

# Say hello to our Filthy Friends

Portlanders Corin Tucker and Peter Buck talk about their brand new band.

BY JASON COHEN  
STAFF WRITER

Filthy Friends formed like most bands do. In fact, it's right there in the name: they are a bunch of people who like each other, playing music together. It just so happens that two members – Peter Buck and Corin Tucker – are known for playing in two of America's greatest rock 'n' roll bands (that would be R.E.M. and Sleater-Kinney, if it needs mentioning). And the rest of the group – previous Buck collaborators Scott McCaughey, Kurt Bloch, Bill Rieflin and Linda Pitmon – isn't exactly weak in the resume department, with credits ranging from the Young Fresh Fellows to Steve Wynn & the Miracle 3 to King Crimson.

Misleadingly (and jokingly) billed in initial press materials as “a David Bowie cover band,” Filthy Friends have indeed been that, taking on “Jean Genie” and “Rebel Rebel” at Buck's Todos Santos music festival in Mexico soon after Bowie died in 2016. But the project actually started several years before that, as a studio collaboration between Buck and Tucker, and this month is its official coming-out.

Filthy Friends' debut album, *Invitation* will be released by Kill Rock Stars on Aug. 25. That same day, the band plays in Eugene, followed by an August 26 appearance at Project Pabst in Portland.

Street Roots joined Buck and Tucker in a corner booth at Dot's in Southeast Portland to talk music, creative partnerships and politics, over nachos and non-alcoholic drinks.

**Jason Cohen:** So was this originally just for fun, or did you always know you had a band here?

**Peter Buck:** Every time I do music I'm really fucking serious about it.

**Corin Tucker:** So serious (laughing).

**Peter:** I mean, I am. It doesn't mean I don't have fun doing it. And when I used to drink, I'd have drinks and do it, but that doesn't mean I'm not fucking serious about it.

I'm not sure that we had professional ambitions. But you want to do great work, you want to be here, you



The Filthy Friends, from left to right, Scott McCaughey, Kurt Bloch, Corin Tucker, Peter Buck and Linda Pitmon. Not pictured is Bill Rieflin of King Crimson, who will join them on tour.

want to write songs that represent who you are, the world you live in and who you want to be. Every time you step on stage, be great. After that, it's just a matter of how much you're gonna do it.

**Corin:** Yeah, he's really serious. When I got the call and he was like, “let's make a record together,” I was like “what?” Really surprised. It's been such an interesting opportunity to work with someone that I obviously admire, who is also like, a door-wide-open kind of collaborator. I really felt like we were on equal footing immediately.

**Peter:** I'd just come off of doing solo records where I was the boss and had mostly wrote the songs myself. And I'm glad I did it. But I'm a collaborator. I like to work with people who have their own musical personality and bring something I don't have. I really want stuff to not be me all the time. We started working and writing, it felt real immediately. And when you're writing, you're forming a relationship. We were acquaintances, but not best friends or anything. We built this relationship through creating stuff and finding out what we had in common. That's a very serious thing.

**J.C.:** So it started with just the two of you writing?

**Peter:** She sang on my first solo record and then we just started writing. And within a few weeks we had six or seven songs and we started recording piecemeal.

**J.C.:** So when did the rest of the band come into the picture?

**Peter:** It started out with the band on my solo record. And that just worked very well. We did a few

shows. It felt like a band. We never auditioned people.

**J.C.:** So Corin, you were the only person who hadn't played with everyone else before.

**Corin:** Yeah, but my voice – it has a pretty big personality. So that, in and of itself, when it comes into a song, immediately can change things. I was just instantly comfortable. Peter is a really natural collaborator. And he's obviously used to doing a lot of material and changing things really quickly, which is how Sleater Kinney does everything, so it was just kind of an immediate ability to feel like I could carve out a space for myself.

**J.C.:** Did this scratch any particular itches for you that you hadn't been able to express in your other bands?

**Corin:** Oh, it's really, really fun. I mean, it's a little more diva-y. A little more lead-singery. It's also a really different musical direction, sometimes, than anything Sleater Kinney would do.

**J.C.:** Between the Alejandro Escovedo record Peter produced and now this, I feel like you've really given the world a new window into Kurt Bloch as a lead guitarist

**Peter:** The thing about Kurt is, he can do anything, but I never give him direction. When you've got a player like that you just want him to be himself. I'm like, “what do you think Kurt?” “Go for it!”

**Corin:** He's got such great instincts. He just feels what should happen on the song, and you're like, “Oh yeah, that's exactly what should happen.”

**Peter:** I take Kurt around on my solo things and people are like, “who's that guitar player?” He's been in

special. I could tell that something unique was happening when we started working together.

**J.C.:** I also see you guys around town at shows. That's new in some ways too: the punk and post-punk generation getting older and having kids and still having that be a big part of their life.

**Corin:** I think so. Obviously my life is different now, and having kids fills up a lot of it, but music didn't become any less important to me. It's not something that I ever lost any feelings for. It's still something that I really turn to in terms of looking for real truth. I feel like artists who really do that are very few and far between, but when you hit it, and when you hit it in music, to me it just replenishes all of my resources as a spiritual person, and as someone who is looking for truth in this world. I don't see that in a lot of other things.

