

# Jeff Smith

## TEXAS STALWART HICKOID ROCK N ROLLER

Jeff, as leader of the legendary Hickoids, what is the quintessential song for new listeners and how would you describe the band in three words?

“Brand New Way” would probably be the most emblematic song. Describe the band in three words? That’s tough. We aspire to be “Tasty but Tasteless.”

Could you tell us about the common link between cross-dressing, Texas blues, and punk rock debauchery?

That would be Gary Floyd and the Dicks. Gary Floyd is, of course, the openly gay lead singer of the Dicks. The Dicks were the first punk band to really incorporate blues into their sound and in that respect are every bit as legitimate a blues artist as Howlin’ Wolf or Muddy Waters in my opinion. To seem them in the early 80’s was a spiritual experience. But Gary would also wear dresses occasionally when they performed and they had some songs with a more comical side such as “Young Boys’ Feet”. And there was debauchery happening before, during and after their shows.

With the incredible new Hickoids album *Kicking It With the Twits*, the band covers British artists ranging from the Damned to Elton John in way that pulverizes the originals. What is the concept behind the album and why do female listeners in Long Beach love the remakes in your opinion?

When Davy and I reformed the band in the middle of the last decade we were trying, maybe too hard, to write songs. We had some hits along with a lot of misses. We wanted to remain true to the band’s identity but not give in to the temptation to go for the cheap shots. We were also attempting to do this sober simultaneously for the first time ever. We probably wrote 20 or 25 songs, the majority of which just didn’t seem to work for whatever reason. We recorded an album’s worth of stuff for an album called “Hairy Chafin’ Ape Suit”...I was riddled with a lot of self-doubt and actually cancelled the order after I had already mailed it off to the manufacturer. So, we ended up releasing about half of it on a limited CD-R called the “Hairy Chafin’ EP” --just to let our hardcore fans know that we had actually been working on something for three years.

But, I was confident in the fact that we had put a good band together and were playing better than we ever did back in the day. And I had been ruminating on this idea of how rock’n’roll has been kicked back and forth across the Atlantic between Americans and Brits since its’ inception, each building upon the thing by turns. So I felt that maybe doing an album of covers that I knew we would be proud of for an official release might be the best way forward. Davy and I picked out the tunes in about 10 or 15 minutes, we did two one hour rehearsals and it was wham, bam, thank you ma’am. Our cover of “Bennie & The Jets” has gotten way more airplay than anything in the band’s catalog.

Any woman with the gift of hearing can recognize that while “Kicking It With The Twits” may not be as polished and sexy as say, one of Rod Stewart’s mid-period albums, there is something very randy going on there and it might have the aurally equivalent appeal of watching a car crash.

I was first introduced to the genre of "cowpunk" in Junior High in the 80's with Hell Comes to Your House II record. Do you feel your music and projects fall into this category; do you not care for it?

I love "Hell Comes To Your House" (Vol.1), it's probably my favorite of the early 80's American samplers and I bought it when it first came out. Every band on there had their own sound and a nefarious yet playful quality (excepting the goofy but brilliant Red Cross track). It seemed evil in the way "War Pigs" did to me when I was 10 or 11, when played on the heavy metal station in San Antonio. But of course by this time I was enough of a student of rock'n'roll to realize they weren't all sacrificing babies, but maybe a few of them were considering it. I still have my original beat to shit copy. I don't think I ever had a copy of Volume 2.

In terms of my music and the stuff I put out, I guess some of it fits in the cowpunk category. Unfortunately that term has come to be identified with psychobilly, which can occasionally be good, but seems to be dominated by three piece bands with chain wallets, tattoos, high hair, upright basses and very little musical or lyrical imagination. I really consider the stuff I work with nowadays to be "Southern Garage"--meaning it has punk energy and attitude but usually incorporates one or more styles associated with the Southern US. (blues, conjunto, country, etc.)



What is the most OBSCENE and OUTRAGEOUS rock n' roll story you have through your years of traveling the alleyways and swamps of America.

