

Thursday Confidential

The first time Betty Burke played the Thursday Confidential, all sorts of mayhem broke out. It was a crisp fall night, and we were warming up the crowd for our Blocks comrades Tomboyfriend. The drummer (Roland 880 beats trapped in an iPod) was chugging along relentlessly, and we were in the middle of a feverish testimony, when a man in a suit brought a round of drinks to the stage. We're not big drinkers, but we love free things, so it was appreciated. Tomboyfriend were also treated to a round.

As the girls were sipped, the man came to the front of the stage and shouted in my ear, "I'm a drummer. I play with Bruce Springsteen. I'm the guy they call when Max Weinberg can't make it."

[Pause.]
"What?"
"Let me get up on that kit."

[Pause.]
I looked over my shoulder at the iPod, which was keeping pretty good time. Since John Power left for Newfoundland, and Dana Snell isn't available (despite my persistence, roses, telegrams, etc.) the Roland 880 has been our little drummer, saving us a great deal of money. Drums are expensive to transport, and require a studio rental for rehearsals- important considerations in this age of austerity. Roland never makes mistakes, gets drunk, argues, or flirts with the wrong people. But I'm always waiting for lightning to strike and illuminate the gloomy night of everyday life. So I decided to put the unexpected offer from Max Weinberg's replacement in the hands of democracy.



"Dear audience, should we let this man get on the kit? He's never heard us play before, but our songs are pretty simple..."

The show of hands was nearly unanimous, so I let him up. As a precaution I kept Roland going, as a guide for Max Weinberg's replacement. We rolled into our easiest song.

But the replacement couldn't keep up. We tried to pass him a tambourine, not too much room for embarrassment there, but he insisted on sitting down at Tomboyfriend's kit, and stepping on the kick pedal. Now and then, as randomly as the brakes of a TTC bus, he stepped and didn't step, then double stepped. I tried to nod and hit my knee, pointing out the beat like an angry pedestrian pointing at a red light, well after the driver that speed through is gone. "Ok, thanks, ok that was fun, ok, bye-ee..." I tried to give him the Ottawa Valley heave-ho on the microphone but he wouldn't go. Sheila found him rather creepy, I just thought he was rude for not leaving when politely applauded away.

Tomboyfriend's actual drummer, Dan, owner of the kit, was at this point quite anxious and reasonably so. I called "How about a real drummer?" and waved him up. He rushed forth and played the Weinberg replacement off, with a nudge, a push, and a sit, the way one might chase a cat from a chair by slowly bending and descending with a look-back of menace, then switching to a full and sudden sit. The replacement came crashing forth between Jo and I, yelling, and knocking over the drinks he'd bought us. His musky waft mixed with the sweet smell of booze, and his odor clung lingered with sweaty face at the edge of the stage. "You're terrible! You'll never learn to play!" (His words.)

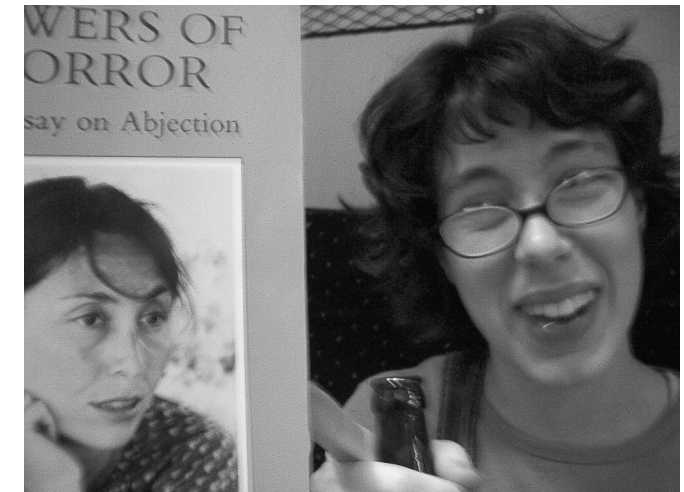
Dan picked up Roland's beat and we all went in for the last number. I was feeling rather awkward about letting the replacement sit at Dan's kit, a remarkable lapse in etiquette on my part. Meanwhile, the replacement retreated to the bar to write us a filthy note on the back of the receipt for the rounds he'd bought and spilled, and another suited stranger waltzed forth, chest forward, asking, "ladies, is everything alright?"

