

# Heavy Trash

March 2007. Interview by Rick Webb. Photos by Igor Emmerich

It could be argued that **Jon Spencer** did a fair bit for the blues throughout the 90s and into the naughties. **Jon Spencer's Blues Explosion** may never have been a 'real' (whatever that may be) blues band but they did bring the language, form and symbols of the blues to a large international audience at a time when blues was, really, a dirty word. I'd be willing to bet that there are a significant number of people who's introduction to blues music was through Blues Explosion, not least because of their association - both touring and recording - with **R.L. Burnside** and the boost that gave to the emerging **Fat Possum** label.

[Seasick Steve](#), hanging with Burnside in the Pacific Northwest at the time remembers "he got playing with the Jon Spencer thing and all of a sudden there's all these young people coming - I remember R.L. talking one time and he said "I like that boy, but he don't play the blues..." I said "Shut up R.L., he's taking you out on the road!"



**Heavy Trash** brings Spencer together with **Matt Verta-Ray**, Canadian twang guitar specialist and formerly of New York bands **Madder Rose** and **Speedball Baby**, in what can only be described as, well, Rockabilly. But it's a punky in-your-face rockabilly and jolly good it is too.

Spencer is undoubtedly a charismatic frontman and he delivers the twisted tales on their debut, eponymous, album with a dark flair, while Verta-Ray's guitar stylings and effortless cool ensure that what might easily have been a tad self-indulgent manages to stay fresh and real. They can do it equally well live as on record - we caught up with them at the Spitz last year before a sell-out show and the place rocked. This year they're set to play the **Spitz Festival of the Blues** and they're a righteous addition to that line-up.

**What I've heard about Heavy Trash is that you two are good mates and just started doing it for a laugh and having fun with it, is that how it worked?**

**MV-R:** Yeah, that was kind of the start of it, we sort of snuck up on it. Our two bands had been touring together for a long time, and we always had these informal jam sessions backstage. And

both of us really liked Rockabilly and American Roots music. But we sort of stayed away from codifying it for a good long time. So the record was virtually done by the time we were like "Oh, I guess this is an album here". I think that helped us to keep things very informal and so the writing and recording process was extremely organic and easy-going. I think it contributed to the vibe of the record.

**So you just began playing together and started rolling tape in your studio?**

**MV-R:** More or less, we're really lucky to have that studio situation. There are mikes and tape machines ready to go, so you just hit the button. There's no need to make a big deal about it, or any need to get money from the record label and so on.



**So you had this record and thought, "we'd better go and tour this" or what? I ask because, one of the things I read was that you were reluctant to do the usual slog around the indie club circuit.**

**JS:** Yeah well, we've both spent a lot of time touring around. So the idea of going out and spending weeks and weeks on the road playing the same venues... would have kind of felt like a day job, if you want to put it that way. It wasn't too appealing, so we tried to do some shows in out of the way places, and any touring we've done has been pretty short - just little trips.

It's also been different because when we made the record there was no band, just me and Matt. We had a few friends come in and help out, but when the record was done, we'd never played a show. So then we started hooking up with pre-existing bands, and the people we're playing with tonight are all from Copenhagen. They're not a band per se (they were put together for this), but they've all played together for a while and known each other for many years. A couple of them were in **Tremolo Beer Gut**, Kim the bass player was in **Powersaw**. Matt and I have found this a really interesting way of working, we can fly over here, hook up with these guys, do some shows and then work with a different set of guys back in the States... it's going well.



**You're having fun with it though?**

**JS:** Yes, of course we have some laughs and it's a lot of fun, but it's not like a sort of throwaway joke, we're very serious and passionate about the music we're making. Part of that maybe comes from the fact that we're not slogging it out doing eight week tours, we can do little bits here and there, and play different kinds of venues.

**MV-R:** Yeah, we wanted to be selective and do some more offbeat venues. We played this club in New Jersey a couple of times that's a bowling alley. And you actually play on the lanes while people bowl around you. So at one point, the song dropped down low, and Jon said "I'm not gonna start this

up again until someone gets a strike!". This other time, we played in this run down low rent strip club in New York City. We also played a Western set in the desert in California. You'd be surprised at how nice bowling sounds mixed in with Rock n Roll.



**I wasn't trying to imply that what you're doing is a joke, it's just that you spoke of it not feeling like a 'day job' and I guess I was trying to get at the fact that Heavy Trash started life as a side project.**

**JS:** Yeah, maybe it seems as time goes on, that Heavy Trash is becoming more serious, but the easy-going process of making the record was definitely down to having access to Matt's studio. We weren't fraught with worries about the budget or the clock on the wall. It was very nice.

**MV-R:** I think that vibe pre-dates the hyped up, huge money studio vibe. Later on studios became more expensive, the music business became more entrenched, everyone saw dollar signs - so that every minute you spent strumming a guitar in a studio was a precious moment. Which is not necessarily good for the creative process. The old style where **Sam Phillips** would just be moving a microphone around all evening trying to find the best sound. Recording a band made up of a group of people who grew up together and played really well together. That's what we're most interested in.



