

EVERYTHING BUT JAZZ:



AN INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT LEWIS

Scott Lewis is a painter, writer, record collector, and one half of **The Scott and Gary Show**, a public-access variety show that ran from 1983-1989. As a project, the show was irreverent, punk, and so alive, featuring all sorts of musicians/bands that would go on to develop wildly interdisciplinary and prolific practices. Scott was the cordially funny host who programmed the music, wrangled the musicians, and subtly directed the temperature of the room. With **Agony Klub**, he shares some of his influences, art practice, record collection, and far out experiences.

AK: Was The Scott and Gary Show influenced by anything? I remember reading that Gary was 'the TV guy' and you were 'the music guy' somewhere. Was there a discussion of how it should be to fulfill a vision, or was it a more organic and improvised evolution?

SL: I knew Gary since we were tiny and he had similar interests like comics, art, photography, etc. and was taking TV production in college. So, the show really developed organically through that. We were watching the Grammy awards; I was making fun of the acts, feeling music and pop culture were seeping into quicksand morose... I was known to be very strident in my musical tastes. I said something to the effect of, that at least the TV shows in the 60s had cool music (The Munsters had The Standells)! I can't believe that with all that is happening in music now (this being like 1983 or so – where you had punk, post-punk, new wave, fluffy shirt stuff, ska, roots/Americana, big pompadour hair, cosmic country, hip-hop, etc. – something new or being rediscovered just about every week), that none of it is on TV (except occasionally on *Saturday Night Live*, or a bit earlier on *Midnight Special* and *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert*). Or if it was, it was being made fun of (e.g. the TV show *Quincy's* punk episode "Next Stop, Nowhere"). Gary's response was, "Well there is thing called Public Access TV. Would you want to have a show with bands that you could choose?" I said, "Sure, why not. Just figure out how to go about it and I'll get the bands."

It was the essence of DIY with a bit of idiot savantness mixed in. Gary wanted to create interesting TV and I loved the idea of exposing music that I loved and/or respected on an unsuspecting audience! It was also around this time that I was working for the NYC PBS affiliate WNET and was doing a little bit of performing (can't say it was comedy, can't say it was performance art, can't really say what it was!) so I enjoyed being in front of an audience.

AK: Other than the bands that you featured on the series, do you have favorite bands/musicians? What are you listening to lately?

This is a tough question that I always regret answering because afterwards because I'll inevitably be like, "I totally forgot about—" or, "How could I have not mentioned—"

SL: I am a huge Velvet Underground fan, even the Doug Yule stuff. Love, love The Cramps. If I could be one musician it would be Larry Parypa, the guitar player in The Sonics. Other faves – Lydia Lunch, Lene Lovich, Lee Hazelwood, so cool. Having 1/2 Japanese on *The Scott and Gary Show* was so such a thrill for me. Contemporary: Valerie June is fantastic – her music is a timeless mixture of all that is great. I really like Marissa Nadler and her dreamy spaced-out folk. Prom Queen is hilarious and has so much style. Josephine Foster is mesmerizing. Then there are the obscure private press artists who keep me crawling on the floor at record stores and busy on eBay.¹

In a way, a big influence is looking back at things I enjoyed as a kid, and then being older and still enjoying them, but seeing it from a different perspective and understanding. I take pride in that I have almost all the Wheaton College Whim's records (I just need their Backporch Song album which has versions of "White Bird" and "Up On The Roof"). The Bisons record has a fantastic version of "Stairway to Heaven" and this is a Christian High

School! I guess the powers that be thought the song was about going to...heaven! What is interesting about these records is that major influences are Joni Mitchell and Neil Young, both of whom I am not a particular fan of. But when a 16-year-old cheerleader tries to sound like Joni, or some guy sitting stoned in his dorm channels Neil and does it their own way...

AK: Right, this is the idea of the #popularesoteric, about how we as artists cycle through our influences really earnestly, but then come back with something that is so far off from the starting point. This cycle, it's circular not like a circle, but a spiral. I mean, the most famous Scott and Gary episode is the one with The Beastie Boys as a punk band! What was the biggest challenge of that series?

SL: The biggest challenge without a doubt was finding studios that would let us tape. The few studios in NYC really just wanted shows that were in-out without any production. Much of 80s Public Access were call-in shows, psychics, religious, etc. There was no real set-up except for a chair, a phone and a sign or banner. We used to book extra time for setting up the background, sound check, etc. We saw our show as a total production. We also had audiences, many of whom danced (this was encouraged – just not for the Butthole Surfers episode!) and this freaked out the people who ran these little studios. There were also a few studios run by sleazy types who told us how we could make money in a clandestine ways, which was not what we were about at all.



Scott (left) and Gary (right), in front of the Beastie Boys, January 1984.

With all these difficulties, it wasn't a surprise when we were thrown out of our original studio on 23rd St (after the episode with No King which was a black tie affair and turned into a great TV party and after-party!). The studio manager could not deal with all the fun going on and threw us out and told us we could never return.

We then taped at a recording studio owned by Moogy Klingman of Todd Rudgren's Utopia. We brought our own cameras in for those shoots. Moogy was quite the character who regaled us with stories, like how he discovered Cindy Lauper. I think we did 6 episodes there. That ended when the studio was shut down because I believe bills were not being paid and the equipment was confiscated! I then tried to get my 'pals' at WNET to let me use their studio. A lot of the guys working there thought the show was cool and wanted to meet 'cute punk girls.' But in the end, we just didn't have the budget. We were then saved by a superhero: Jeff Krulik (*Heavy Metal Parking Lot*) offered the studio he was managing in Maryland. That is the studio where we did the episode in our underwear (the joke being we lost our luggage along the way) and got into a real fight with the band The Velvet Monkeys. This was also the episode where one of the crew pulled the switch so that all this went out live and people started calling the station about guys in their underwear fighting on TV.