Actually, everything was great. I apologized to Dan profusely, who was good humored about the whole episode, and Jo, Sheila and I marvelled at the Weinberg replacement's booze-reciprocity poetry. The editorial committee chose to reject his submission to the journal of Betty Burke studies, but we remember his antics well, at the Gladstone Hotel. He was infamous, though his name was unknown to us.

Once the musk wafted off into the night, Tomboyfriend took the stage, dressed in fall foliage. Actual foliage.

The Thursday Confidential is full of surprises.

WERS OF HORROR



EPITHALAMIUM

On the weekend before the Blocks Recording Club reunion-destruction party, I found myself, along with several of the old gang, at the Garrison on Dundas St., for a show by Khaela Maricich and Melissa Dyme, a.k.a. the Blow.

One of my best memories of the "Torontoia" period was the Blow show, back when Khaela played solo, in which she "married Toronto." What made the joke powerful (= not a joke) was not only that we collectively loved this woman from Portland back, but that we all likewise wanted to marry Toronto. (Even if we agreed with the Hidden Cameras on banning marriage.) We wanted to sodomize each other with the CN Tower and to cook, clean, breed/adopt, mostly though far from exclusively in some non-corporal manner, to intermingle messily with friends, strangers, artworks, buildings that had always been canyons (viz Les Mouches). To mangle a line from an old Montreal bastard, Toronto was ugly so it had the music.

This was the violent love song we were singing every day at shows and on message boards and blogs. I graffiti'd it up most days on my site Zolius, in alt-weeklies and at disc-packaging parties and on midnight voyages to inhale toxic waste. The workers' co-operative model for Blocks was one of the few ways that marriage was ever formalized, which allowed it to become one of the few that outlasted the Torontoian-honeymoon phase of the mid-2000s in some variation on intact.

In retrospect that period appears at once like a temporary autonomous zone and like a phase of urban capital development that we mistook for its opposite. It was the devil-may-care overture to the funeral march for class diversity in the megacity. Perhaps this is a commonplace experience; it may be how the downtown New York scene of the late-70s-early-80s came to feel, for instance. But it's not commonplace when it's your own.



For a minute, Toronto had the Barcelona Pavilion and the Cinecycle TORONTO IS THE BEST! day concert; now Toronto has Drake and the OVO fest. Not that you can reduce the Drake phenomenon itself solely to money — no doubt it'll be more significant than Blocks or, say, David Miller's mayoralty to the self-conception of the big inebriated whole — but it conforms to the new Toronto rate: Everything is done to condo-tower scale. Pay your maintenance fees or move along.

Then, Owen released the first Final Fantasy record and went on tour with the Arcade Fire and suddenly all the cracks in the system burst wide open. Although relatively modest compared to the music industry at large, we had



The Rob Ford era was a largely successful proxy war against the Toronto we were trying to sing into being, on behalf of the fee takers — its foot soldiers, the inner-suburban voters in particular, were willing to be conscripted in part because we never sang to them, only each to each, like Prufrock's mermaids or at least like Patricia Rozema's. That's one of the blunders we have to own up to.

