

## I-94 BAR

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Marcia Resnick  
photo

# NOISE ANNOYS: GUITAR ADVENTURES WITH ROBERT QUINE

A handful of songs into just one album, and Robert Quine had staked a claim as one of the most distinctive guitar sounds on the New York punk scene. Quine was part of that small but influential coterie of musicians, artists-turned-musicians and assorted dilettantes that populated a seedy ex-biker bar called "CBGB and OMFUG" at 315 The Bowery, on the Big Apple's seamy Lower East Side. He was the principal guitarist in Richard Hell and the Voidoids, a unique quartet spitting out some of the New Wave's most disturbing music.

The Voidoids were, by all accounts, a confronting and ferocious live experience - the officially-released live tape "Funhunt" confirms as much. As the singer and bass player, Hell's quavering yelp, intense presence and wired stage antics were in sharp contrast to Quine, the epitome of cool in shades and sports coat, a seemingly ever-present cigarette dangling from his mouth. Working alongside underrated guitarist Ivan Julian and drummer Marc Bell (later to rise to fame as Marky Ramone), Quine's sometimes melodic, often jarring, lines gave flight to the embittered, poetic lyrics of songs like "Love Comes in Spurts" and the anthemic "Blank Generation". Tours of the UK followed as punk - in Europe at least - became a commodity.

They were lucrative times for some but not the Voidoids who dissolved in a sea of industry indifference and disinterest on the part of their singer, by then a captive of other distractions. A 1982 reformation album was well received but Quine was moving into other areas. Critically-acclaimed solo work provided some satisfaction but it was an invitation from Lou Reed to join his band that occupied this hard-core Velvet Underground fan for the next five years. Quine became an integral part of Reed's recording and, eventually, touring bands. His work on Reed's 1982 effort, "The Blue Mask", a return to form after a run of indifferently-received albums, was masterful. The set contained not a wasted note and the critics proclaimed that Lou was back as a guitar player, swapping leads and relishing the presence of a duelling partner. The relationship, however, soured after the less intense, low-key "Legendary Hearts" album where Quine's presence in the mix was minimal.. Briefly an equal, he had become a sideman but stuck in there as a member of Reed's touring bands. He was missing from the studio line-up for "New Sensations".

The ensuing decade was a busy time. Quine worked with Lloyd Cole and Hell, with the latter as a contributor to the Dim Stars project (with two members of Sonic Youth.) Playing with Matthew Sweet on a string of studio albums introduced this talented guitarist to a new generation, especially as the "Girlfriend" album was a breakthrough of sorts.

Robert Quine's been low profile in recent years but we were delighted to host him over a bourbon or two in the I-94 Bar recently, to talk about Bowery days, guitar greats, his time with Lou Reed and his plans for the future (which include a reformation of the Voidoids for a song to be available on the Net.) He spoke to [Ken Shimamoto](#) (with some background mutterings by [The Barman](#), who was serving them drinks.)

Our thanks to Alice Sherman for being Robert's designated driver on the Information Superhighway, and Michael Carlucci of [Subterranean Records](#).

I-94: When and how did you start playing guitar? Are you self-taught?

RQ: I got my first guitar in 1958—an Orpheum F-Hole. I'd always loved the sound of the guitar, long before rock & roll emerged. My immediate motive was chord stuff, like the riffs on Everly Brothers songs like "Bye, Bye Love" and "Wake Up Little Susie." But the few guitar teachers I tried—they basically knew nothing about rock & roll, and they certainly despised it. So that was a dead-end street, and I just gave up the guitar for a year. Back then very few people played the guitar, but in the fall of 1958 "Tom Dooley" by the Kingston Trio came out, and suddenly a lot of people I knew owned a guitar. They showed me usable chords and progressions—E, A, B7; C, Am, F, G—which was about all you needed back then—at least for rock & roll. Then I began to be able to play along with my favourite records, and that was it. Since then, that's the only way I've learned. I've never liked sitting down with the guitar by myself. It always has to be playing with records: sometimes trying to steal licks, sometimes just jamming with the recordings. The three Ritchie Valens albums kept me going for about three years. By then I was ready to pick up whatever—Link Wray, the Ventures, etc. And that's the way it's been ever since. I can't read music aside from chord charts.

