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A sideman-soloist screaming to be heard, lost in despair

Robert Quine 1942—2004

by **John Piccarella**

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Robert Quine took his life on Monday, May 31, 10 months after his wife died. She had anchored the years when he'd alienated most musicians he might have worked with. He spent his final months playing guitar for hours each day in his Grand Street apartment, self-destructive and lost to despair. You can feel his brooding, wry hermeticism on two duo records: 1981's *Escape*, with guitarist Jody Harris, and 1984's *Basic*, with drummer Fred Maher. Though he also invented brilliant voicings to accompany singer-songwriters, what endures is a modest collection of intros, solos, and codas that sound ripped into and bled out of air.

Quine had a record collector's encyclopedia of influences, which he defined as "Chuck Berry to Albert Ayler." Born in Akron in 1942, he created his style alone, practicing to '50s and '60s records, citing only the Velvet Underground, Stooges, electric Miles, and one Eno album (*On Land*) as contemporary models. He used Stratocasters for decades after Ritchie Valens, but decided in his last years the less compliant Telecaster was supreme, tutoring himself with Roy Buchanan albums until he mastered it. His solos from the two Voidoids albums and Lou Reed's *The Blue Mask*, sourced in the bent-note riffing of "Tallahassee Lassie," the partial-chord clusters of Chuck Berry's intros, and Reed's "I Heard Her Call My Name," are essentials. Later he played sessions, notably for Matthew Sweet.

Quine did his best work as a sideman-soloist, screaming to be heard. "As a guitar player he was fantastically sophisticated and completely raw," Richard Hell says. It's tempting to liken his wrenched sounds to the saxophone-inspired Sonny Sharrock or Pete Cosey, but Quine played like the guitar was a throat he was strangling. Not only feedback, distortion, and sustain, but notes and clusters just shy of or just past the "right" note, opened up ferocious other worlds between the frets. Next to Reed, who spit random notes from frenzied strumming, Quine's atonalities were carefully articulated. Closing Reed's 1982 "Waves of Fear," each note breaks a half-step away from itself—like Coltrane or Ayler in the upper register, like a prisoner clawing through glass.