I Need A Chick", "I Been Refused", and "Beehive". There's an acetate somewhere of those sessions, I think Gerry has it. We'd record on an Teac 4-track, and this beatnik guy would run the gear.

*What was his reaction?*

Well, how excited did beatniks get about anything? Besides, we hadn't learned to improvise yet.

*How did the hippie/yippie brand of counterculture relate to the counterculture of Devo? Was Devo a reaction, a refining, what?*

Well, we were more of your Noam Chomsky / B.F. Skinner types, you know, "We're only smart monkeys, let's not get too snotty". Which had the ability to piss off the SDS and the Young Republicans equally. And we are. We're the smartest, meanest monkeys. The anthro ideas worked in to the art in that way, and it was universally unexpected by both mainstream and counterculture. Musically, we were reacting to the excesses of rock at the time, you know, Yes, Bachman Turner Overdrive... There was a kind of an advantage to applying the Devo philosophy to music. It could mask a myriad of musical inabilities, allowing us to say "we want it to sound that way". We liked Captain Beefheart, Robert Johnson, even Frank Zappa — but we wanted to be more subversive, we wanted to fool the audience into liking the music.

*I always got the feeling that Devo was built to appeal to the high-minded academic as well as Joe & Jane six-pack. Would you agree, and was this intentional?*

We wanted to go as high as we could, and fucking low as we possibly could. The lowest of the low.

*Were you intentionally building an art form with this odd idea of wide appeal for primarily commercial*



*reasons, or was it an aesthetic exercise first?*

It was an aesthetic exercise first that had built within it, the opportunity to create wealth. That wealth would be rolled back into the aesthetic, so it would be kind of self-perpetuating. Devo was a unified theory of art and commerce, and that's fairly clear to fans who paid any attention to the ideas that Devo presented.

*Would it be fair to say that the genesis of Devo would have to have occurred in an environment that fostered SDS and yippies as well, that it couldn't have existed without the presence of that counterculture?*

It would be hard to separate it out of the time amber in which we are imprisoned, but distrust of authority, distrust of common sense ideas about stuff, these were ideas rampant at the time there.

*Did Devo extend that distrust also to the left?*

We had an affection for them, but all of us perceived that bullshit rhetoric wasn't gonna get anything done. My impression was, if you wanna blow something up, hey, I'll drive, but please, no more meetings! Another way it affected the continuation of Devo was that had it not been for the shootings at Kent, it would have been debatable that Devo would have manifested itself, Gerry and I would have probably continued into Grad school...

*How did that affect Devo?*

Because I had never seen anyone get their head blown off before. It crystallized the sense that something was seriously wrong, and there was no simple fix, and the causes of the problem were extremely deep. We kept on because what we were saying only made more sense as time went on...

## **Popeye's Big Punch Knocks Bluto Cold — Gettin' that big ream, legal-style.**

Bob became the manager for Devo, occasionally filling in for Bob Casale on guitar through the 1970's. In 1974, he became Devo's full-time



manager. The De-evolutionary bios and manifestos and writing of the time is largely his, as is the vast majority of the effort expended in the documenting and fostering of Devo as a rock / art unit.

*After the recording of the Warner Brothers Debut album "Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!" in Berlin, the exposure of Gerry Casale to the starmaking machinery of Los Angeles resulted ultimately in the first major error of Devo's career as rockstars.*

During that period, I would be the point man with Stiff records (Devo's original label), find pressing plants, financing for the films and the singles, book the shows, all that. Warner Brothers had sued Virgin over the fact that Devo had basically signed two deals. Richard Branson (Virgin chief shark) had signed them, yet Warner Brothers had paid the six figure money for the recording of the *Are We Not Men?* Album. The suit ended up with Branson and Virgin taking the band's record in the UK and Japan, and Warner Brothers taking it in the US. Branson got 50% of all Devo music publishing in perpetuity for the pittance of \$70,000 up front.

*I had heard of a story where Branson had flown Mark and Bob Casale down to Jamaica or something during all of this, brought them into a boardroom, lit up a huge joint and said "Johnny Rotten has just left the Sex Pistols. We want him to sing for Devo." Did that really happen?*

Yeah.

*Man. Go on. How did you and Devo end up parting ways?*

I remember talking to Mark on the way back from the *Are We Not Men?* Sessions...On the way back we had set up a gig in London, where I delivered the final 10,000 singles on Stiff. On the way back from New York, listening to the way that Gerry was talking, the first I had seen him after the Berlin sessions, it was apparent that Gerry was acing me out. Warner Brothers had simply told Gerry that their manager was now Elliot Roberts. I talked to Mark about it, and he said that Gerry was the boss. It wasn't a high-pressure thing, it was just a quiet resignation on the rest of the band's part. Mark said "He's got to do what he has to do, and so do you."

*What did you plan to do? At what point did you believe that you had something to protect legally?*

Right away. I asked them to change the name of the band, to relinquish all of the intellectual property related to Devo. The General, the bios, manifestos, graphic design, philosophies, characters, even the Poot. Gerry wasn't interested. So, in the fall of 1978, I filed the lawsuit *Lewis v. Casale, Mothersbaugh, Mothersbaugh, Casale, Myers, Devo, Inc.* I sued them for theft of intellectual property.

We had some fine legal talent, and we could bitch-slap the LA lawyers with it, but the crushing blow was from a kid from Ohio. It had gotten around, only

locally that I was suing the band for theft of intellectual property, and I got a phone call from this guy who had been a kid in high school during one of Devo's very first performances at the Akron Art Festival. He interviewed Devo for his little magazine.

*Funny how familiar that sounds.*

He calls me up and says "I have a tape you might want to hear." So he comes in and it plays this kid asking Mark the question "So who thought up this whole De-Evolution thing?" And Mark says "This guy right here, Bob Lewis."

