

MUSIC

Kill Henry Sugar:

Just a Happy Little Depressing Duo

By Al Kaufman

It was an interview I entered with some trepidation. While I had been a fan of Kill Henry Sugar for years, the idea of actually talking to one of them scared me stupid. Their CD covers are always dark and provocative. On their current orange-toned SWING BACK AND DOWN, someone who looks like a Hassidic Jew wanders over long abandoned railroad tracks. They sing of things like Viking funerals. Their sound is sparse, with Erik Della Penna on guitar or banjo, and Dean Sharenow on percussion. They sound like they record their songs from the bottom of a tomb.



Della Penna and Sharenow

Then there's the band's name—so violent, so random. Who the hell is Henry Sugar and why do these morose musicians wish him dead? “The name was Henry Sugar, which was a Roald Dahl book, but someone told us that name was already taken, and that that band already had a record pressed,” explains Della Penna. “We had to put something in front of it, and it was either ‘kill’ or ‘eat,’ so we went with ‘kill’ because we thought we’d be tough.”

And that's the thing. Della Penna is not tough. He's a loquacious, slightly geeky, and very funny New Yorker.

Take, for instance, his last name. When asked if it is “Della Penna,” or just “Penna,” he replies, “It's a two-word last name. I'm not trying to be pretentious. It's a two-word last name, like Van Halen. Only I play finger style guitar, so there's no need for guitar solos. And no need for a bass player.”

Della Penna and Sharenow decided to form a band while backing Joan Osbourne. They soon discovered they both had a penchant for old Irish songs played in the outer boroughs of the Bronx. But you won't hear any piccolos or tin whistles in their music, “I'm not really an Irish pub guy,” says Della Penna. “Dean and I are native New Yorkers, so I like to think we have a certain urbanity to us, and we sort of mixed it together. We try to think of ourselves somewhere between Jimmy Rodgers and Jimmy Breslin. We're both obsessed with New York and the history of New York so we try, musically, to represent that history.”

Tammany Hall video

Their music has been defined as sparse, dark, lo-fi, and, occasionally, Americana. But unlike most Americana, Kill Henry Sugar are considerably lacking in twang. “We

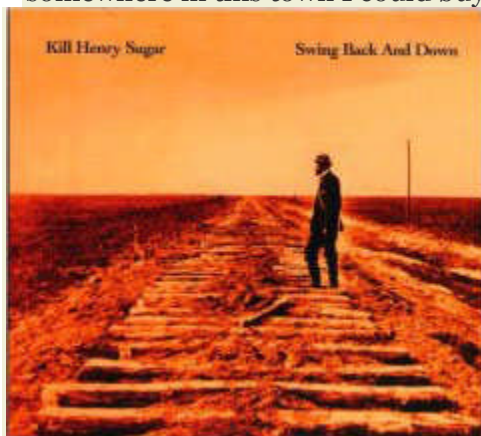
have no business having a twang. I'm not a twangy guy. So we're doing what we do, from our roots."

Their roots are planted deeply in New York. The opening track on SWING BACK AND DOWN, "Where the Road Ends," is from the point of view of a 17th century New York foreigner, possibly a slave or captured Native American (Della Penna is not sure). The song is a mesh of a spiritual and an old railroad song. It's dark and depressing with just a glint of hope.

Contrasting sharply is the next cut, "At the Mall," which, by Kill Henry Sugar standards, is an upbeat number that pays homage to the perennial teen hangout. Della Penna sees it as something more: "There's really something soothing about the mall. You really can't pull any shit at the mall because everybody's in the same boat. You're all just walking around slouching with your bag and your family or your girlfriend. It's just this great leveler. And I was thinking of New York because New York has malls right in the city now, where once there weren't. This was the anti-mall town. Now you walk into these façade buildings, and damn, you're in a mall. And the malls are the capital of today. They're where everyone is safe. Get yourself into the mall and you're in the fortress. I think those are the churches and castles of today. They're the sanctuaries, the sanctuaries of humanity. And they're the only place people walk."

They celebrate New York's diversity in their own happily pessimistic way on "Puerto Rican Day Parade." "Everybody gets a parade in New York," explains Della Penna with both pride and disdain. "New York is one of the last places where everyone celebrates their ethnicity publicly and arrogantly. There's a Greek Day Parade, a Puerto Rican Day parade, a Columbus Day parade, an Italian parade, a St. Patrick's Day parade, a Mexican Day parade. . . They're all the same drunken sprawls."

Like proper New Yorkers, Della Penna exhibits a certain complex cosmopolitan attitude that manifests itself in his songs. The video for "Tammary Hall," about political corruption, is hilariously macabre—featuring sex, gluttony and murder. Onstage, the duo demonstrate the same type of morbid humor. Della Penna describes their live show thusly: "It's not raucous. It's intimate and chamberly. If I could, I would light a little fire. No incense. Maybe the smell of antiseptic, or I'd cauterized a wound; pull a lead bullet out of somebody while singing if I could. If I could have any stage prop, it would be an infected leg with a piece of buckshot in it. I'm sure somewhere in this town I could buy some body parts."



Kill Henry Sugar
SWING BACK AND DOWN
Surprise Truck Entertainment

It's the same type of humor and melancholic gothic sound that fans of Tom Waits have grown to expect. Yet Della Penna's voice is as sweet as Waits' is gravelly. It's the perfect juxtaposition for his earthy songs.

Della Penna says Kill Henry Sugar does not lose money, but he has no illusions of grandeur. He understands that Kill Henry Sugar will never be the next big thing. "We've abandoned that idea," he says. "When we decided to really nail down Kill Henry Sugar it was like taking a vow of poverty. We understand where it's at. It's like when one decides to become a philosopher. You know what the odds are; you know what you're doing, so I think it's like that. The best we could achieve is having a room full of people yell, 'Yeah, yeah, you're right.'"

He admits that he and Sharenow make the bulk of their money on other projects. They have backed Natalie Merchant and are currently on tour backing Joan Baez, who occasionally plays the Della Penna-penned "This Is the Kingdom."

In a Barbara Walters-like interview moment, Della Penna also makes the admission that they occasionally write music for TV shows. He then tries to retract it. "No, don't say that. Does that sound chinsy? Do we sound like whores?"

He is reminded that he is a musician and a musician's job is to make money writing and performing music.

"Yeah, all right," he concedes. "We're just street whores. I think that sounds better."