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Interview with Don Was

Total Music: Can you recall what prompted you and David to begin making music together, and how the original ZE Records deal came about?

Don Was: “As adolescents, David and I would drive aimlessly around Detroit trying to pick-up girls but to be honest, we rarely scored and would vent our frustration by going back to David's basement, smoking a lot of pot, grabbing some instruments and turning the tape recorder on. Short of getting laid - which seemed out of the question at that point - writing and recording music was the coolest thing we could think of to do. Jump ahead fifteen years, we were both married with kids and living a couple thousand miles apart but would still get together to record. During one session in 1980, we stumbled on ‘Wheel Me Out’ and knew instantly that we’d landed on something radical, it was a clean amalgamation of our Detroit musical roots: jazz trumpeter Marcus Belgrave and MC5 guitarist Wayne Kramer wailing over a deep R&B dance groove and some beat poetry, there was nothing like it at the time. I'd been listening to a lot of stuff coming out on the ZE Records label - James White & The Blacks, material, Kid Creole – and it seemed like a good home for us. David was working as a jazz critic for the now-defunct Los Angeles Herald Examiner so we hatched a devious plan whereby he would call up Michael Zilkha (head of ZE) under the pretence of interviewing him for the paper. At some point in the conversation, David digressed and said ‘there's this great band from Detroit that you've gotta hear called Was (Not Was)’, he got Michael very excited and then 'arranged' for me to call him later. So we basically scammed our way into our first record deal. Fortunately Michael loved the record and became our Medici. Without him, we'd still be back in Michigan performing at the piano bar of some shitty Holiday Inn”

Total Music: How did Harry Bowens and Sweet Pea Atkinson, become involved? And were they ever concerned about the strange roads you were taking them down?

Don Was: “Sweet Pea was working on the assembly line at the Chrysler-Jefferson plant in Detroit, he'd augment his income with a little pimping and some singing - he led a Dells-style vocal group that would appear at UAW halls on the weekends. His band would rehearse next to the studio I worked in and one night I came out of the dark control room and saw this guy dressed to the nines in an orange fedora with matching shirt, jacket, pants, socks and handkerchief, I was kinda stoned and thought he was made of fire! we became friends and made a few dance records together (they never were

released). A few years later, we asked him to sing on the first Was (Not Was) album and David and I put the lyrics of ‘Out Come The Freaks’ in front of him: ‘Like Little Michael on his motorcycle, with leather pants and a leather brain, he ain't never been the same since Vietnam’, Sweet Pea was not impressed and never made it past the ‘leather brain’ line. ‘I ain't singing this shit’ he said and he walked out [and] then he drove away in his pimped-out 1974 Lincoln Continental. So we called another old friend, Sir Harry, to come down and sing the song - Harry had a gig touring with the O'Jays, playing piano, doubling the vocals onstage and carrying their suits to the shows – and he came to the studio at 3am, his first vocal pass is the one on the record, it took about seven minutes. Looking back on it, being forced to share the stage with Harry has been the bane of Sweet Pea's existence since that fateful night almost 30 years ago. I'm sure he's re-lived the ‘Out Come the Freaks’ incident many times in his head, each time envisioning what life would be like if he would've just sung the fucking line about the leather brain without getting so cranky. Neither singer has subsequently refused to sing a David Was lyric but it's not unusual to see them silently shaking their heads in the studio as they read over the lyric sheet. In fact, if we can't draw some kind of cynical reaction out of them, the song probably sucks. In addition to being two of the finest singers in the world, they also serve as our surrealism barometers.”

Total Music: Was (Not Was) lyrics have often had a distinct ‘socio-political’ edge to them, you often drape quite biting lyrical comments in an upbeat danceable cloak, is this a deliberate attempt to sugar-coat the message – or slip it through without people noticing immediately?

Don Was: “We were raised in a time when lyrics transcended fashion and became important sociological markers. You didn't just *listen* to ‘Street Fighting Man’, ‘Almost Cut My Hair’, ‘It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)’ or ‘Kick Out The Jams’, you tried to *live* those songs! As such, David and I were always kinda squeamish about writing mere exhortations to ‘get up and boogie’. It was not only trite, it was socially irresponsible. I had an English professor in 1970 who instilled the notion that, by definition, art was political. But by 1980, the social landscape had changed and people didn't wanna hear heavy stuff anymore. Where did we belong in a world where everybody wanted to go to studio 54 and dance to ‘Copacabana’? So we came up with a very deliberate plan to ‘Trojan horse’ a subversive message by cloaking it in an irresistible dance groove. Of course we veered from the plan almost immediately but there are palpable artefacts of revolutionary zeal that still permeate the funk.....”