Well, I've actually been sober for a decade now so I've got nothing new for you. This guy contacted me a couple of years, an agent in New York who handles "Dexter" and Rosie Perez. He tells me how he and his wife met at one of our shows in Pittsburgh in the 80's and there was all this drunkenness and blood and how he wants to come to follow us around and make a documentary about us. I had to write him back and say that's very flattering but it's not going to be too exciting.

Anyway, you might like this:

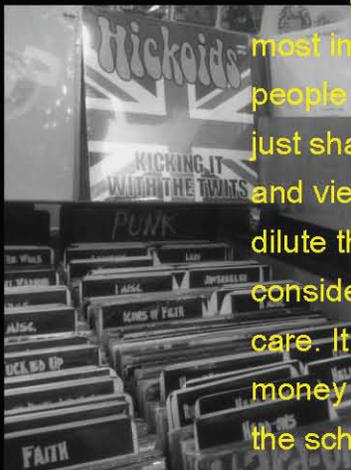
We were staying with some new friends in San Francisco sometime in the late 80's...I became very friendly with a couple of the girls in the house. So, after we'd been getting busy for the better part of a week, one morning while everyone else is asleep, I go out on the stoop, sitting there writing a postcard to someone back home. One of the girls walks out and her jaw just drops as she sees me writing this postcard. I could tell by the look on her face that she thought I was illiterate so I just kind of nonchalantly offered "Yeah, I can read some too..." She was stammering "I...I....I'm sorry". Apparently she did not discriminate based on any reading tests, or at least failing one wouldn't rule out the possibility and might actually have helped one hop into bed with her.

But it's funny to me because although that was by far the most mundane of our interactions it was also the most obscene and emotional in some respects.

SO--that's how we did back in the day. Get drunk, kiss the girls and then get the boot when they figured out we was playing dumb.

As owner of Saustex records and a prolific catalogue of self and co-released material and vinyl, what advice do you have for young bands just starting out?

Well, I'm probably not the go to guy if you're asking about "making it". First and most importantly, in absence of making a decent living at it, have fun. There are more people than ever who "want to have a career in music", but I think the majority of them just share our culture's fascination and preoccupation with instant gratification and fame and view playing music as a quick and cheap ticket to that end. Unfortunately, they dilute the pool for the folks who really would like to have a career in music for what I consider the right reasons. I don't know anything about today's pop music and I don't care. It all seems very soulless and vapid to me. The folks I do know who have made money all have impeccable work ethics and usually have had to make sacrifices to meet the scheduling demands that are required to play original music for a living. You have to get in the van and go. It shows people in the business that you are self-reliant, have a



## How has the digital revolution changed the face of music and promotion in your opinion?

I guess most importantly it has made it so that anyone, anywhere on the planet can take your music for free if they want it. We're coming into the second generation of music fans who have never had to pay for recorded music. I tell people who are disheartened by their sales figures that if people only like you they will take your music. They have to fucking love you to pay for it.

In terms of promotion, some things are easier. But the barriers to entry have become non-existent or so low that you are competing with 100,000 brands of crap. What would you do if walked into a store to buy beer and there were literally 100,000 brands of beer with their own lighted displays screaming for attention? Some people would take it as an opportunity of discovery, others would simply shut down because of the overwhelming nature of it, and I think the majority would ask the stock boy "where's the Budweiser?", grab a six pack and get the hell out of there. My point is that people gravitate to the familiar. It is very hard to get a new band to the point of being familiar now so it is mostly accomplished via the sonic cheat of co-opting the musical elements, tones and timbres of others so that it seems familiar. That's not Brian Wilson...it's some kid from Iowa who lives in Brooklyn who's working with a Mellotron and a good producer.

I'm not bitter and I'm not giving up, it's the way things are. It's just a matter of adapting and making it work for you.

But, you are asking a guy who has a dinosaur on his logo.

*Thanks Jeff, can't wait to hear what you have planned next!*

- K.M