I mean really good writing can do that. But for me music is the most powerful source of it.

**J.C.:** This is hardly the first time this has come up in American history, but does it feel like music can, or should be, more important than ever now?

**Peter:** Y'know, I told my daughter, we watched the election together, and she was dumbfounded, and I said, “you know what? When I was 13 my main fear was that Richard Nixon was going to kidnap me, shave my head, and send me off to Vietnam to die. This shit's been going on forever.”

Is it bad now? Yeah, of course it's bad. There's this great book by Jacques Barzun and it's a history of the last 500 years (*From Dawn To Decadence*). And the whole theory of the book is, the last 500 years, this is humankind's step towards freedom. We don't go back. Yeah, there's this shit going on. But we have more freedoms to live lives in different ways than anyone did 60 years ago. And our job is to keep doing that. I feel real positive.

And it's not that bullshit about how good music is going to happen with a bad government. Fuck that shit. I'd rather have bad music. Well, we've got that anyway. But I firmly believe that there's a lot of the world that just doesn't march to those drums anymore.

**Corin:** Yeah, I have to admit, I felt really pretty depressed after Trump was elected. For several months. But now I feel like it's really lifted just because he's so incompetent. The utter lack of being able to get anything done is kind of cheering me up, to be perfectly honest. But I think in terms of music, I really feel like music is an extremely powerful way of people telling their story. And that's how you can open up people's minds. I think that's part of why rock and roll has been so powerful.

This is a weird example, but (Tucker's husband, filmmaker Lance Bangs) and I went and saw *The Revolution* the other night. And it was just so incredibly moving that this band came out on the road and played these songs that they had written together. It was a really powerful expression because one of the things about the band that I think is really amazing is it's a rock-n-roll band, and it's truly integrated. There's African-American people, there's white people and it brings together punk, and this kind of steady rock drummer, and Wendy, is almost like a jazz guitarist. Everything thrown together is like 10 times more interesting and more powerful and they were really a band and they really cared about each other, even though they had a lot of problems along the way.

And that to me was a super powerful lesson for America. We have all these different people thrown together and we have our problems but we're spending time together and we love each other and we have to remember that part of it.

**J.C.:** Your first single, “Despierta” has been received as something of a Trump-era anthem.

**Corin:** It was written before Trump started running. That to me was about change in this country and this hope of mine that power is gonna start changing hands in our country. If more diverse people start getting involved, and start voting and being involved in politics, if you just look at the numbers, they're really changing. So that was my hope for what was going to happen in the election and things didn't go that way. But it's a little bit of a fighting song, a bit of a rallying song, and that kind of works to call someone out like a Trump. Just to be like, listen, your power is really tenuous, which I feel like it is. It's tumultuous times that we live in right now.

**J.C.:** And you've said “No Forgotten Son,” was written about Trayvon Martin, which, unfortunately, hasn't dated at all.

**Corin:** That one just hit me like emotionally. Sometimes, for me when I write a song, something is bothering me in my head that I don't even know how to articulate, but it spills out when I start writing a song. It becomes about something that I didn't realize I was consciously thinking about. Because (Trayvon Martin) was just this kid. That resonated with me because I'm raising a kid who's really close to that age, who does stupid shit. Like, goes off in the middle of the night for Skittles and an iced tea. He does stupid shit all the time and he's out late at night when he shouldn't be because that's what teenage boys do. And like, how could the price for that be your life?

That's just...it's mind boggling. And it's unacceptable. So that's kind of where that song came from. And of course, I think that we have a larger problem at work. We have a police system that's so clearly broken. That so clearly needs to be deeply reformed. That so clearly is suffering from the militarization of policing. But when you write a song, you're trying to reach someone emotionally. That story just got to me.

**J.C.:** Corin, you lived in Eugene and Olympia, and Peter, you are from Georgia but got here via Seattle. Do you feel like what brought you to Portland initially is still here?

**Corin:** I do. I mean, it's kind of so in your face now, because there are so many people that moved here. It's almost like, be careful what you wish for. “Oh, we want to create this alternative community!”

**Peter:** Hey, you know what though? Do you need more insurance adjusters or lawyers? I'd rather live in a place where I can come to Dot's and yeah, everyone's got tattoos and I know it's the Portland thing and Portlandia of course. But those people know how to use a city. They're interesting. I like that. I travel all the time and I end up in a lot of small towns and I look around and go, “how would you live in this place?” I grew up in Roswell, Georgia, for God's sake. This feels pretty nice.

**Corin:** The greatest measure to me is the community that my kids are growing up in is so great and so kind. I mean, public high school is still public high school and there's still jocks and mean people and drugs and what have you, but when Trump was elected they had a unity assembly, and the kids formed a circle around the gym and were like, “for those of you who are immigrants, we're not letting ICE touch our property. They're not coming in here. You are safe here.”

That's pretty incredible for a bunch of high school kids to have the depth to reach out and say, “we care about you and these are our values. Our values are people-first.” I'll fight traffic any day to be in a city where that's how kids are brought up to treat each other.