Creating community isn't done with a crane, one big pull and then it's up. It's as much like an optical illusion as it is like architecture. Close your eyes and it vanishes; stare hard and it shimmers into existence again, or does it? I was among those whose eyes wandered. Our community fractured the way scenes do, to dodge the maintenance fees but also some of the emotional levies. Of course it didn't expire. Some people are doing that work in new ways and some in similar ways (Wavelength, Doubly Double Land), and my temptation to declare it truly over is the worst impulse of nostalgia — to murder the thing you love so you can indulge in mourning it. I know. But in my own symbolic timeline, I do feel Blocks' shutdown is the signature on divorce papers we've been stashing in a desk drawer because we couldn't bear to look at them. And just as it did in my human-to-human marriage, the moment makes me cry.

At the Blow show at the Garrison last week, our collective ex Khaela did not do her usual previous thing, which was to sing songs overtop of programmed beats, songs so catchy and charming you could crumple, enhanced by her extraordinary between-song charisma as host, asking tricky questions and spinning crazy-wisdom monologues out of the humidity of the room. This, in 2015, was the Blow "unplugged." Which meant that between songs she and Melissa laboured over banks of kvetching uncooperative analog synthesizers, passing (hah) plugs and cards back and forth. And whether playing or setting up, their eyes were locked in on one another. As if the songs were for one another, would be sounding whether or not there were an audience. I don't think Khaela spoke at all until two-thirds through.

This show wasn't asking us to like it, and plenty didn't (Canadian Music Week biz types were gabbing so loud, it was as if they were staging a protest). But it kept taking place unrelentingly in front of us, making us witness. Perhaps, I thought, this is what you do when there isn't a community to be playfully expansive with. You get serious, small, stubbornly intimate. It's hard to be married to a city, just as it's difficult to be married to a human, and (as many of us learned) it's near impossible to be married to both and to mean it. In mourning our mass marriage, I remember that we meant it, despite the flaws of our own under-acknowledged economy of cultural capital. That's what I took away.

The Blow was enacting how much these two people meant it, as an end in itself but also an act of preservation, keeping capacity up for the next time it might be needed. The ceremonial aspect of all performance: This is ours but it can be yours. Like tending to a natural water system year by year whether or not anyone is currently drinking or bathing from it. You probably don't even know what creatures are depending on it. You wouldn't want to see what would happen without it.

I asked Khaela about this in some shorthand version at the bar after the show and she said, yes, right, that's part of it. ...

Guys, she said yes! Again. And I say so, too. I'll keep over on my last sore impromptu knee for every godforsaken one of you. To the last brick, the last block.

— Carl Wilson



Mark McLean and I started the Blocks Recording Club in 2003. Our original intention was to issue records only on mini-CDs, a format that we both admired for being something like a digital 7" record. Both of us were in bands that played short, choppy songs and short choppy sets — my thought was that an actual full LP of material from us would probably be unpleasant, whereas a short record would be just about right. It seemed like a smart format to me: it took up no unnecessary space, it was easy to transport on tour, it had none of the physical drawbacks of conventional, jewel-case packaged CDs and giant, cumbersome LPs. Back in the early 2000s, no one could have predicted just how obsolete the mini-cd would become. Predicting the future was never a Blocks Recording Club strong point.

The other idea Mark and I had for Blocks was that each of the mini CDs would be luxuriously packaged. There was, at the time, lots of weird CD packaging going around. One band I saw taped their CD-r to a plastic faux-metal drinks tray with a construction paper drawing taped to the other side. Bahal Cassette stuck a CD-r in the business end of a toilet plunger. The first actual Blocks release was the second Barcelona Pavilion mini-CD *It's the Barcelona Pavilion!* (Blocks 004) originally packaged in screen-printed drafting vellum with a blue card inserted inside so that it could hold its shape once it was taped together. After the seal on the release was broken, the packaging sprang open like a reverse-man-trap and was very very difficult for people to put back together.

