

March 1, 1992

Mama oo pow pow

Who's gonna twist and shout

Mama oo pow pow

Who shot the la la out

Your gamagoochie's got the gagas

And your hoochie coochie's hangin' out

- "Mama Oo Pow Pow"

by Lux Interior & Poison Ivy Rorschach

The lovely "Mama Oo Pow Pow" is just one reason the Cramps are America's greatest rock band. In a gut-wrenching gasp, songwriters Lux Interior and Poison Ivy cover Willie Dixon ("Hoochie Coochie Man"), the Isley Brothers ("Twist and Shout") and New Orleans soul man Oliver Morgan ("Who Shot the La La?").

To top it off, the song is about an adult recreational activity (i.e., spanking).

The Cramps play a frightening hybrid of loud psychedelia and rockabilly in a lava-lamp-lit lounge setting. With dramatic sardonic tones, lead singer Interior sounds like a psychopath in a karaoke bar. That isn't much of a stretch. The Cramps once gave a free concert for patients at a Southern California mental hospital.

These are some of my favorite Cramps songs: "What's Inside a Girl?," "How Far Can Too Far Go?" and the brand-new "Eyeball in My Martini."

Obviously, the Cramps are not concerned with radio airplay, pointy-headed music conferences or Grammy Awards. The Cramps' maverick approach to making music is the second reason they are America's greatest rock band.

The Cramps' live show - which rolls through the Riviera on Saturday - is unforgettable. Interior strips down to black high heels and a feathered G-string. That could be inviting, except that Interior is a guy.

I am looking at the back of the Cramps' latest release, "Look Mom No Head!" (Restless Records). Interior is dressed in that arresting strip club getup. His cleanly shaven legs look like the road repairs on Clybourn Avenue.

A Cleveland native brought up on ghoulish rocker Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Interior picked up Poison Ivy in 1976 as she was hitchhiking out of Sacramento, Calif. Her father had given her an acoustic guitar as a lovely parting gift. Nice gesture, but she wanted electric. That's the third reason the Cramps are America's greatest rock band.

Dressed in concert garb of gold go-go boots, fishnet stockings and a black fringe bikini (sex is the true spark of rock, reason No. 4), Poison Ivy plays guitar with the tough rockabilly twang of Link Wray, albeit in a loud psychedelic setting. How many women psychobilly players do you know? Take the fifth.

And throughout a frenetic live Cramps show, neither Poison Ivy, Interior, drummer Nicky Alexander nor bassist Slim Chance take time to preach about Nicaragua, equal rights or baby seals, which is the sixth reason I love them so.

The Cramps remember that rock 'n' roll is supposed to be fun.

"A lot of bands are kind of career-minded, and what happens is they set high expectations," Poison Ivy said. "No one can predict what is going to be a hit record or what can make something click. To put your hopes in that, you're just setting yourself up for a major disappointment.

"We avoid that by not having any expectations."

Well, at least there must be the expectation of selling a few records; otherwise, the Cramps wouldn't be in the midst of their longest tour ever. They're playing 45 dates, including shows in Europe; Iguanas, an all-ages cantina in Tijuana, Mexico (seven), and even a March 10 show at the Ranch Bowl Entertainment Center in Omaha, Neb. (Not!)

The Cramps are one of the obvious precursors to popular grungy guitar bands like Teenage Fanclub and Titanic Love Affair. Are they worried about becoming mainstream after spending 15 years in the subterranean?

"We've never felt our band was esoteric and aspired to be mainstream," Poison Ivy said. "We don't think our music is for any elite underground. We certainly have fans who understand more about us than some newer fans do, but it's nice to have a new audience that doesn't know anything about your

past."

And the Cramps are opening some young eyes.

The terminally cute Melody Maker magazine wrote, "Tonight . . . was spectacular. . . . The Addams Family, if they'd ever turned their hands and limbs and skeletal protrusions to rock 'n' roll. . . . The Cramps have always been cabaret, but cabaret's never sounded so sexy. . . . An hour-and-a-half's worth of the finest primordial ooze."

Poison Ivy groaned.

