

Cheap Suit Serenaders combine musical influences memorably

'Singin' in the Bathtub' tackles varied American styles from jazz to Cajun

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PULSE EDITOR

As a comic artist in the 1960s, Robert Crumb helped define the look and attitude of a volatile time in America's cultural and political history. For this reason, fans of his artwork are often surprised upon hearing his ventures into music. Gone are the piercing social satires, the vicious caricatures and the madcap takes on repressed sexuality. What remains are dry-witted, technically superb takes on long-gone American musical styles.

Over the course of three albums, Crumb and his band, the Cheap Suit Serenaders, attempted to recreate the sounds of classic American music from the 1920s and 1930s. Obsessive collectors of 78s from that era, the group members were able to match the sound while remaining completely original, somehow making it seem natural that a group of counterculture artists would be performing old jazz, ragtime and Cajun music in the middle of the 1970s.

The best of these recordings is the third album, "Singin' in the Bathtub" (originally released as "Number 3"). The album is the perfect compendium of a style that has failed to gain any better a moniker than "old-timey." Mostly done on stringed instruments, including Crumb's own accomplished clawhammer banjo-playing, the music also features a couple of saxophones, an accordion and (of course) a musical saw. The arrangements are tight and well-crafted and blend a wide range of styles into a single cohesive sound.

The vocals are either oddball group harmonies or by Crumb himself, whose voice lends itself perfectly to the music, which is fortunate because there are few other styles it could lend itself to. The lyrics are tame, considering the source, but like everything else on the album they fit perfectly with the intended sound.

The closest thing to a political song is the Cajun romp "Shopping Mall," one of the best tracks. "I ain't got no job, no way to pay my rent/But I keep on shopping 'till I squander my last cent," is a pretty overt swipe at consumer culture. But for the most part the lyrics are dry, quick and inviting, even a bit self-deprecating. There is not an ounce of



Aaron Sullivan Illustrator

Artist Robert Crumb and his band, the Cheap Suit Serenaders, perform lively old-time music on their album 'Singin' in the Bathtub.'

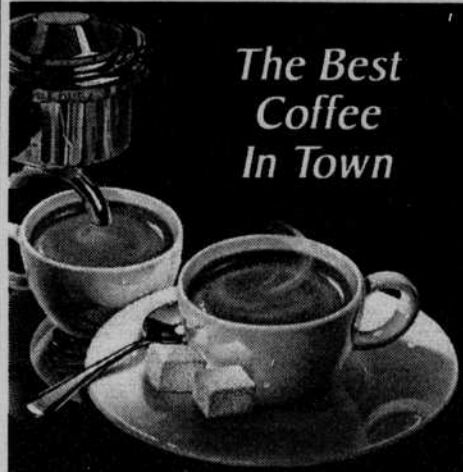
irony throughout the album, which should be a welcome respite from much of modern entertainment. The group goes into each song with a sincere love of the style it is playing.

That love comes through with each note, and the Serenaders' ability might come as a surprise. Crumb in particular is a superb player, weaving together a variety of sounds and styles which most modern listeners would have never even heard of. The band even busts into polka on occasion, not to mention Hawaiian music, blues, Dixie and who knows what else.

With each style, the musicians find inner joy and bring it out, as if attempting to share with the listeners the same pleasure they found in those old 78s. The best thing about the album is listening to the amount of fun the group is having on each take, as if the joy of making music were all they needed and it didn't make any difference if anyone were listening.

It's rare to find music as lively and life-affirming as this, in this or any era. That it all came from such an odd source only makes it all the better. "Singin' in the Bathtub" is a good place to start for an introduction to old-time music as well as to the musical works of Crumb. Its companion album, "Chasin' Rainbows," is almost as good. Both are available on CD, though the original self-titled album by the group has fallen into obscurity. At least these two remain to enlighten and enliven any lucky enough to hear them.


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