In 2004 The Barcelona Pavilion went on tour to Europe, where we were also recorded for John Peel's radio show. We got all our friends to help us fold all the CDs we hoped to sell there, as well as t-shirts bearing our MIT Press inspired band logo before we left. Within a few days of arriving in Europe and touring by mass transit (as none of us could drive) we managed to lose something like 1/2 of our merch in some train-train station or port or other. We fought with each other like caged animals and I often felt like strange alien garbage abandoned on earth. When I came home I threw my energy into Blocks because I was tired of fighting my band friends. For his part, Mark seemed to have an endless appetite for fighting with his bandmates and focused more on touring and recording with the Sick Lipsick.



Around this time Lisa Graham started working with me at Blocks, just as Mark began to fade out his involvement and eventually moved to Ottawa. Lisa is an amazing book and paper ephemera artist and her interest in Blocks centred on crafting handmade packaging. She sewed the air mail envelopes together that we made the first Blanket EP out of and we demoe'd different paper folding package designs together — it was fun. Working together, Lisa and I put out lots of things: Bob Wiseman, the Hank Collective, Ninja High School, The Creeping Nobodies, The Diskettes and Lenin i Shumov for example.

Weirdly, people noticed: things were selling modestly, the national media reviewed our concerts and recordings, the then-innovative open format DJ parties of that era were playing our songs — we were doing just great. But now there was too much money coming in than could be dealt with by me alone. I worried that in confusion I would simply misplace money that wasn't mine. I worried that I'd get hung up to dry come the next tax season, I worried and worried.

Then, Owen released the first Final Fantasy record and went on tour with the Arcade Fire and suddenly all the cracks in the system burst wide open. Although relatively modest compared to the music industry at large, we had



never encountered demand for any of our records like we did for that first Final Fantasy record. The original packaging for Final Fantasy "Has A Good Home" was hand-folded and had a large collage insert that Owen made. We had to keep shipping CDs to Owen on tour as he kept selling out of them. No one else involved with Blocks had been able to sell anywhere near as many records so quickly. I realized that we couldn't possibly hope to keep folding these things as fast as these people wanted to buy them. We gave in and got the packaging mass-produced. Around this time Lisa faded out her involvement, mass-producing things meant that there were fewer interesting craft problems to solve.

To try and cut off our organizational problems as they were starting to overcome us, I decided to incorporate Blocks legally as a workers' co-op. The idea that our DIY label was for-musicians-by-musicians was written into the bylaws of the co-op and it became impossible for a professional manager to be appointed. There would, for better or worse, be no middle-men at Blocks.



So now Blocks was run by a board of directors, elected by the members, the bands who worked with Blocks. In my dreams, incorporating as a co-op would create a new kind of solidarity between us cultural workers and workers in all kinds of other sectors. I imagined us banking at a Credit Union, supporting our local community — not some faceless financial giant. I dreamt we would be an organization similar to some biodynamic farms and bicycle shops — instead of just using money as a way of supporting our artists we could maybe arrange through solidarity with fellow co-ops to make our lives as creative people cheaper and easier. In other words, instead of subsidizing there would be fellowship and exchange, and actual co-operation between musicians and non-musicians. In practice, although the co-op secretariat of Ontario would let us sign up and incorporate as a co-op, that was about all the fellowship that we got. For a few thousand dollars we could send board members to a co-op retreat where we maybe could have forged some of those alliances, but we frankly didn't have a few thousand dollars hanging around the office to spare on sending me and James Anderson on a retreat. Our local credit union didn't want to give us a bank account at all so we had to go to the largest, most ethically terrifying Canadian bank instead.

This all happened in 2005. I served two years as official board president of Blocks before stepping down in mid-2007. If I say so myself, we were much better prepared to handle Owen's "Piss Clouds," which sold way more copies than his first solo record, but we weren't prepared for the rising sense of entitlement in ourselves. Suddenly, we all believed that we could do what Owen had just done. I think this was a mistake. That there was a large audience for Owen's solo music didn't even translate to interest in Owen's previous band Les Mouches. Every mall or shop across Canada could indeed stock our records, now generally packaged in more generic sleeves to help our distributors out (who had always been bummed out by our weirder packaging and mini-cds), but what good did it do when those records just sat there on the shelf gathering dust? So, who were we changing our packaging and run-sizes to appease, our distributors or our newly inflated egos? For the most part our distributors now no longer even exist, but the boxes of unsold distributor-ready material does.

