



Robert Quine and Richard Hell in '76

## Hell Remembers Quine

*Head Voidoid talks about his fallen guitar player*

"Part of being a guitar player -- ninety-nine percent of it -- is being obsessive enough to spend thousands of hours listening to records and practicing," Robert Quine told me in 2001. "I've always believed in immersing yourself in good music. Sooner or later, if you have any personality or musical intelligence of your own, you'll come up with your own thing."

Quine -- who was found dead in his Manhattan home on June 5th, an apparent suicide at sixty-one -- was thrilling proof of his own theory. Beginning with his epochal solo on Richard Hell and the Voidoids' 1976 single "Blank Generation," Quine challenged the accepted low-brow standards of punk and garage-rock guitar, inventing a singular fusion of terrorism and tonality rooted in his lifelong loves of 1950s rockabilly, jazz and the Velvet Underground. He looked more like a pro bono lawyer than a guitar hero (Quine actually held a degree in law from Washington University in Missouri), and he only made two albums under his own name, both collaborations: 1981's *Escape*, with guitarist Jody Harris, and 1984's *Basic*, with ex-Material drummer Fred Maher. But with the Voidoids on the mighty 1977 *Blank Generation* album, as the second guitarist on Lou Reed's 1982 LP, *The Blue Mask*, and as a sideman on records by artists as varied as Tom Waits, Lydia Lunch, Critti Politti, John Zorn, Lloyd Cole and Matthew Sweet, Quine elevated and transformed the songs of others with a pure fury and incisive melodicism.

"He was always trying to do the best for whatever song or piece of material he was playing at the time," says Hell, who spoke at length to *Rolling Stone* about Quine's music and legacy (below). "He was very raw in his playing, but also extremely sophisticated. He wasn't lurching out of control -- he needed to be there, in the song."

Last year *Rolling Stone* included Quine in its rollcall of "The 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time" -- in the company of many of his own heroes, including Reed, James Burton and Chuck Berry. But Quine never actively pursued celebrity. He made guitar history by listening avidly to the music that he loved, playing his guitar for hours every day and contributing only to those records and artists that moved and mattered to him. "My

personal vision is to do anything I want at any time," he told me in a 1983 interview. "I don't know what I want to do until I do it or that it will be any good when I do. But I want the freedom to do it.

"That's my personal vision -- maybe it's no vision," he said pointedly. "I don't care."

### ***Richard Hell remembers Robert Quine***

#### **What were your first impressions of Quine, when you and he worked together at Cinemabilia?**

I can't remember whether it was the final days of me being in Television or if I was hooked up with the Heartbreakers. It's funny because I brought this up with him just a month or so ago. My recollection was that Quine had applied for the job there because he knew Tom Verlaine and I worked there. Quine said that wasn't the way it happened -- that he knew [Television manager] Terry Ork, who got him the job.

But I know that Quine had seen Television play, and that it was the first glimmer of hope he'd had, that there might be a place for him in music. He hadn't played in a band for six years, since college in Missouri. He had auditioned for some groups in New York, but it was completely humiliating, as usual [*laughs*]. A thirty-plus-year-old bald guy in a sport coat -- nobody took him seriously. Plus, none of the people in these bands had the chops that he was looking for. He wasn't interested in playing with them.

But we started talking right away. We had a lot of stuff in common. We liked the same movies and books. He was kind of beaten down -- he didn't know what the future could possibly hold for him. He hadn't gotten anywhere in music. But the stuff that was going on in New York gave him hope. So I'd go over to his place on St. Marks Place after work. We'd play records and drink martinis. Quine made a great martini.

#### **Had you actually heard him play when you started forming the Voidoids?**

Not really. He wasn't performing anywhere. But I trust my instinct. He was smart. We had everything in common. And I was learning about music from him: the old rockabilly stuff that he raved about, and some Miles Davis stuff that I didn't know about. He was clearly serious about music. He found some tapes of one of his old bands, and they sounded great. I felt like I could depend on him to be really skillful at playing roots rock & roll, but his head was also into much more exotic, freaky things. It was just what I was looking for.

I was getting restless in the Heartbreakers. I had to move on. I wanted to try things that Johnny [Thunders] and Jerry [Nolan] had no interest in whatsoever. There wasn't any point in bringing it up. So I invited Quine to play with me. I had the drummer in mind [Marc Bell], and we started messing around, looking for another guitar player [Ivan Julian]. We had a setup from the beginning; Ork wanted to do a single with me. Man, those days were so innocent compared to the way things ended up. Bob got so cantankerous. But all of us have.