So yeah, the biggest challenge was having a space. It is frustrating to me looking back because we would have done so many more episodes if we had local (NY/NJ) studios available to us. Getting guests were never a problem. This was a great opportunity for these musicians to get TV exposure. I don't think too many people were calling 1/2 Japanese in 1984 to be on TV. We also syndicated our show by sending it to other Public Access Systems. So at different points we were broadcasted in Austin, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Boston, etc.

AK: That sounds like such an amazing and fraught time! Did you have much of a crew?



The whole crew from the Ben Vaughn Combo episode, in Maryland, April 1989.

episodes in stereo before you could broadcast in stereo! Besides Gary directing and our audio person, we had 2 and then later 3 camera people – all of whom were really into the show. And we had 2 editors over the course of the show – both of whom were friends and wanted material to hone their skills. Both are now video professionals. We were friendly guys and introduced crew to guests so that everyone was relaxed with each other. Pizza helps.

AK: NYC, Brooklyn, NJ have changed a lot, flipped over, gentrified over the years. I guess it's always been changing, but do you feel any remorse or sadness when the iconic music venues, the record shops, the bars have closed and are still closing? How has it affected your art practice?

SL: I grew up in Brooklyn, then lived in Forest Hills (yes – Ramones territory!) and have been out in NJ for the last 10 years or so. What will always be special about New York to me is the subway. Once, I was riding the subway and there was a fairly conservative looking woman probably in her early 40s standing in front of me holding the subway car pole. I noticed she was biting her nails...for a very long time. Then I noticed the blood dripping down from her fingertips. She was biting the skin around her nails causing blood to flow! This went on for at least 30 minutes and was continuing as I got off. That became a painting. In a way, my paintings are like plays or scripts because I develop characters that interact on canvas. A good example of that is my painting "Hank"... He's sitting in a bar crying while there is a whole kaleidoscope of frivolity going on around him. Hank is being ignored even though he is wearing his new orange sweater that the salesperson recommended for him.

I have spent some time in Philly the last few years and it reminds me more of what NYC used to be with alternative art spaces (like the Philadelphia Mausoleum of Contemporary Art), a good music scene and accessible music venues. Plus, rents are much cheaper than in NYC. But I never want to be the person who as they get older pines for the "good old days." And I believe you can't stop things from changing, especially when there is money involved and there are always those who take advantage. It's funny, I recently exhibited at a very cool space in Chester, NJ called The Hive. Great space, great art and the theme was 'Masquerade.' What was really a bit mind blowing was that the space was in a strip mall. When I got directions I was told to go to the Shop Rite Mall and the gallery was 2 doors down from The Mattress King!



Hank, 30"x38", gouache, watercolor, acrylic, ink, and pencil, on illustration board, 1997.

It did not have quite the panache as saying, “the corner of Prince and Broadway”, but the woman running the space was so passionate about art (and this was not safe art – it was a pretty edgy show) that I felt hopeful. Places are losing their individuality and uniqueness, but this is where the artists need to take the lead to create new spaces and opportunities.

AK: That's a nice way of putting it. Maybe the role of the 'avant-garde' now is to return, with much hindsight, to its proletarian roots.

SL: There is always a way to make meaningful art, it will take more work but it is worth it. And if one believes in their art, then they will find a way and create their own scene. To a degree, I felt we did that with *The Scott and Gary Show* – I didn't like what was on TV so I created my own. In times of adversity, artists should be even more inspired. As “they” say, keep on fighting the good fight!

¹ Another genre I collect is moody singer/songwriter albums by nuns. Lots of songs about being lost, finding oneself, etc. A couple of great ones are *Listening In On Centering Down* by the Association of Contemplative Sisters and *Sister Germaine's Songs of Salvation for Church and School*. And sometimes you really hit the jackpot by finding an album that combines both School and Xian (vinyl collector code for Christian) – I am really looking forward to listening to Joel Perales and The Faith Singers', “Let's Talk About The Lord”! From the cover it looks like a xian/lowrider hybrid. Even if it stinks, it still has a dynamite cover. An absolutely amazing record is The Search Party's *Montgomery Chapel*. To me, it is like a cross between Jefferson Airplane and The Velvet Underground. And it was produced by Rev. Nicholas Freund! One funny thing that I have found while searching for Xian records is how many have the song, “He Touched Me” which cracks me up.

Then there was the time I bought a CD of the soundtrack to *Carnival of Souls* on eBay and the seller was Ed Kuepper of Aussie punk legends, The Saints! But I digress. I also enjoy after buying a cool/interesting old obscure record, trying to track down the artists and sending them a fan letter. I love acknowledging someone who might think their work was lost or forgotten. I have gotten some great responses! One guy told me about his drug problem when he was in the band and now he was into church, etc. When I followed up with the idea of writing an article, he became worried that people would know about his past and cut off contact. Another guy who was part of a Kansas trio that put out a 1964 folk album became a big-time lawyer, married the girl in the group and they later divorced. Another cool artist I contacted and replied is Sarah Kernochan (who later became a successful filmmaker and writer) who put out a great album called *House of Pain* in the early 1970s and created an amazing ahead-of-the-times video for the album. It is on YouTube and should be seen by all!

But I have lots of new wave, blues, Hawaiian, weird cover records, punk, country and probably my favorite genre garage psychedelia. No jazz!

Opposite pages: *Constance*, 22"x28" acrylic and gouache on canvas, 2012.
Jocelyn, 22" x 28" acrylic, gouache, and ink on canvas, 2005.