#### **I-94: Who were your formative guitar inspirations/influences?**

RQ: My influences were all the great players from the late '50s and the late '60s. There are too many to list, but I'll narrow it down to 10:

(1) **Chuck Berry**— No explanation necessary!

(2) **Ritchie Valens**—A total genius. Rene Hall did a lot of the solos on his records, and his stuff is great. But Ritchie's solos influenced me more. Some highlights are "Fast Freight," "Big Baby Blues," "From Beyond," and "Boney Maronie." And despite what you may have read, Ritchie definitely did the solo on "La Bamba."

(3) **Link Wray**— "Rumble" was a revolutionary record in every way. The stuff he recorded for *Epic* (1959-'62) is classic. The CD "Walkin' With Link" covers this period.

(4) **Mickey Baker** — Best known for Mickey & Sylvia, but everything he did from '52 to '62 (when he moved to Paris) is classic. He's one of those players with a "touch"—one note and you know who it is.

(5) **James Burton** —Certainly he's well known enough, but he's been pigeonholed more than he deserves. Yeah, he does the chicken-pickin' thing, etc. But there's so much more. That's him on the original version of "Suzie-Q," at the ripe old age of 15. "Genius" is a much overused word, but it certainly is warranted in his case. The Ricky Nelson stuff ('58-to '68) alone is worthy of endless study. A not too well-known classic of this period is "Stop Sneakin' Around" ('62). His tone, authority, harmonic conception on this track alone makes him immortal. Another classic is "I'm Feelin' Sorry" ('58). His understatement and maturity on this track is astounding. I've taken what I could from him, but it's "difficult," to say the least, to really nail his stuff; you have to take into account his unique picking style (flat pick plus two finger picks) and his insanely light string gauges. And that's just the beginning.

(6) **Roy Buchanan** — He was a very big influence, long before I ever knew his name. His first recording was "My Babe" by Dale Hawkins in 1958, which was the year I bought it. But it took me 14 years to figure out it was Buchanan on it! A really big influence on me was an instrumental: "Potato Peeler" by Bobby Gregg and His Friends ('62). I bought it when it came out but had no idea who the guitar player was until the early '70s. By '62 he was in his early 20s, and his style was completely developed.

(7) **Jimmy Reed** —Not too much to say here: you either dig him or you don't. Certainly, he could never be accused of "virtuosity." But his approach is subtle in some way, and his "attitude" is beyond reproach.

(8) **Albert King** —Again, there it is: you can take it or leave it—I'll take it. "King of the Blues Guitar" (*Atlantic*) and "Years Gone By" (*Stax*) are his ultimate statements.

(9) **Jeff Beck** —His Yardbirds stuff and his first two solo albums ("Truth" and "Beck-ola") are my favourite things of his. The virtuosity is there, but there's a healthy dose of dementia happening. The album cover of "Having A Rave Up" was the reason I got a Telecaster in 1968.

(10) **Harvey Mandel** —He's not a total obscurity, but he's tragically underrated. He's alive and well, playing better than ever, but I doubt that he's a millionaire. In the late '60s I knew that I had to advance my playing—particularly in the areas of string-bending and left-hand vibrato—and to that end I focused a lot on Albert King and Harvey Mandel. One particular aspect of Mandel's approach that fascinated me was his concept of sustain. He has always been somewhat secretive about what "gadgets" he used. But I would guess he was having his amps customised with a built-in compressor as early as '68. A good example of this sound is "The Snake" from around '72 (Janus)—total sustain, but clean sustain.

I'll stop with these 10, but there are hundreds more, from Hendrix to the totally obscure Kenny Paulsen ("Tallahassee Lassie").

#### **I-94: When you saw the Velvet Underground in the late '60s, what was your impression of them? Did they influence or affect your musical approach in any way?**

RQ: By the time I saw the Velvet Underground in 1969, I was already totally influenced by their albums. But seeing them live was inspiring. I had moved to San Francisco that year, and in November they played there several weeks. Fame-wise, they were hardly on a Stones/Beatles level. That's unfortunate, but it made it not so difficult to meet them, hang around with them, etc. They were relatively happy, getting along well. And Lou Reed was going through an especially creative period. He was writing a lot of new songs, including "Sweet Jane," "New Age," and "Ride Into the Sun." Each night he'd improvise new lyrics, on the spot! And best of all, I got to spend a lot of time talking about music (influences, new directions, etc.) with Lou Reed. I went to all the performances and taped them on my cassette recorder. Between sets, I'd hang around with them in the dressing room, sometimes playing them cassettes of stuff they'd done that night. It was a real privilege—something I'll never forget.