"We don't consider ourselves cabaret at all," she said. "We're a rock 'n' roll band. We just happened to be a compilation of abnormally flamboyant people. Maybe we're somewhat exhibitionistic. Maybe it's just facets of our personality that come out. I'm sure it has caused people to misunderstand what we are or that we are trying to be a parody of something. They don't understand that we just might be this way."

But Poison Ivy admitted that theatrics can distract from the music. For example, at a show last November in Munich, Germany, Interior repeatedly chopped at the stage with the base of a microphone stand from the drum rise. The stage weakened. Interior eventually jumped from the rise, onto the stage - and through the stage. Although he completely disappeared, he kept singing.

And the band played on.

"Lux doesn't seem to feel pain while he is onstage," Poison Ivy pointed out. "He gets messed up a lot. It is not an act. But it did evolve. When we started out, it wasn't that crazy."

The Cramps' latest release, "Look Mom No Head!," is the most even-sounding record of their career. The Cramps have enlisted two new members, Slim Chance and former Weirdo drummer Alexander. He replaced Roy Orbison look-alike Nick Knox, who left the Cramps early last year. "We couldn't work with him anymore," Poison Ivy said, which brings us to the eighth reason they are the best rock band under the sun. Unlike money-grabbing codgers like the Who, the Cramps will kick someone out of the band if they don't like them.

Besides the psychobilly shockers, they play straight-ahead blues and weird cocktail music in an eerie cover of the Runabouts' "Strangeness in Me." The Runabouts were a rockabilly band that came out of Memphis in the late 1950s.

Underscored by bluesy tremolo guitar, a weepy Interior asks the questions,

"When you're all alone, what do you want to do? Do you want to die? Or is it the strangeness in me?"

It sounds like old Dean Martin meeting new Lou Reed.

"We were impressed by the sound of that song,"

Poison Ivy said. "It seems like it was about suicide or the bleakest thing possible. On a lot of the old rockabilly 45s, the B-sides are down-and-out ballads. We like doing those things, too, even though we usually do the rockabilly stuff."

Poison Ivy knows her old 45s - Reason No. 9.

"Lux and I started collecting records after we met," she said. "A record collectors' store had opened up in Sacramento. At the time, we were listening to T. Rex, Alice Cooper and the New York Dolls. We were collecting black vocal groups and we discovered rockabilly through that."

Iggy Pop, another important figure from the Cramps' formative years, lent backing vocals to a raucous cover of the Flower People's "Miniskirt Blues" for the new album.

"We've dug Iggy for years, but we didn't meet him until 1990," Poison Ivy said. "We wanted to get in touch with him to do that song, but he was always on tour or something. When we were recording our album in Hollywood, Lux stumbled into him in the deli next door. He was buying beer. He said he would come by and meet the band. Then he asked if there was anything we wanted him to sing."

So, as the album credits put it, Iggy occurs on "Miniskirt Blues."

Much of the Cramps' strangeness is cultivated from their pop culture interests, ranging from Rat Fink model building to 3-D photography. Interior and Poison Ivy reside in a home that borders on Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, Calif. Inside their house, they have a collection of more than 3,000 horror and exploitation videos. Someday, the Cramps hope to star in their own horror movie. They once signed a contract with Enigma Records at Bela Lugosi's gravesite in Los Angeles.

"The film will happen eventually," Poison Ivy said. "We're still very much interested in film and video." John Mellencamp did "Falling from Grace." The Cramps could do "Falling from Space."

The Cramps have maintained an eye for the unusual throughout their 15-year career. In the new Poison Ivy-Interior composition "Eyeball in My Martini,"

Interior sings about a romantic dinner date where:

". . . In my soup, I found a fly

But there beyond my plate

Was an eyeball in my martini.

A highball with a twist

One in my linguini, too.

I said, "There's something wrong with this."

They rhymed "linguini" and "martini." I bet Bob Dylan hasn't even done that.

Poison Ivy said, "Well, that song was written over martinis. It was inspired by the moment."

Reason No. 10, which is one of the most important ones. Impulse.

That is the charm of the Cramps.

And impulse is the purpose of rock 'n' roll.