

# AFGHAN WHIGS



PHOTO: D.A. FLEISCHER

From the cultural wasteland of Cincinnati—home of racist Reds owner Marge Schott, gay rights repeals, public outcry over exhibits of Robert Mapplethorpe, hardcore legends Slugger and, of course, WKRP—comes the Afghan Whigs. While each album has seen a gradual streamlining of their blend of punk and 70s rock (with a dash of Motown reverence) into a more darkly-hued, increasingly-melodic beast, there's always been a soulful passion at the fore, mainly from vocalist/guitarist Greg Dulli's tobacco-stained, raspy emotional outpouring and heart-tearing lyricism. Their latest album, "Gentlemen," is the sound of emotional despair and darkness. Somber, but, at the same time, cathartic in its rush of slowly-revealing melodies. Previous to "Gentlemen," their Elektra debut, came three albums: the self-released, hopelessly-out-of-print "Big Top Halloween," then, from Sub Pop, "Up In It" and "Congregation,"

which showed a leap-year stylistic jump. There have also been many singles and EP's from Sub Pop, as well. The other Whigs are drummer Steve Earle, guitarist Rick McCollum and bassist John Curley, who I interviewed over the phone from Texas...

**SV:** Cincinnati seems like a really conservative, culturally-oppressive place...

**John:** 'Cause it is!

**SV:** Cause it is. How did you guys manage to evolve beyond what must have been such a constricting environment?

**John:** I guess it maybe was that itself that inspired us. Anywhere that is known as a conservative place is going to have a sort of anti element. That's the part of the population that we belong to, anyway. There's people there that try but, unfortunately, what the rest of the country hears about is a minority of people who get the majority of the bad press. But most of the people, it's not their problem.

**SV:** Yeah, I mean, I just saw in the paper that

people are wondering if the new mayor is a lesbian and there was just a gay rights ordinance that got overturned. It just seems a horrible place in some ways.

**John:** It's terrible. There's a few right-wing community values types there and anti-smoking types. I don't smoke, but it's just ridiculous the extent that people will go to get their point across.

**SV:** Where are they going to outlaw smoking? In all public places?

**John:** They were going to outlaw it at the stadium. Can you believe that?

**SV:** Good luck enforcing it.

**John:** Hey, in Cincinnati they would.

**SV:** Are there any plans to reissue your first album?

**John:** No. We went as far as we were going to go, with that, and we put some of the tracks from it on the "Up In It" CD. So that's about as much as anyone's going to hear of that. There were only 1000 of those ever made.

**SV:** I never heard it. Was it radically different from "Up In It"?

**John:** No, not radically, but it sounds kind of like a demo tape. We were getting our feet wet, pretty much.

**SV:** I have the LP of "Up In It," with the original cover, before it was changed, relatively quickly. Why was that?

**John:** My reason for wanting to change it right away was they used that ugly neon and orange stuff, which I just think is an aesthetic offense to humanity. It was a good idea, but it didn't really say anything about us and that silly picture on the back of that woman with the lights and stuff. We made a mistake in letting them...we thought, wow, Sub Pop can make us a cool cover and learned a valuable lesson early on.

**SV:** You took things into your own hands for "Congregation." You did the photography for the cover, right?

**John:** Yeah, me and my neighbor, Dave.

**SV:** Who's the woman and the baby?

**John:** Her name is Tamika and she's a friend of ours from Cincinnati, a bartender and the kid is Dave's kid.

**SV:** Any deep meaning to the cover, at all.

**John:** It was a cool image. But that's not to say that someone can't derive meaning from it, 'cause there's a couple of different things that you could apply to it.

**SV:** Racial harmony.

**John:** Yeah, that's an obvious one. Or the birth of white music from black music is one that I heard. I think songs and record covers and something like that, it's nice if you can do something that applies to a lot of people in a lot of different ways, so that two people can hear it and walk away with two totally different things.

**SV:** Yeah, the imagery you use on the covers and in the video are kind of oblique and don't necessarily lend themselves to obvious interpretation. So what was the concept

behind the new album cover and the images in the "Debonair" video?

**John:** That's pretty much working out some demons from pre-adolescence, I think. The scenes and a lot of the stuff like that were sort of images of our teenage years. A lot of it was filmed in Greg's neighborhood, where he grew up.