#### **I-94: How'd you wind up in NYC in the early '70s?**

RQ: I went to law school in Missouri, and passed the Bar exam there in '69. Then I moved to San Francisco—a real mistake. I failed the California Bar exam several times. San Francisco was a beautiful city, but I just didn't fit in there in any way. So after about two years I decided to move to New York. The way I looked at it was, "maybe I won't fit in in New York, but it can't be worse than San Francisco."

**I-94: As someone who was a participant in the NY "scene," what did you think of "Please Kill Me"?**

RQ: Once you accept the fact that it's not really concerned with the music, "Please Kill Me" is an excellent book, an excellent history of the "scene." Obviously, I was aware of the "sleaze" factor at the time, but I was still shocked when I read the book.

**I-94: Was Peter Laughner in your orbit of acquaintances in those days?**

RQ: I met Peter Laughner a few times in 1976, but he was quite hostile to me, so I didn't pursue it. I was disappointed because I was from Akron, and when I used to visit my parents in the early '70s I would see a lot of his writing in local music papers, and we shared a lot of the same opinions. But people that knew him told me not to take his hostility too personally. I guess he desperately wanted to be a part of the New York music scene and wouldn't have minded being a Voidoid. Too bad. He obviously was very intelligent and talented and could have contributed a lot more if he'd been given a little more time.

**I-94: You were familiar with Richard Hell's Television/Heartbreakers work when he first approached you about making a band. What did you expect, going into a band with Richard?**

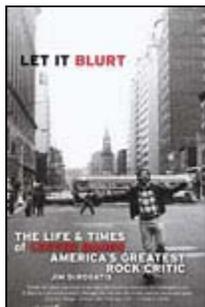
RQ: I really liked Television and the Heartbreakers and Hell's influence on them. But when he approached me about forming a band, I had no idea about what musical direction he had in mind. My only clue was that he thought I would fit into what he was planning to do. I know he really admired Verlaine's and Thunders' playing and that my playing covered a lot of the same ground, from Chuck Berry to Albert Ayler.



**I-94: You had a friendship with Lester Bangs after he moved to NYC. Can you talk a bit about him?**

RQ: Yeah, Lester was a good friend—I miss him a lot. We shared a lot of the same influences, but we didn't sit around listening to White Light/White Heat or Raw Power. Those were things we had absorbed on our own long ago. So we would try to turn each other onto various "nuggets." He turned me onto a lot of great things, from Skip Spence's Oar to Don't Touch My Guitar by The Archies. I turned him onto a lot of good stuff too—the Otis Rush Cobra records come to mind. Sometimes he would come out with deliberately perverse statements such as "Hendrix wasn't any good," and I would shut him up with the two takes of "Red House" from the Are You Experienced? album. Another time, he suggested that Albert King was "useless," so I turned him onto "Cockroach," a track from Years Gone By.

Some of the stuff Lester was enthusiastic about, I just couldn't appreciate. The Clash is a good example. I highly respected his opinions, to say the least, so I ended up buying the first three Clash albums, twice, but I just couldn't get it. We both liked Mingus, so he spent a lot of time subjecting me to The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady, but I never "got" that one either.



Anyway, Lester was a beautiful, highly flawed, brilliant person. He embraced life—there's just no other way to say it. There's a biography that just came out about him called Let It Blurt! by Jim DeRogatis that I think does him justice. There were many ways the subject could have been approached—a respectful, scholarly tome that would have ignored Lester's personality and problems; or a squalid, lurid exposé in which his achievements would have been barely included. But Jim's biography balances everything pretty well. For people who never really got to know him personally, it does the job. I hope it will lead to a few more volumes of Lester's writings. His fans all have their favourite stuff that didn't appear in "Carburettor Dung". For me—I'd like to see the classic Lou Reed interview that appeared in *Creem* in 1973. Another favourite of mine, also from '73, was his review of "Raw Power" (for *Hi-Fi Stereo Review*, I think). It's very disciplined. He's basically saying, "You're gonna hate this record, but..."