**So is Rockabilly what you're doing? Are you comfortable with that term?**

**JS:** Yeah, I think it's accurate, but I can imagine people listening to the record and saying "this isn't real Rockabilly". That's because there are lots of other influences from other types of music, like Blues, Country, Doo-wop and Soul. One of the things I liked about making this record was the chance to really embrace a more traditional musical style. For a while I wanted to be very strict and have no drums at all, but they kind of crept in.

**So what's the path that leads you to make a Rockabilly record?**

**JS:** Matt and I both love the music. It's certainly something that's been in everything I've done, especially as a singer. Hearing Matt's records, I could tell that we both shared a love for that type of music. So we got together and starting messing around with this stuff.

**MV-R:** I grew up in Canada, and my Mom had this great Rockabilly record collection, so I was a fanatic. I thought the reason that no-one else was into it was because they were Canadian, and soon as I went down to the States it would all be Rockabilly! Rockabilly! Rockabilly! I finally made it down there in about 1979-80 and was sorely disappointed. But that meant you had to seek out other fans, so I got to see **Pussy Galore** and the Blues Explosion, and started touring with Jon, and

figured out that we probably had very similar record collections.

**It's interesting you say that. It was similar here, in the late 70s and early 80s, there seemed to be a small Rockabilly cult going on. So was there an 80s Rockabilly boom in America?**

JS: A little bit, it was coupled onto to Punk and New Wave and also the success of **The Stray Cats**. There was a little bit of a scene.

**I always think Rockabilly spawned this sort of West Coast Blues thing - Kid Ramos and a whole bunch of guys who've got the hair, the leopard skin and the motorcycles...**

JS: That stuff's alright, but I was never really into it personally, although for a while it did come above ground in the States. For me, what's so cool about Rockabilly (and I mostly like the older stuff) is that it's so....weird, so very personal and idiosyncratic. It's very unusual music and a lot of the modern bands seem to iron that stuff out, which is a shame.

**MV-R:** Yeah, that's a good point. There's a sort of x-ray vision that happens where people are trying to see what makes something cool. Let's say you've decided to start a Rockabilly band, you look back on everything from **Gene Vincent** to **Elvis** and **Charlie Feathers**. What happens a lot is that people filter out the anomalies, the weird personal stuff. But to Jon and myself, that's the essence of it. For instance, there's this really obscure record (I can't remember who it's by) about this Rockabilly cat and his quest to catch this fish that keeps breaking his line. This struggle goes on for years, and it's such a strange topic for a song. There's also the personality based weirdnesses of the musicians themselves. The personality quirks of Charlie Feathers for example are just as interesting as the stories of **Robert Johnson** or **Leadbelly**.



**I think I know what you're saying. Don't take this the wrong way, but it feels like you inhabit this sort of 'Jim Jarmusch-ey' world. It's almost like the band Joe Strummer was in in Mystery Train could have been Heavy Trash. A sort of 'wonky' Rockabilly thing... (that's meant to be a compliment)**

JS: (chuckles) I don't know man, I like that movie, but I'm not sure it's a compliment. There are people who focus too much on the kitsch or strange element - and that doesn't make for good music. The music that people like Charlie Feathers made is way out there, but there's still something legitimate about it. You can get a sense of a person, of what's inside them, their soul - and that's what makes great music. It's not about the accoutrements which is what a lot of people focus on, and some people iron out the craziness so end up with something really bland and boring. It's all about the heart and soul.

**Is it fair to say that you're not deliberately trying to duplicate these old records but that**

**you're doing it your own way and adding your own contemporary twist to it? I mean, we're not supposed to be just relating the references back to old records are we?**

**JS:** I think the music should grab hold of you in an immediate way, it shouldn't be that you're thinking of old references or influences or some kind of subtext. But that it makes you tap your feet, get up and dance, that it moves your heart. In some way, I think we've achieved that.

**MV-R:** Yeah, the stylistic hooks are easy to identify. Jon and I have digested them over the years but we're not actively trying to adhere to any particular rules of recording, or writing or Rockabilly style.



**Okay, a couple of Blues related questions... Some purists might have an issue with you being interviewed on this website. Do you guys think you have every right to be on a website called Blues in London?**

**MV-R:** Well, we're in London! (laughs)

**JS:** Well we just played as part of a Blues festival in Portugal. Me personally? Yeah, I think that I've done something for the Blues.

**But is what you're doing now 'The Blues'?**

**JS:** Yeah, I mean it's a Rockabilly band, but I think Rockabilly is a sort of white Blues... in a way.

**MV-R:** The need to describe Rockabilly as white blues or get into any of these classifications is pretty nebulous.

**JS:** Yeah, it was all so mixed up, you had **Chuck Berry** listening to the big powerful Nashville country stations, which he claimed as a huge influence. Then you have the most famous example of Elvis Presley listening to black Blues artists. That's what's beautiful about music, it brings people together.

**Amen to that.**