Total Music: Equally there is a strong seam of absurd humour running through your work, but very few people (yourselves, Frank Zappa and Tom Waits spring to mind), handle humour in music very well, why is it so hard to get that balance right do you feel?

Don Was: “Music performs a very primal function in the human psyche. It helps us identify who we are in ways that transcend the limits of conversational language. It's very important to people, if an artist doesn't take their music seriously, how can you expect the

audience to? Movies are different, Robert DeNiro can go from young Don Corleone to 'Meet the Fockers' and everyone still loves him, he's an *actor*. But a musician had better be for real all the time, acting is not tolerated. We have a song called 'Earth To Doris' on the *What Up Dog* album, [and] there are many lines that might make you laugh but, as goofy as it is I don't think anyone doubts that we lived that song, everything in those lyrics happened to us in real life and the song rings true on a subliminal level. David's vocal rings true. I think that David and I - and Harry and Sweet Pea, for that matter - have been very straightforward and consistent in our sensibilities over a 30 year span, hopefully our world view has expanded but, at any given moment, you knew exactly who we were. Same with Zappa and Tom. We're not joking around. We're not comedians. The guys who recorded 'Disco Duck' or 'They're Coming to Take Me Away' are comedians. They may land a few punches but they will not be standing at the end of the 15th round."

Total Music: You're obviously generous collaborators, given the who's who of people that crop up on your albums, is this collaboration an integral part of Was (Not Was), and do you always have specific vocalists or players in mind for specific songs (for example what would you ask Wayne Kramer to play rather than Val McCallum)?

Don Was: "One of the benefits of playing with the same cats for 30 years is that you eventually start writing with them in mind, you become like Duke Ellington and his band - he and Billy Strayhorn wrote lines that lend themselves to Johnny Hodges' phrasing and tone. One of the things that makes 'Boo!' our best album to date is that, over the last sixteen years, we've learned to write lines that the guys can sing, we know when they have to take a breath, we know what consonants will roll off their tongues gracefully. We were unaware of that shit when we started out and, when I listen to our old records, I can hear Harry and Sweet Pea rushing to squeeze all the lyrics into a tight space. I didn't give 'em enough room to fully express themselves. That familiarity extends to the musicians. I knew that 'Semi Interesting Week' was a song for Wayne Kramer before we finished writing it. I didn't know exactly what he would play but knew his sensibilities would suit the song. So we tapered the music for Wayne's style as we were writing it, the whole middle instrumental section was placed in there as a custom-made vehicle for Wayne long before we even picked up the phone and asked him to come over to the studio. If he would've been unavailable for six months, we'd have held the song till he was ready to play."

Total Music: Was (Not Was) have always been impossible to classify musically, do you think this affected your sales in a business obsessed by slotting music into genres to facilitate sales?

Don Was: "People don't pay any attention to categories anyway, that stuff's only important to guys who have to organize record stores or lists on EBay. People either like a song or they don't. I've always been very pleased by our record sales, I still can't believe that so many people have gone out of their way to hear our music. Going on a 16 year

hiatus? Now *that's* something counter-productive to building an audience. Being impossible to classify has been one of our greatest accomplishments!”

Total Music: Steve Winwood’s song ‘Spy In The House Of Love’ had some remarkable similarities to your own, what are your thoughts on the whole borrowing/sampling debate?

