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March 19-25, 2003
Volume 15, Issue 32

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Homicidal roots music with a sense of humor

BY GRANT BRITT

Soundboard

Contact ESP

Angry Johnny and the Killbillies get written up as a bunch of white thrash punks masquerading as hillbillies. But there's more to this quartet of East Hampton, Massachusetts, madmen than rockabilly rebels with a psychotic twist.

The band first got noticed after their performance on a side stage at Lollapalooza in 1995. Despite the fact that they were up against Courtney Love's Hole, Pavement, Beck, Sonic Youth and Jesus Lizard, Angry Johnny's tales of white trash death and destruction as a way of life shook up jaded critics and fans alike.

Signing with Steve Earle's E-Squared organization also was a career boost. The band's first album, *Hankenstein*, raised eyebrows and hackles throughout the industry. The Killbillies set the tone of the album with "Life, Love, Death And The Meter Man," a tale of death by chainsaw with the alleged weapon snarling the cut's introduction. A bit later on, Angry introduces a new makeover concept by threatening to skin an ex-lover alive and "make a suit out of her hide."

The album's cover introduced Angry Johnny's artwork to a new audience, as well. Those who had not been aware of Angry's previous work decorating a Dinoasur Jr. cover now came face to face with his work with a likeness of a freshly dug up, green-tinged Hank Williams looking much the worse for wear with his autopsy stitches ringing his forehead.

More Angry art adorns the band's second album.

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The *What's So Funny* cover features John Wayne Gacy in full clown makeup posing with a bloody axe upraised. The subject matter is pretty grim, as well. "All-American Girl" chronicles the groupie lifestyle in a far different manner than the recent VHI "expose." Angry's girl discovered rock 'n' roll, got a fake ID at 16 and became a backstage groupie queen.

"Rode in the vans of every member of the band/
Said you only live once, gonna get it while you can/
Just back from the clinic/ they're positive you're
done/ Guess it doesn't matter, long as you had fun/
You're just a all-American, all-American girl."

But that one pales next to "High Noon In Killville," the imaginary burb Angry's white trashers call home. It's the story of a grocery store robbery gone bad. It's not pretty. Brothers Bruce and Ed, two would-be hold-up men who Angry admits "weren't very smart," get blown up in the course of the deal which quickly turns into "my very own Dog Day Afternoon." Though the subject matter is grim, Angry's telling of the tale is peppered with asides worthy of a punk Robert Service.

"The parking lot was already crawlin' thick with cops," Angry realizes too late, reasoning that "that's what you get when you rob a store `round the corner from the donut shop." Daddy is brought in to reason with his boy, but loses it, telling his kid that "you're the worst son I ever had/ You're really in it this time /you're really in it deep I hope they blow your brains out/ you good for nothing creep."

This is the kind of stuff that raises the Killbillies out of the realm of the novelty boys and aging punkers desperate for another line of work. Though the attitude might be punk, the musicianship is not -- these boys can play. Set to a walloping hillbilly backbeat and fronted by a leather-lunged desperado with a take-no-prisoners attitude, this stuff is sure to satisfy even the most hardcore country fans.

"The art world never really welcomed me with open arms," Angry told a Billboard reporter, and it's unlikely that the music world will either. But that's their loss. If you're looking for the real deal in psychotic, rambunctious no-holds-barred country music with a homicidal twist, there's only one way to

get satisfaction -- get Angry. I

Angry Johnny and the Killbillies

Saturday, March 22

The Garage

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