

The Heavy Trash thing came out so much better than I had hoped. I was really excited about it, but it really started ... to take on a life of its own. Me and Jon both got more psyched about it than we thought we would be. And it looks like it'll be a real thing on its own.

—Matt Verta-Ray

The side project has served as a convenient divider in the critic's lexicon, a neat way to segment an artist's career into a linear, hierarchical system. As if an artist's work/product could easily be segmented into first place, second, and so forth. From the outside looking in, the artist's frequent embrace of the opportunity seems to support this idea; after all, who in the arts doesn't juggle multiple jobs, but spends so much time at that primary breadwinner? However, as the fissures of the recording industry become increasingly common knowledge, and independent musicians begin to vocalize the difficulty of sustaining a career, numerous artists have taken on *arbeit*, albeit re-defined. Musicians still release a steady stream of product—not unlike days of yore when the Godfather seemed to have a new record every week—but through an ever-changing identity—case in point: Madlib-mania. The happy medium: the artist is allowed to continually challenge and shape their self, while the market benefits from consistently “new” and “different” product. Thus, the stage has been set for the “side project” to step down. At least for non-tax purposes.

The nature of art is communicative, and thus artists often collaborate in varying manners and circumstances. The digital/information age has given rise to new methods of interfacing (Johnny's dialogue with June Carter Cash versus DJ Shadow's work with Björk on wax), but the same ideas remain: reflect, remix, and create. As if to subvert the stigma surrounding polygamy, musicians subsequently swap partners with more frequency than Pamela Anderson (Lee).

Heavy Trash, a new project centered on the Blues Explosion's Jon Spencer and Speedball Baby's Matt Verta-Ray, deliberately harkens back to the past through its musical cues, its recording approach, and its work ethic, but is another such collaboration, plain and simple. The group released a record in April 2005, a refreshing work for the two vets; years of road and recording work can wear a musician down, but these two sound refreshed and at ease. While hardly the sort of record that becomes year-end critical darling/overkill, *Heavy Trash* excels by embodying the very aesthetic that produced it: a couple guys sharing drinks over good music.

“Honestly, I think it's a really good time for Jon, too, because we have been in our bands for some time, over 12 years ... and it's always good to have something new to offer; people are interested in new things because it's new and they give it a chance, so it's a good thing to do. Not that it's more important than your tried and true ... It's like meeting some beautiful girl at a party when you've been married for nine years, and you go, ‘Oh my God, I can still feel this way!’ (laughs)”, says Verta-Ray.

Verta-Ray's enthusiasm shines through when he speaks, not just about his new project, but in general. *PopMatters* spoke with him via phone to capture clips of this beautiful trash: influences, process, shop talk, and Tuesdays with Poppa Verta-Ray.

PopMatters: When you first got together with Jon, what was your original idea of what Heavy Trash would be?

Matt Verta-Ray: The idea for it started a long time ago where our band used to tour with their band ... and backstage we'd all jam, and Jon and I sorta picked up on our love of rockabilly ... Over the years we got to know each other a little better ... and about two years ago, we both had a little time off, and we started jamming ... I have a recording studio, so we decided to put it together and make a record out of it. It happened ... very organically ... like how a high school band gets together ... It was a lot of hanging out, beer drinking, and listening to old records; like, saying, "Have you heard this?" and, "I've got that one," or, "I've never heard that one." Just the way it happens when you're a kid and you got your first band going.

PM: So, what records were you trading with each other?

MV: I was always a big rockabilly fan, and Jon, too. But there are areas that didn't overlap. For instance, I've always been into Gene Vincent, Cliff Gallop, Johnny Burnett, Hasil Adkins, and stuff like that. I'm familiar with Charlie Feathers, but Charlie Feathers is kind of Jon's, I would say, his touchstone for that kind of music: very bluesy, very personal, almost internal. The way Charlie Feathers comes up with his lyrics, it's almost like he's talking with himself ... I'm really zealous and deeply into Feathers like Jon, but that's one thing he turned me onto. I kinda turned him onto some qualities of a recording, like the way a certain atmosphere comes up by the way they put down, and how the process was. We're both really into Elvis, and Eddy Cochran ... The one thing we both really connected on was the sorta surrealist or absurdist wordplay that happens when people who don't consider themselves poets come up with poetry. And all these amazing associations that aren't Shakespeare, but what they're coming up with is poetry despite themselves. That's my favorite stuff, because it's unselfconscious and just as great. People like John Lee Hooker and Hasil Adkins, certainly, and Charlie Feathers are great examples of that. They're not trying to write some song that is tailored for a market because they know they can make money out of it. They're just sitting in their own personal hell coming up with stuff because they have to...