I do have one problem with this biography, however: It leaves open the possibility that Lester might have committed suicide. No way!!! I was a pretty good friend of his and spent about four hours talking with him the day before he died. Yeah, he was depressed—he had the flu. But he told me that he wanted to go to Mexico that summer to write a novel. Basically, Lester died because he just goofed. He made a mistake, that's it—bad luck.

**I-94: Lester wrote about the influence of '70s electric Miles Davis on your playing. What elements/aspects of that music caught your ear?**

RQ: My favourite electric Miles albums include "On the Corner", "Get Up With It", "Agharta", and "Pangaea". These albums still haven't gotten the respect they deserve. Jazz purists hate them for the uncompromising brutality in the way they rock. They're listening for solos, and often they're just getting textures. On the other hand, hard-core rock & rollers are turned off by the jazz elements. Personally, I think these records have a lot in common with the Velvet Underground and the Stooges, and I think Lester heard that too. The song "Rated X" from "Get Up With It" is a classic example of these qualities.

**I-94: The interplay between you and Ivan Julian seemed at times to suggest an awareness of Captain Beefheart's Magic Band. Was that intentional?**

RQ: No, there was no Captain Beefheart influence at all. When we read the comparisons in the late '70s, we were all totally puzzled.

**I-94: How do you think the Voidoids fit in with what was happening musically in NYC? What were you trying to accomplish musically?**

RQ: I don't think the Voidoids fit in at all in that musical scene. We just happened to be there. We were unique—for better or worse.

**I-94: I've read that you were pretty much the bandleader in those days. What was the interpersonal dynamic like between the guys in the original four-piece?**



RQ: I've sometimes gotten more credit than I deserved. Each guy's influence would vary drastically from song to song. But we did listen to each other, and argued a lot, at least the first year and a half. All of it was built around Hell's vision, and that contributed a lot to the songs' jerky rhythms, which some people compared to Beefheart. Hell was very driven and ambitious during the early period, knew exactly what he wanted. But there were times when he couldn't communicate to us what he was hearing in his head, and that could lead to frustration for everybody in the band. Fortunately, we were able to turn out that one great album—it holds up.

**I-94: What was Hell like to work with?**

RQ: I pretty much covered that in the last question. As I said, there was musical squabbling, but it paid off in an album we were all proud of. In the beginning, the two of us were both frustrated with each other. I couldn't get exactly what he wanted from me. Ultimately, what he wanted from me was me, not Tom Verlaine or Johnny Thunders.

**I-94: What other NYC bands did you like/respect?**

RQ: There were a lot of really great and really horrible groups. My favourite from that scene was Suicide—their first album.

**I-94: How did you guys wind up touring the UK with the Clash? How did your expectations compare with what you experienced there?**

RQ: I think *Sire* set up that tour. I've talked about that experience in a lot of other interviews. Suffice it to say it was completely horrible and left the band quite demoralised, to say the least!

**I-94: You once commented that the Voidoids "could have gone on indefinitely," in spite of Richard Hell's lack of interest. Was that comment based on creative or fiscal considerations, or a combination?**

RQ: When I said we could have gone on "indefinitely," I was totally referring to fiscal considerations. We had some agency sending us around to do gigs, and it paid fairly well. By then it was obvious that no record company would touch us—that didn't help our attitude. Basically, all of us had pretty much lost interest at that point.

**I-94: How'd you come to work with Jody Harris from the Raybeats? What's he doing now?**

RQ: I met Jody in early '75, when we both worked at the Strand bookstore. We spent a lot of time listening to records and playing guitar. He has an amazing ear for music—a great guitar player, very underrated. He's been working for a legal firm for about ten years. He still plays a lot but got sick of trying to make a decent living in the "industry." He plays occasionally with The Band of George, basically the same group he played with in '76: The Screws. Sometimes they play at a place called Nomoore (on North Moore in Tribeca). They just play for the fun of it—a rare thing nowadays.

## **ON TO PART TWO**