

MUSIC

The resurrection of a lost Art

Years after a brief career, Art Bergmann returns with music that should have made his name

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VICTORIA -- The demo tapes were going to take Art Bergmann to the big time.

The Vancouver singer was a lean and angry performer with a ferocious presence. He wrote razor-sharp lyrics about life's underbelly, singing tales of molestation and desperation in a voice as sordid as his gutter topics.

Any schmo can write a love song. Mr. Bergmann preferred exploring the motives of a guy who guns down his family.

No "moon-June" rhyming for him. His stuff was smart.

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In the mid-1980s he recorded some songs in Vancouver with an up-and-coming producer. The demo tapes led to a contract with a Toronto label. They had the songs produced by John Cale, who founded the Velvet Underground with Lou Reed. Mr. Cale eschewed the loud rhythm guitars that had been so much of the Bergmann sound. It was OK, but it wasn't really Art.

Mr. Bergmann later had a Juno nomination, got signed and dumped by another major label, continued to write songs of genius, kicked a debilitating drug habit (the experience of which was captured in the album title, *What Fresh Hell Is This?*), and, finally, settled down on a farm in Southern Alberta, where he lives a spartan life as a semi-recluse.

The big time never happened.

Over the years, the original demo tapes took on a semi-mythological status.

If only John Cale had appreciated guitars, if only the tapes' up-and-coming producer had been employed on the record, if only Art not been torn by his allegiance to his art and his uneasiness with the business, then maybe Mr. Bergmann's music might have found the wide audience it deserved.

Now, 20 years later, the demo tapes are being released.

Bearwood Music is releasing a compact disc next month titled *Lost Art Bergmann*.

The independent label is owned by Ray Fulber and Susann Richter, a husband-and-wife team who played bass and keyboards on the demos and in Bergmann's band, Poisoned.

"I think Art is a Canadian icon," Mr. Fulber said. "He's written some brilliant songs that stand at any level."

The couple toured with Mr. Bergmann for about five years. They now live in Gibsons on the Sunshine Coast, where they operate a recording studio from their small acreage overlooking Georgia Strait.

The tapes spent decades in a box happily not lost despite some wild times. He hung on to the tapes in part because he considered them his "I told you so" to the music industry.

The passing years caused the tapes to become unplayable. The solution? A slow baking at 135 degrees Fahrenheit in a Snackmaster food dehydrator. Cook for six hours, turn every 30 minutes.

The tapes were mixed by Bob Rock, who had been passed over as producer in favour of John Cale. The irony is that Mr. Rock, which is, incidentally, his real family name, went on to become one of rock's great hit-makers, handling recordings by Aerosmith, Metallica, and Motley Crue.

Three of the songs on *Lost Art Bergmann* were produced by Paul Hyde, Mr. Rock's partner in the Payola\$.

"It's radio-friendly and then you listen to the lyrics and it's heavy," Mr. Fulber said.

He knows life offers twists and surprises and ironies that are only funny with the passage of time. Take his father, Fred, a social democrat in Germany at the time of Hitler's rise. He was working as a merchant mariner when he jumped ship at Fanny Bay on Vancouver Island.

It was 1938. He lurked around isolated logging camps, picking up work as a cook as he tried to teach himself English.

After Canada went to war with Germany, though, he was picked up by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police as an enemy alien. He likely spent time in a prison camp with other Germans, some of whom would have been the very Nazis from whom he was fleeing.

Nazi atrocities figure on more than one Bergmann song, as the songwriter contemplates the horror and his own heritage. He was born to a devoted Mennonite family in the Vancouver suburbs. Some of his earliest drug experiences came while hanging out with the juvenile delinquents sent to live with his family.

He joined the Mount Lehman Grease Band, which gained an avid following in the Abbotsford area. One of his bandmates was David Mitchell, who later chose politics over punk. He wrote a favourable biography of Social Credit premier W.A.C. Bennett before being elected an MLA himself. Mr. Mitchell recently became president of the Public Policy Forum and is a frequent contributor to The Globe and Mail's op-ed page.

Mr. Bergmann followed a different path. He played in a band called the Schmorqs before joining the K-Tels, for whom he co-wrote *Hawaii*, a blistering and ribald paean to every Canadian's desire to escape winter. The song, an instant punk classic, got no airplay because of the frequent adjectival use of a common expletive.

(The K-Tels got a lawyer's letter ordering them to desist using the good name of the Winnipeg-based company known for its household gadgets and its "Sound Explosion!" compilation albums. They briefly renamed themselves the X-Tels before settling on Young Canadians, a deceptively squeaky-clean moniker.)

Then came the punk superband, Los Popularos, and then came Poisoned and then came disappointment.

Mr. Bergmann will play his first Vancouver date in many years. He suffers from arthritis, making guitar-playing difficult, and had an operation last fall on his back.

On March 26, he will join his old bandmates from Poisoned on stage as part of a CD release concert.

It is being held during a week of Juno festivities leading to the music awards show three days later.

"It's going to be a spectacle," Mr. Fulber promises.

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