PM: When you approached each of the songs, was there a consistent writing process? How did you guys tackle each song?

MV: Here's exactly how it went down. We would just be jamming with the tapes running, he'd be playing acoustic, I'd be playing electric. We'd find a riff, and kinda go at it ... for five or ten minutes. It usually kinda transforms, and maybe a chorus will start to emerge ... Jon would be sorta mumbling dummy lyrics. And we'd listen to the tape player, and some of the words bubble up, or come up more often, and that may sound cool. You're trying to trick yourself into not thinking about it. Like, Billy Joel, I'm sure, is trying to write words that make a story ... We're into trusting it, and mostly Jon and his subconscious sorta generating these images and phrases that sorta come together. Then we'd go back in, and lay a few more words, and try it out again, and record it ... And check that out and chop the tape up; we used a lot of razor blade editing. It's like Pro Tools, but pro tools! We would chop the tape up into pieces and move it around. And different associations would happen ... But really the recording process was built into the songwriting process; it's not like he came in with some demos that were all ready to go.

PM: Were you doing it reel-to-reel?

MV: Yeah, analog baby.

PM: A lot of musicians don't use analog anymore.

MV: I've had a recording studio for a long time, probably almost twenty years ... And I've always been using tapes, and into old gear and old music. When Pro Tools came along, I had a brief moment of owning up on all this new technology. But it didn't seem like that much fun to me; it didn't get you any closer to where you couldn't get otherwise. And it sounded worse. So, I'm like, WTF ... If you ask me, [analog] feels in keeping with everything else we did: very organic, you have this huge oxide-covered piece of tape zipping through this piece of machinery that is human-size. It's tangible. Files don't get lost, and hard drives don't get erased, and nothing freezes. Everything is real. It's like when you open a Dodge Dart or a Chevy Nova, you see everything. You can fix it easy. As opposed to a Toyota Tercel or a Saturn or something where there's computers, and fuel injectors and all this stuff that can go wrong. Are cars better now? I don't think so. I'd rather have a Chevy Corvair than a Ford Taurus. But that's just me, and I'm probably in the minority (laughs).

PM: Heavy Trash is a collaborative effort; not just between you and Jon, but with friends, people you've recorded with in the past ... What kind of input did they have? What did they bring to the record?

MV: Funny, because we didn't do it the usual way, where you come in with a rhythm section, and get the drum takes down, and punch in the bass, and overdub the guitars. In fact, the idea was to have no drummer. Some of the songs were supposed to be in the old Sun style before they got DJ Fontana [long-time drummer for Elvis Presley], it was just standup bass, and acoustic guitar, and electric guitar ... That's how we started, and certain songs we felt needed to be kicked along a bit, so we put some percussion on it, or we had a guy play live along with us on a Cuban percussion box ... If it ended up with drums at all, it was sorta ass backwards (laughs) ... Each person was brought in for certain songs we thought they'd be good on. Like, Lily Wolfe, we brought her in because we needed some piano thing on "Under the Waves." And a couple of the songs needed that standup bass sound as opposed to electric bass, so we brought in Paul Dugan ... It was a song-to-song basis. We don't actually have a band, per se, so ... we're going out with a Canadian band called the Sadies on tour ... They're really great musicians, they backed up Andre Williams. And both Jon and I have had dealings with Andre, so we have a lot in common. So, they'll do the opening set, and we'll come out and they'll be our back-up band, and they'll switch instruments. They're so good, they can play frickin' anything. They can put down a guitar and pick up a fiddle, or a baritone guitar or whatever.

PM: When are you going on tour?