*Bailiff, clear the courtroom!*

When we played that in court, I could see the table where Gerry and the WB lawyers were sitting, I could see them sort of deflate. They settled immediately after that.

*What was the settlement amount?*

Ah, I'm not at liberty to divulge that.

*How about a ballpark? Five figures? Six? Seven?*

Into the six figures. And Warner Brothers of course told them "Don't worry, we'll pay it — you'll pay us back LATER." And of course they did. Unfortunately for Devo, and I take no personal pleasure from the whole episode, that really soured the whole relationship between the band and the label at the time, since it came right off the heels of the Virgin / WB lawsuit where Branson was such a shark. As a result of the whole mess, Devo never got pushed, never got the attention from the label that they deserved.

*How badly did this affect your relationships with the band?*

There was no animosity, but there were hurt feelings. It was bad for a few years, but we're all on friendly terms now. The Devo philosophy even affected that, since everybody knew that Gerry was just fulfilling his genetic destiny, to be a kind of weasel. He can't help it, and we all knew that. I'm friends with all of them today.

*I keep hearing that it's very hard to work with Gerry...*

Well, Mark was commissioned to be the frontman, it was thrust upon him, he didn't want to do it really. Gerry wanted to be the frontman, but he was commercially unacceptable in that role

*How do you mean?*

He couldn't...he couldn't restrain himself, he couldn't hide his disdain. Gerry is filled with anger about the stupidity he sees around him, and that wouldn't make for frontman material.



Were there settlement terms that had you promise to keep quiet about it?

Yes, I was not to divulge the true nature of the authorship of the intellectual property that comprised the Devo philosophy, so as not to damage the potential of the band or its career.

Well, it's out now, Bob. All over Wind-Up.

## Itchy Itchy Goo Got Me Thinkin' Of You - The Wrong Girlfriend Protocol and Devo

Let's talk about the post-settlement creative progression of Devo. What the hell happened to Devo's sound as they moved away from guitar-driven rock and into plastic synth dependence? Where did the guitars go?

What it boiled down to is that Gerry got pissed at Bob Mothersbaugh for dating and then impregnating and marrying a woman named Maria. [Bob and Maria are the parents of Alex Mothersbaugh, the blond-haired girl featured on the cover of the Shout! record. Cute kid, crummy record. — RJ] Around the time of Freedom of Choice, Gerry punished Bob, isolating him and making him obsolete, giving him fewer responsibilities. Of course, the guitars then had to be replaced with the keyboards, Gerry got into playing bass keys and he had his brother Bob doing them as well. What resulted were gloppy records like *Oh No!* and on, guitar-free and drum-free Devo. The problem is, all those synths had the same ranges. The earlier stuff, despite its poor recording is the most interesting.

Huh. The common answer for this from both Mark and Gerry over the years has been that Devo had done everything there was to do with guitars, that they were bored with them and had to move on. How do you reconcile that?

It's bullshit.

At what point do you believe Devo strayed the farthest from the musical or promotional ideals you had all created?

Probably the flowerpot hats on Merv Griffin. But even that period had its great advances. I remember Gerry hearing "My Sharona" by the Knack around that time and saying "We've gotta do something like that." What resulted was "Girl U Want."

[Shock, stunned silence, great appreciation of the genius of Devo. Go ahead, play em' back to back.]

Uh...wow.. What are your impressions about Lene Lovich covering "Be Stiff", and what are the implications of a woman singing the line "wet women waste your food?"

It was cute, I liked it. You know, Stiff Records put on a tour of bands that did nothing but play that song, so I was used to hearing a lot of different versions of it. A later girlfriend of Gerry, Toni Basil ["Oh Mickey, you're so fine" — MTV

70 \_\_\_\_\_

ed.] also put a version on one of her records, so now every quarter, I still get a couple of bucks.

As long as the fairer sex is on the table so to speak, give me your take on lines in your early work with Devo such as "Baby Talkin' Bitches", "I Need A Chick", "The Rope Song", "I Been Refused..."

Devo was actually a celebration of womanhood. Look, it is war out there. Women are to be respected and feared at the same time, and that is what we put forth in our lyrics. We were the only honest treatment of the gender relationship in rock music.

Who among you was the first to get laid as a direct result of Devo?

Gerry, 1978 at Max's Kansas City in New York.

Today's best rock such as Brainiac or Six Finger Satellite (also known as "panic rock", if the Wind-Up Editorial Phrase-Coining Machinery is to be trusted) owes a great debt to the continuum it occupies, a continuum that certainly has Devo in its first chapter. If this jaunt into De-evolution has piqued your interest, go hit the Web and consume as much information as you need from <http://www.escape.com/~drazz/devo-faq.htm>. Or, if you have the patience to suffer through a Usenet newsgroup, check out [alt.fan.devo](http://alt.fan.devo). There's sure to be a small resurgence of appreciation of the band and its art as they have just been booked to come out of retirement to play 6 dates of sets of older material on the West coast leg of Lollapalooza. Go ahead, because now, you know the Truth. >

Sing, Eunuchs! Records  
P.O. Box 31283  
Omaha NE 68131-0283

Simon Joyner Heaven's Gate LP/CD  
The Bruces Hialeah Pink LP  
Solid Jackson Solid Jackson  
Record LP  
Chris Yambor Tambourine CA  
Simon Joyner/Mountain Goats Why  
You All So Thief? 7"  
many, many more  
tapes \$3 LPs \$6 CDs \$11 7" \$3  
airmail-add \$3 (C&7") add \$5 (LP)

Please write for a complete catalog.  
Send checks to Sing, Eunuchs!  
Thanks.