Terrified of myself, that I was becoming a middle-man, I joined lots and lots of bands, Jon-Rae and the River, Lenin i Shumov, Ninja High School, Heart Murrur, Napkin, some bands I was only in for a week or two...I was unable to leave good things alone. Maybe I didn't trust others to do a good job without me? Probably I was just afraid of missing something amazing happening and felt like the best way to not miss out was to actually be everywhere. I tried to use excessive praxis as a way to wash away all my fear of turning into one of the weird middle-aged Canadian Music Industry Vampires (CMIVs) that I was starting to be introduced to now that Blocks was "a real record label."

At some point it was clear that I was spreading myself too thin. I was cracking up, spending most of my time helping people make their work, playing drums in bands, putting out records, not at all clear what my own goals for my own projects were. Then I read this in Adorno's essay "Resignation":

Pseudo-activity is allied with pseudo-reality in the design of a subjective position; an activity that over-plays itself and fires itself up for the sake of its own publicity without admitting to what degree it is acting as a substitute for satisfaction, thus elevating itself to an end in itself. [...]

Generally speaking, pseudo-activity is the attempt to preserve enclaves of immediacy in the midst of a thoroughly mediated and obdurate society. [...] The unfortunate model for pseudo-activity is the "do-it-yourself" syndrome — activity that does that which has long been done better through the means of industrial production and which arouse in unfree individuals, hampered in their spontaneity, the confident feeling that they are of central concern. [...]

The society that confronts human beings in such an impenetrable manner is these humans themselves. Confidence in the limited action of small groups is reminiscent of the spontaneity which atrophies beneath the encrusted totality and without which this totality cannot be transformed into something different.

As a person who was spending his time not quite-mass-producing little plastic blobs that, for the most part, remained mostly unsold on a shelf in an office in the Annex, the questions raised in the essay triggered a total crisis in me. I quit most of the bands I was in, with the exception of my solo effort The Blanket, and once I finished my second term as president I scaled back my involvement with Blocks. While it was still going to do good and useful work for other people, I had too much trouble trying to answer for my own behaviour to steer the ship. I tried to grapple with those questions through the only Blanket LP, "Negatively Negative," but by the time the board at Blocks had the time and money available to release it, it had been finished for almost two years and I had moved on to grad school in California and had almost no time in my life to do music.

With these kinds of democratic systems sometimes things like this happen. That sounds like more of a downer than it really was, I'm glad I started Blocks with Mark. I'm glad that the questions Blocks raised remain unanswered. I'm glad it let me and my friends do so many things and go to so many places that we would never have made it to on our own. I'm glad to say that the friends I made and worked with then are still, for the most part, friends now. I'm glad Blocks continued to be active long after I was not involved, that it lasted longer without me than it did with me, and that there are releases in progress that I have absolutely no idea about. New people made new decisions and I have no information about how those decisions got made, the co-op functioned under several different groups of people and that's a testament to the strengths of the co-operative model. Even as the dissolution of the co-op as people drift away, after their hands broke up or their life priorities changed seems to argue against it: the material still stands. It, however painfully, exists on earth. For good or ill we tried and did some things. Thank you for reading this final Blocks Recording Club object.

— Steve Kado



With photos by: Kevin Parnell, Steph Matthews, David Waldman, Dennis Amos and Steve Kado



What We Talk About When We Talk About Blocks

What did I learn from my time with Blocks? I learned about the lily.



Some mind-photos in no particular order

Seeing Barcelona Pavilion at Cinecycle with Ben standing still with laptop while Maggie and Steve showed their natural fireworks, so beautiful.

