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Intelligencer

Delicate Rage

Richard Hell remembers Robert Quine, the funny, angry, brilliant guitarist who played for him in the Voidoids.

By Richard Hell

Rock-and-roll cognoscenti and Robert Quine's friends were angry and torn up last week to hear that on Saturday, June 5, his body had been discovered in his loft on Grand Street, a suicide. Quine never injected drugs, but this was an injection and one containing way too many bags of heroin to have been accidental. By his own avowal, he'd survived a similar try this past winter. He didn't want to live after the completely unexpected death by heart attack of his wife, Alice, last August. They'd been together since the mid-seventies.

I won't presume to try to analyze the factors contributing to his ceaseless, abysmal despair of recent months, but he'd never been exactly a cheerful person, though he was always one who had something really funny to say. In fact, if you're not crying, it's hard to think of him without smiling. Or possibly you could do both at once. Then again, he also had a talent for provoking anger, and he was an angry person himself. It contributed to his magnificent guitar playing.

Like Miles Davis and Lou Reed—probably the two instrumentalists he most admired—Quine brought new ways of playing to improvised music. Quine had many influences, and he loved perpetuating them (all of his friends have compilation tapes made for them from his gigantic record collection), but anyone who cares can recognize one of his solos immediately, and even those who don't care are likely to perk up when exposed to what he'd wring from a guitar for the 20 or 30 seconds of one of his perfectly structured but outrageously wild expositions in the middle of a song by Reed or me (or Tom Waits, Lloyd Cole, Matthew Sweet, or John Zorn). His command of technique came from endless hours of studying the records that moved him—but it was the combination of rage and delicacy, and the pure monstrosity of invention, that set him apart.


Quine grew up in a fairly privileged family in Akron, Ohio. His uncle was the Harvard philosopher W. V. Quine. Bob himself had passed the bar in Missouri, though he never practiced law. He also attended the Berklee school of music. Part of his legend was that, though a member of one of the first "punk" bands, the Voidoids, in 1976, he was already 33 when the band began, and he dressed like an office clerk in jeans, innocuous sport coat, and open-collared button-down shirt. Underneath, though, was the connoisseur of moronic rapture who thrived on such material as the Blue Echoes' "Cool Guitar," Ronnie Speeks and the Elrods doing "What Is Your Technique," Al Sweat's "I Hate Myself," Jimmy Copeland's "Satellite Rock," and Floyd Mack's "I Like to Go."

He was still playing guitar for hours every day, alone, up to the end. All his friends wanted to help and called him often and got him out to eat, but he couldn't stop crying. He would tell you how he'd gotten the crying down to two hours a day from four. He was still almost always funny, though. Ivan Julian, who played with him in the Voidoids, told me about a wisecrack Quine made when they went out to eat recently. When the check came, Ivan reached for it, but Bob snatched it away, snarling, "No, I got it. It's my way of saying good-bye."



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