#### **What was the initial reaction to Quine and his playing when the Voidoids started doing gigs?**

Because I'd been in Television and played with Thunders, people were curious about what I was going to come up with. When they saw who I'd brought in as my new guitar player -- a guy in his thirties with his button-down shirt and bald head that nobody had heard of -- they smirked. They laughed. And he never forgave those people [*laughs*]. This is something else I had in common with him -- anger. I would play on that when we were recording

-- deliberately infuriating him, until he played a transcendent solo.

**Are there specific examples of that on the *Blank Generation* album?**

Almost every song. I would force him to play it again. I would tell him, "I didn't like this part, I didn't like that part." As a guitar player, solos were his bread and butter. So when it was time for him to take a solo, he was a gentleman who wanted to please. He never could have led a band. He had no interest in it -- he was a born sideman, who wanted to play what the songwriter needed from him. He would give you what would be best for the song.

**Did you talk with him much about what a song was about or supposed to impart? He once explained to me how, on Reed's album, *The Blue Mask*, he worked hard to come up with a part that suited the feel and meaning of a particular song.**

It was different for Reed, because Bob was coming in and playing those songs the week he learned them. We would play our songs for a year. He didn't have to do a study. I expressed what I hoped for from him with my remarks across many rehearsals and performances. It was obvious. He'd seen me do the songs night after night, rehearsing and playing them. Obviously, it's self-serving, but for me, far and away, his best soloing is on the stuff he did with me.

**His playing on *Blank Generation* is so many things at once: explosive, colorful, and at the same time, absolutely precise.**

And outrageously creative. This is something else I'd been talking with him about in the last year, because we were planning to do some things. I said to him, "Bob, I've noticed that there is one word that everybody applies to your playing, and it really gets on my nerves. It's in every review. I'm so sick of it." He couldn't guess what word I was talking about.

**Is it one of the ones I just used?**

No. "Angular" [*laughs*]. They're lazy, but I know what they're talking about. It's part of how I could always recognize his style. He had a way of suddenly shifting, going somewhere else completely on the neck for instance, by sliding, say, whereas the previous part of the solo had been staccato, or making some other sudden, radical departure from what he'd just been doing.

**He had a way of skidding out of tone, where the notes actually seemed to move.**

He had such a command of the neck of his guitar. But his whole life was music. And his knowledge was startling. One time, the Voidoids were driving through Appalachia, going to a gig somewhere, and we came across a radio station playing nothing but rockabilly, doo wop and Fifties rock & roll. I swear this is true: As each song started, Quine not only identified it, he announced the original release date. It was incredible. But he'd been there, and that music was the most important thing in his life. He actually saw Buddy Holly play, for instance.

**When I first interviewed him, in 1983, I asked him about his solo on the original "Blank Generation" single, and he explained how it was partly inspired by the guitar break on one of his**

**favorite records, a 1957 single by Jack Scott called "Baby, She's Gone."**

I've heard him make remarks like that about various solos. I've never been able to compare any of them to the originals, because they were always so obscure. Like a poet, he would take ideas from anywhere that arose, as they arose. And he had high standards.

One thing that did annoy me about him -- which he always denied -- was that once he found a solo, he would repeat it. It was frustrating when we were touring. There might be a tiny variation, and there might be a quasi-exception on some night. But I would want, on any given night, to make everything new. And he resisted that.

But people did not appreciate his playing, anymore than they appreciated anything we did. *Blank Generation* was trashed in a lot of places when it came out, including *Rolling Stone*. Then as his reputation grew, people assumed that any interesting guitar on that record was played by him, which isn't true. Ivan contributed an incredible amount -- he came up with the intro part to "Blank Generation," which people love and assume is Bob's, and Ivan played some of the solos too.

**Can you hear Quine's influence today?**

The way we sounded together in the Seventies, as well as on *Destiny Street* (1982) -- I never thought of it as being influential, because it was too eccentric. But now for the first time, I'm hearing things that sound like they were influenced by those records: the new wave of garage rock and "art rock" -- I'm way into the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, for instance. I'm not saying that group in particular is influenced by us, but I believe I can hear us in many of these bands, and they cite us in interviews.

But Bob was completely indifferent to things like that. I mean, indifferent to what's successful in "pop" -- he certainly did like getting his due credit. I mean, he had a pretty open mind, but he also had very high and narrow standards. He wanted finesse in music -- which for him, for any true connoisseur of rock & roll, is not inconsistent with craziness and aggression. A lot of people are unaware of the finesse in Link Wray or what James Williamson did with the Stooges. They just hear in-your-face crudity and noise. Bob loved noise but he was about more than that too.

**DAVID FRICKE**

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