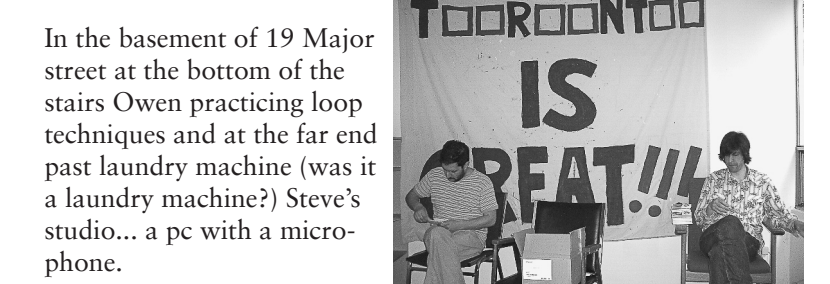
A Blocks organizing meeting at Christie Pitts in the summertime. Everyone under the canopy, maybe it was raining?

Realizing The Blanket plays unplugged electric bass.

Steve telling me about Katie Stelmans.

The crazy library show in North York and the double electrical whammy of Matt Collins and Steve Kado...and Matt's tiger(?) outfit.

Steve walking with a checkered scarf through falling snow outside the still unfinished renovations for the Gladstone. Telling him I heard he started a label and asking if I might be Blocks-worthy. "Yes!" he answered.



In the basement of 19 Major street at the bottom of the stairs Owen practicing loop techniques and at the far end past laundry machine (was it a laundry machine?) Steve's studio... a pc with a microphone.

The fun of being in a room with Brian Joseph Davis anytime.

Collaborating with mad genius Darren O'Donnell and teaching 12 yr. old kids at Parkdale Public School to play along to music by Kids On Tv, The Phenomenes and me one memorable night at the Gladstone.

Steve telling me I should tour America w Owen.

Meeting Simone and Ian of \$100 and discussing working with them.

Owen paying for my flight to join him in Seattle to start the tour, wondering if he realizes nobody else in the world would pay for the flight of the opening act to join them.

We board members nicknaming Brian Joseph Davis The Tone for his narrative style that encapsulated what we agreed was the right feel about Blocks in a one sheet to radio or journalists.

Getting to know Tammy and Adam at Samo.

Joining the Tranzac board of directors to secure Blocks amazing low rent downtown office space.

The mystical double sided industrial tape gun used for assembly of cds and records.

— Bob Wiseman



In my experience it wasn't just the co-operative model that made Blocks Recording Club distinct, it was the way queer community was interwoven into the culture. When I reflect on what the label was and how it contrasted to what else was happening in the country, it is the queer ethos embedded in the collaboration that attracted me. Artists ranging from Owen Pallett, Katie Stelmans, HANK, The Pining, The Torrent, and others, produced wildly different music but shared a home at Blocks. As a member of the "apocalyptically gay" band Kids on TV and a board member of Blocks Recording Club, I have been involved with the co-op since 2004. Firstly, through the Toronto is Great compilation, which released 36 Pills — a song dealing with HIV medication. It was incredibly exciting to record that song with Steve Kado and be included in a release alongside so many emerging artists in Toronto. As a go-go dancer at Will Munro's Vase-line parties, I witnessed a queering of the music scene in Toronto. It appeared that generally the indie music scene in the city was pretty heteronormative until the early 2000's. The scene evolved so that seeing a queer artist at Wavelength and a bunch of straight kids rocking out was common. Blocks brought together so many queers and helped them be their authentic selves, have a voice, and be able to support each other's creative efforts. Torontoia to me was feeling safe from homophobia, not feeling token in my identity, and feeling inspired by the creative brilliance of the artists in Toronto.

That long-lost box has recently resurfaced. Hopefully copies of *I Pity da Fool* will be available at the Blocks May 9th 2015 show. If not contact me and I'll get you a copy if any are left.