Don Was: “Well, first off, if you listen to the opening line of ‘Walk The Dinosaur’, which I wrote, you may notice that it's almost note-for-note the same melody as Steve's song ‘Pearly Queen’ from the second Traffic album. Winwood's such a lovely guy, [and] even though I've hung out with him a dozen times. he's never even mentioned it to me, he never complained, never sued. He understood that songs get lodged in your subconscious and ideas get unintentionally recycled. There's no dignity, honour or satisfaction in plagiarizing someone else's song. I would never do it intentionally, neither would Steve Winwood and neither would any of the artists I admire, how could you fucking live with yourself? In the larger picture, there is some question in my mind about whether these songs we write ever really belong to us, they ultimately belong to the listener who attaches his own projections and meaning to them. I'm not all that comfortable with this notion of 'intellectual property' to begin with, there's an unsavoury amount of ego behind that concept. Songs pass through us and we just kinda pass the music along to listeners, that's one reason why I'm not comfortable with the notion of record companies suing music fans over peer-to-peer file sharing, the hypocrisy of these corporations is laughable. Record companies have been stealing from artists since Edison invented the phonograph! I mean, these guys have made ripping-off artist royalties a legitimate means of doing business, they have no moral leg to stand on. Where was the fucking RIAA when Frankie Lymon was getting ripped-off ? Why is a 13 year old kid who downloads a song for free any worse than a record company that refuses to honestly account to an artist?”

Total Music: It’s been a long time since the last Was (Not Was) album, but you have obviously been very busy (and very successful), so what was the impetus for you and David to go back into the studio and record again?

Don Was: “We never really stopped recording, well, there was a six year period where we didn't really hang out but, aside from that, we've always had something cooking. The difference this year has been that, after a long period of time, we're signed to a record company again and they gave us a deadline. We were adding new tracks right up until the album was mastered. In fact, we wrote and recorded ‘Your Luck Won't Last’ *after* the album was mastered! We had to go back, drop a song from the sequence and re-master. Finally the folks at Rykodisc said ‘it's being released April 8th, you're done January 8th!’. without that, we'd be messing with it for another sixteen years.”

Total Music: Kris Kristofferson sounds like he had a lot of fun on ‘Green Pills In The Dresser’, care to tell us what the hell it’s about?

Don Was: “Well, as you seem to have discerned, we weren't necessarily in our right minds that evening. It wasn't a 'bring the family' type of session! Kris recorded his vocal to a sparse track of acoustic guitar and stampede sound effects - David wrote the lyrics in about twenty minutes - the title is based around a post-it note that his mother had stuck on a kitchen cabinet decades earlier: ‘green pills (are) in the dresser... I'll be back at 5’ or something along those lines. We forgot about the song for a number of years and then stumbled upon it in our tape locker about six months ago, when we played the finished version for Kris, he had absolutely no recollection of the session or the song. It's pretty cool though, isn't it?”

Total Music: Your production career has been enormously successful, as has your work on film soundtracks, what would you say were the particular high and low points of your career to date?

Don Was: “There are a number of high points. Playing onstage with the Rolling Stones at the Paris Olympia in '95 was pretty cool. Playing bass behind Bob Dylan and Willie Nelson on ‘Poncho And Lefty’ at Willie's 60th birthday show was a trip! They sang the fuck outta that one - the video of the show is floating around the internet somewhere. I really enjoyed playing ‘God Only Knows’ with Brian Wilson when he sat in with Was (Not Was) earlier this year at the Orpheum Theatre in LA. you play that song and your spirit elevates [and] to do it *with* the guy who actually wrote the song is such a thrill! I've known Brian for 20 years and have never seen him in such a happy, enthusiastic mood, it made me cry. I dug being onstage with Springsteen doing ‘The Times They Are A-Changin’” when Bob received the Kennedy Centre Honours award, Dylan was seated next to the President of the United States and most of the elected officials in the US government were in the audience, when Bruce got to the ‘come senators, congressmen please heed the call’ line, I got really emotional, it was as if, for one fleeting moment, the good guys had won the revolution! Of course, in retrospect, it was just an illusion, a TV show. Two years later, Bush was President and the whole ship of state went down the sewer, but it was quite a moment! I could go on and on, it's been a charmed life. Low points? I don't know, Was (Not Was) performing on the club MTV tour all summer in 1990 with Milli Vanilli, Paula Abdul and Tone Loc? We were the only band who played live and, as such, we died onstage every night in front of 18,000 bored fourteen year olds. I remember being in the basement of a hockey arena in mobile Alabama *begging* our agent to get us off the tour, he was lucky that the Was Brothers are a couple of old school peaceniks, a slightly less conscientious band would've slit his fucking throat that night!”