MV: May, June. But we're also putting together an auxiliary, New York City-based version of the band, so when the Sadies are out on tour and can't join us ... Probably some people who played on the record, like Dave Varenka ... We were going to call up Carol Kaye, but I don't know if she's in our price range, because she's the top LA session musician. We had also talked with the drummer from Ronnie Dawson's band, but we haven't talked with her in a while. She might have to work because her former boss has passed away. We also don't want to do a bunch of shows, sloggng through the indie rock clubs. Just cos we've both done that ... and it can be demoralizing, and generally doesn't get you too far. I like it, I love to play, but touring is very difficult, and we want to make sure it's fun for everybody, including us, so we'll be playing in, oh, I don't know, strip clubs,

and car shows, and openings of Jiffy Lubes [American chain of fast lube and oil change centers] (laughs). But it should be something special, so it's not like a gig; it's like a party every time we play.

PM: There is an intimate quality to the music; I took a drive down from New York to Virginia, and it was great road trip music. And there is something about when you're in a car by yourself listening to music; it can be a very intimate experience.

MV: Good, those are the two worlds we are trying to bridge: road trips and intimate (laughs).

PM: Which song is your favorite?

MV: The second one ["Lover's Street"]. It has that kinda Motown beat. I like some of the imagery. There are a couple I really like. I really like 'Gatorade', because it's like an instruction manual to eating pussy (laughs). I really thought it was one of Jon's best lyrics. It's a song about a tough subject, but the main character is pretty innocent; at the beginning of the song, he's never done it, and he doesn't know how to do it, and he's gotta be instructed by his girl. So, I think that's pretty cool ... At one point, we were kinda worried: "Are we going to get sued by the Gatorade company?" But we thought, oh well.

PM: It's kinda good promotion.

MV: Yeah (laughs).

PM: You mentioned you shared similar music tastes. Was there a particular quality of Jon's music, or the way that Jon works, that attracted you? And vice versa?

MV: I don't think so. My band, Speedball Baby, has some of the same qualities as the Blues Explosion. In fact, when we first started putting out records, that's all they would ever compare us to, cos they were like the more successful version of our band (laughs). Charismatic frontman/leader with surrealist, William S. Burroughs-esque cut-up words. It's not like singer-songwriter shit. It's really kinda angular and explosive, and it's based on the blues and rockabilly. Obviously, Jon and I have similar influences. So, I sense a stripped down roots version of art school music, which you could describe my aesthetic as, too. I like Marcel Duchamp as much as I like Captain Beefheart as much as I like Gene Vincent, y'know? Whereas if Jon and I were just car show guys—there's a whole contingent of rockabilly purists who walk around, and the car has to be exactly right, and their girlfriend is chosen for their lifestyle, and their tattoos have to be perfect—I think me and Jon have messed with the formula. We're not as purist ... We have that in common. I can't speak for why he would work with me, but I know that Jon has amazing front-person qualities, and really cool imagination, and a deep voice that the tape just loves...

PM: His voice is definitely getting deeper with age.

MV: I know, right? A couple of the takes we actually speeded up the tape because it was a little too

low!

PM: What do you think you have learned so far from this collaboration?

MV: One thing I learned from Jon, and maybe this is his personal style, or considering the good luck he's had in his career, but he never gives short shrift to a process. So, if something needs to take a little longer, like a mastering process ... where my instincts would be, "Oh, we've already spent so much money; let's just cut our losses and call it OK," Jon would be like, "No, let's just keep working at it" And I think that's a really good instinct; always pays off in the end ... I'm planning on taking some of that away and using it (laughs). I wouldn't call him a perfectionist, because that implies uptight, which I don't think Jon is, but he's very particular, and will stick with something patiently until it's the right thing, which is a good quality in any artist.

PM: Where did the name come from?

MV: Actually, when I was a kid, every first Tuesday of the month was heavy trash day ... So, my dad would write it on the calendar; and one day, he was joking with me cos I had a band, and he said, "You should call your band, Heavy Trash!" And I just kinda ignored him, cos he was my dad, until the band came along where it was the right name for the band, but it was always kinda rattling around the back of my head. And my dad, when I told him that was gonna be the name, he was so pleased. He couldn't hide it (laughs).