**SV:** Did you all grow up in the Cincinnati area?

**John:** I didn't. Greg and Steve both grew up in the Cincinnati area. Rick grew up in Louisville and I grew up in Washington, DC. But that guy's house, the POW-MIA house, that's real. He runs a museum. He was in Vietnam and that's how he deals with it. Then, like the bowling alley and the fight, that's kind of teenage angst. Basically, the idea with the videos is to do something kind of freaky and interesting. If you've got to do them, you might as well make them good.

(talk about the CMJ panel where there was a hypothetical marketing plan developed for the Afghan Whigs)

**SV:** What do you think about your "art" being bandied about as a commodity, which was the impression I received after seeing that panel.

**John:** That's reality. If you hope to survive on your art, you'd better get used to that. We've always wanted to, so...I don't think we're whores or anything. There's some things that we won't do.

**SV:** Yeah, one of the suggestions that the panel made was having you do a promotional tour and play acoustically in record stores or radio stations and the guy from Elektra said you wouldn't do that.

**John:** No. Shit, there's acoustic guitar on maybe two or three songs a record. God, that's a pretty self-indulgent thing to do, I think. But, like being on TV and stuff like that...as long as they leave us alone.

**SV:** Greg's involved in the videos and I've heard he's a filmmaker. What sort of work has he done?

**John:** He's been in a couple of movies that haven't been out, yet. Mostly independent films that friends of his have made. He's working on developing a screenplay from a book that he read. I would tell you which one, but I don't think I can, yet. But he's written a screenplay of his own that we got money from the record company to produce.

**SV:** Is it going to tie into the band or be independent of it?

**John:** I don't know. Hopefully, a couple of us will be in it and we'll probably all work on it. I hope to, anyway.

**SV:** What made you decide to make the step from Sub Pop to the major label?

**John:** 'Cause the major labels came around saying they'd give us all this money. They pretty much came to us. We weren't looking to leave or anything like that and, all of a sudden, a lot of shit happened all at once. The major labels were looking for independent bands, all of a sudden.

**SV:** Feeding frenzy.

**John:** Yeah, kind of. Greg and I both have a pretty good bullshit detector and we're able to weed out the people that we really didn't need to hang out with or talk to. Fortunately, we were on tour and I say fortunately, because we didn't have time to deal with a lot of that schmoozing stuff. And if you blow somebody off and they're really interested, they're going to come back, anyway. We spent a long time deciding to sign with Elektra. So far, it's been good, I think.

**SV:** What's the reaction been like with Love Jones?

**John:** They're fucking comedians that play music and they put on a great show and their songs are really good, too. They play kind of like Tito Puente/lounge music/conga thing. Usually, people will stand for the fist song with their mouths open but by the end of the

second song, they're clapping, laughing and everyone's really into it.

**SV:** I wonder if any wise-asses are asking for Squirrel Bait covers.

**John:** I'm sure they're being dealt with handily by Ben Daughtrey, if they are.

**SV:** Why did you have Marcy from Scrawl sing "My Curse"?

**John:** She's a fellow Buckeye. That's a song that's been around for a long time that we wrote, before we were even on Sub Pop. Marcy had sang on our first Sub Pop single, as well. We've done stuff with her before. We did a single with her, under the name of Ornament, on No. 6.

**SV:** You guys seem to have a heavy 60s, R&B/Motown influence, especially on the EP that came out after "Congregation." Was that stuff that inspired you?

**John:** Yeah, definitely. All of us listened to the radio for years before we started buying records and that was all the type of stuff that was on although, when we started buying records, we didn't exercise the same good taste. It took us a few years to get back to it.

**SV:** Why did you decide to record at Ardent studios?

**John:** We had met Jody Stephens, the Big Star drummer and it turned out that he knew a lot of the same people we knew and finally, we met. We were talking and he said we should go see him at the studio if we're in Memphis.

A few weeks later, we were in Memphis and we took him up on it. It was a really nice place and when it came time to record, they seemed like nice people and it seemed like a good place to do it. It had a good vibe. We got to see the Big Star master tape collection.

(talk about a rowdy Sub Pop/Touch & Go boat party a few years back in New York)

**John:** It was crazy. It was sponsored by Jaegermeister. That's a sick joke. Have a bunch of bands and unlimited Jaegermeister. What were they thinking? Greg got so fucked up that night, we couldn't even play. He disappeared before the show and, somehow, he made it back to the hotel. That's like having an AA convention sponsored by Budweiser.

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