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Edgy music gives Akron fringe status

By David Giffels

When the body of Robert Quine was discovered last weekend in his New York City apartment, he became the first of a puzzling subgeneration of Akron-born artists to pass into the great beyond.

At 61, he was the elder statesman of an absurdly brilliant bunch, all born roughly between 1945 and 1950, who collectively represent the city's most noteworthy contributions to art and pop culture.

Most of their eventual obituaries will include the adjectives that apply to Quine: iconoclastic, adventurous and influential.

In music, there are the Mothersbaugh and Casale brothers, who formed Devo and now make soundtracks and commercials. There is Tin Huey, which spewed out the solo career of horn player Ralph Carney and Chris Butler's band the Waitresses. There is Chrissie Hynde, a virtual lock for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

In film, there's Jim Jarmusch, the grittily independent director, beloved by critics, the darling of Cannes and Sundance, forever flirting at the edges of the mainstream.

In comics, there's Paul Mavrides, co-author of the underground Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, and yet another whose influence is more notable than his popular success.

In literature, there's Rita Dove, the Pulitzer Prize winner and two-time U.S. poet laureate, whose more refined tone may place her in a different aesthetic category, but who (like Hynde) has passed blithely through glass ceilings -- iconoclastic, adventurous and influential.

Quine, like his Akron contemporaries, played mostly at the fringes, and the fringes loved him, all spirit and technique chopped up with bursts of belligerence.

Almost always a sideman, the guitarist fit right into Tom Waits' cast of carnival freaks and Lou Reed's downtown Bohemianism. He gave a raw edge to the lush power pop of Matthew Sweet's early albums, careening meanwhile through the avant garde of Brian Eno and John Zorn.

The first album he played on, Richard Hell and the Voidoids' *Blank Generation*, was one of the first albums I owned, and *the* first record that challenged how I listened to music. Though raw and honest, it was misidentified as punk rock, too sophisticated and artful. Quine was like a musical tailgater with Tourette's syndrome, constantly bumping the Voidoids' course beyond simple progressions.

As I studied the photo collage on the inner sleeve, it was clear that the man playing those cracked solos had to be the one with the beard and the monkish bald head, the black sunglasses and the impossibly rumpled shirt -- the guy who didn't seem to fit. I was right. Quine once described his look as ``a deranged insurance salesman," a surprisingly self-aware statement for such a nonchalant character.

It's telling that Quine, Jarmusch and Carney were embraced by Tom Waits, one of the few true inventors in America's contemporary musical idiom. Waits is notoriously choosy with his collaborators, and yet he settled on three from Akron. Carney was Waits' horn player for years. Quine played on his landmark *Rain Dogs* album. And Jarmusch has cast the musician in many of his films, including the just-

released *Coffee and Cigarettes*.

You might think this came about because of small-town networking. But that's not the case. Instead, it seems, there is something in their DNA that made them all so successfully adventurous, so aesthetically consistent, even as they worked independently from one another.

Most of these people have been asked how Akron influenced their approach to art, and most have given good answers. The yellow air and carbon black ``snow" produced by the tire factories; the factories themselves, once described by Devo's Gerald Casale as ``an art-directed backdrop for this kind of music we were making." It could've been the science fiction of airships lolling in the skies, or the kitsch of bowling culture.

For a long time, I have believed that the prime mover was Ghoulardi, an equally cracked performer whose local, late-night horror movie show captured the minds of these artists in the early 1960s, squarely amid their coming of age. Most of them have cited him as a key influence, for his irreverence, his oddball tastes and his improvisational genius.

Jarmusch, in a San Francisco Chronicle interview published the day after Quine's body was discovered, talked about Ghoulardi, but he also broadened the explanation.

``I think what unites us Akronites is we don't take ourselves too seriously," he said. ``Oscar Wilde once said, `Life is far too important to be taken seriously,' and it's a philosophy I quite agree with."

After we learned of Quine's death this week, I asked Harvey Gold of Tin Huey these same questions, and he gave an answer surprisingly consistent with that of Jarmusch: ``OK, here's the real truth. (Stuff) like this happens when those that participate believe that there won't be any real consequences. This inspires the attitude, this inspires the act."

The Akron that mothered their invention *was* a place without consequences. Hardly anyone was peeking into their basements and garages. That may not explain it completely, but it did create elbow room. They all started flailing away, and only Quine has stopped.

David Giffels' column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. He can be reached at 330-996-3572 or at dgiffels@thebeaconjournal.com.