— Matias Rozenberg



The evening ended with Charlie and his dad playing pool and cracking jokes til 4 in the morning.

I gave Steve Kado the box of remaining hand-crafted cds and hung up my hat.

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Q7

That actually happened to Blocks once. I won't say which album we were losing a dollar a copy on because of its packaging — and that is way more than 5 pence — but in general it was my job to come up with a production budget to try to make sure things like that didn't happen.

When we were prepping the last two Final Fantasy EPs, John Caffery and I were going over printing estimates when I saw an item: "metallic ink/label/\$75."

I questioned whether the albums really needed metallic ink on the center labels. In my mind I thought that it broke some kind of design law against excess and, frankly, it was 75 bucks we didn't have. Instead of articulating it that well I dropped the dumbest cliché I could: "Isn't adding metallic ink just gilding the lily?"

John looked at me with some severity. If he wore glasses he would have taken them off. He replied, "Why not gild the lily?"

That was the end of the metallic ink discussion and I learned a lesson I've taken with me everywhere in life after Blocks: Gild the lily. Gild the goddamn lily!

— Brian Joseph Davis



THE RISE AND FALL OF FRANK FB A

I met 16 year-old Chris Wright sometime around the early-mid 2000's. He had read about my cassette label, Consumption Records, in Alexandra Molotkova's zine and wanted me to release some music recorded on boom-box by him and his little brother, Charlie, who would have been around 10 years old at the time.

Consumption Records was a label that released music that was originally recorded by people without the intention of playing it for an audience. The music was then dubbed onto recycled tapes, packaged in recycled materials like cardboard and old housepaint and bartered in exchange for art-related challenges, not for money.

Chris played me their boombox recordings and I was floored! We agreed to release the Frankster tape.

I met Charlie and he was down with the plan. I also met Chris and Charlie's mom, to get her blessing and to minimize any questioning on her end about why a 30-year-old man wanted to spend so much time with her young children. Me and her got along fine and she offered to do my astrology chart. I took this as a compliment, but also suspected it may have been a sort of "background check."

Anyhow, parody record contracts were drawn up and signed. Charlie, who was about 12 at the time, wanted to give me some comic books as a sign of appreciation for releasing his music. I was like, "Thanks so much, but I can't take your comic books."

We agreed a fair price for the tape was "a drawing of the band in mutated form," as Consumption Records did not exchange music for money.

We released the Frankster tape and they started playing shows, quickly adding 2 members, Nick and Andrew, on guitar and drums. Explosive, chaotic punk rock shows happened: rabbit costumes, Charlie covered head-to-toe in gift-wrap, jumping, falling, screaming, etc. Drawings of the band as mutants began to pile up sky high! Along the way, I had become their manager, booking shows and so on, though in retrospect, Chris was always the manager, I just helped the cause.

It was decided we should make a CD and sell it for money. This was partly because of their success, and partly because I felt like I was exploiting child labour, as I got to keep all the drawings of the band in mutant form. Also, the hand-made tape art took way too long to make and we couldn't keep up with demand.

We recorded a couple songs with the full band on 8-track reel-to-reel tape. These songs, along with selections from *Frankster*, became early versions of *I Pity da Fool*.

Charlie began making some mad loonies!

A decision was made to make a better version and really go big with this! Steve Kado was a fan and agreed to release it through Blocks. Leon Taheny, Blocks' go-to engineer, hopped on board to remix and master a definitive version. Contacts in London England regarding distribution were cemented. I had a meeting with Don from Constellation Records to learn me something about promoting a CD, like as in, "for realz." Not just for drawings and toe nail clippings.

On the evening of the CD release show, the audience and I were treated to not only a dynamite show, but also to the surprise announcement that the band was breaking up, effective immediately.

The show was recorded live and a CD was released that very night at the end of the show. So theoretically, some people got to hear them quit show-biz twice in one night.



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