

And "Baby" makes free

Speedball Baby makes free-verse rant and roll out of the poetry of overheard conversation and the wrong guitar riff at the right time.

By [JOSHUA TANZER](#)

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When you think of William S. Burroughs' rock and roll stepchildren, of course, you think of Steely Dan. But think again. Speedball Baby is nothing like that.

But Speedball Baby does take its inspiration from the famed beat poet, with Ron Ward's relentless rants stumbling down the middle of the street arm-in-arm with Matt Verta-Ray's stream-of-consciousness guitar, backed by Ali Smith on bass and Andy Action on drums. No smooth, jazz-tinged pop music here — this is rough-edged rock, except when it's a brooding noirish slow-burn.

Verta-Ray remembers how he first got together with Ward. "I heard Ron do these spontaneous monologues, almost like poetry — I wouldn't say beat poetry, but it was definitely inspired by Burroughs. It was very abrasive and not very musical at that time," he says.

At Ward's wedding reception eight years ago, the two improvised an early form of what would become the Speedball Baby sound, and it sounded like the music both of them had imagined in their dreams — "music nobody wanted to hear," Verta-Ray jokes. "All of a sudden it made perfect sense."

The band doesn't write songs in any conventional way. They start with a patter, a spur-of-the-moment rap from Ward which, from the sound of it, could be inspired by a character on the street or a snatch of conversation overheard at last call. In fact, the band took its name from one of its earliest songs, "Speedball Baby" (hear it on [Real Audio](#) or [MP3](#)) about a strung-out heroine of the Lower Manhattan streets.

Eventually, lyrics start to flow — something like:

Don't ask me to show you the way.
Don't ask this monkey for a light.
'Cause I got no answers,
No dress code.
Look at your own palm,
Read your own goddamn future.
Taste a stranger's skin
— and think nothing of it.

— from "Suicide Girl" ([RA](#), [MP3](#)).

Ward sings the lines with the fervor of a Southern preacher on a staticky car radio. "He'll come up with a verbal riff," says Verta-Ray, "and then I'll just jump in and try to, without thinking about it, play the words."

A wise guitar hero once said that the reason you have to learn theory and practice technique is so that you can forget it and just play — and that's the kind of guitarist Verta-Ray is. It's obvious that he's listened carefully to everything from Duane Eddy to the Clash — and, as long as we're playing

the music critic's favorite game of "name that influence," let's add Cliff Gallup, John Lee Hooker, Link Wray, the Cramps, maybe the Wipers, and hey, is that a little bit of "Willie and the Hand Jive" I hear at the beginning of "I'm Addictive" ([RA](#), [MP3](#))? But the thing is, he's not summoning up the souls of guitarists past for you to blindly revere; he's drawing on a huge musical vocabulary to create something new and sometimes startling, sometimes with the feeling of Captain Beefheart or Ornette Coleman foremost in mind rather than any of the usual pantheon. What riff will come next, nobody knows.

And that goes for the whole band — Speedball Baby's signature sound is a rock song that you think you've heard before until it does something to surprise you. It goes up when you expect down. It's the hero jumping from the moving train, the femme fatale pulling a gun from the handbag, the coyote falling off a cliff. Try listening between the lines in a song like "Dangerous Top" ([RA](#), [MP3](#)), hear the music where the punctuation's supposed to be. It's as if a piece of rockabilly sheet music got turned upside-down and they decided to just play it that way anyhow. Every song is something you wouldn't have thought of before.

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