

MC5 Back On Shakin' Street

Dave Marsh, *Creem*, October 1971

**Their mamas all warned 'em
not to come into town
But they got it in their blood,
now they gotta get down
– 'Shakin' Street', The MC5**

FEW ROCK'N'ROLL BANDS have been saddled with such import, right from the beginning, as the MC5. It's only fitting, because they approached the rock'n'roll scene with guns drawn, armed to the teeth; they were gonna *take over*, be the Baddest Boys in the Bad Boy world of rock and roll, fuse politics with rock, dope (read: religion), and fucking in the streets and market it all as one neat package, precisely labelled: The Revolution.

They possessed roots all the way back to the Crusaders in the eleventh century, they were filled with real righteous American zeal, religious fervor, a sense of purpose and of necessity. This was the MC5, brothers and sisters, the hottest highest energy crew of dudes to come pouring out of the bad-assed Motor City into the American cultural continuum since the halcyon days of the notorious Purple Gang. And what's more: *they meant business*.

Or so it seemed.

Despite all the complications, as they say, the reception to their albums has been good, in many places as phenomenal as they knew all along it would be, as they were confident it HAD to be.

Their live performances were another question though, especially in those early days. The Five's sets tended more towards flash'n'frenzy than anyone aside from the Who, and the problem was that there were numerous people in the dark days of the late sixties who just weren't *ready* for shock-rock.

So the Five always left one flank unguarded, the one where detractors could sneak up and ask: "Well yeah. I can see that that's something, that's something there all right. But is it MUSIC?" An almost imperceptible sneer accompanied by a chortle of glee at your choked stare.

Because *of course* it was music (even though it wouldn't have mattered if it wasn't). More than that, it was rock and roll music. Rock and roll music at its very finest. Maybe it's that I cut my rock teeth on the MC5, or that I am possessed by the peculiar Motor City aesthetic, but I'd go and see that brand of the MC5 even if the Rolling Stones were across the street. Nothing I've ever experienced has been nearly comparable and it may be a long time coming before we all have the collective spirit to do it again. So I cherish those memories; be forewarned, or read no further. This is as much *caveat* as you're gettin'.

The dream, for the MC5, was that of toughassed downriver kids who came from factoryville to the big city, became neo-beatniks, prehippies, and – in the end – the most avant-garde rock and roll group the world has ever known. That's the dream. For awhile it looked as though the MC5 had made it real.

Their first album, *Kick Out the Jams*, was musically avant-garde, for it attempted to key into both the unrealized energies that rock'n'roll had been suggesting were there all along and the Chicago/New York black music of Coltrane and Coleman and the rest. Those who were prepared for a total assault on the sensory culture to which they had been accustomed were

delighted with this dancing, tribal epiphany; those who weren't ready were aghast, horrified in a way they'd never been before by a mere rock'n'roll band. Those ready were immediately and totally swept up, those unready thrust out quickly. Halfway didn't exist for the MC5. A Real Problem.

Since the Five were the one band to attempt to let their music carry an explicitly and implicitly political, even revolutionary (as they interpreted it) message, they were laid wide open for other, more cutting attacks. Not the least of them were from the Aquarian Brigade – you know, "fuck, ma-un, hell wid polertiks, le's jest go out an' have a GUD TAHM!" But in the end, the barbs from hard-core politicians who couldn't understand a political rock band that didn't even know any Pete Seeger songs (which is what 'Street Fightin' Man' is, even if it does have 'Jumpin' Jack Flash' as music) were just as damaging.

This criticism was heaviest, naturally, while the band was with the White Panthers, and thus John Sinclair, though some of it has come as a direct result of their leaving the Party – and even from the Party itself.

But to anyone who is familiar with the first album, the Five's political premise would seem to be musical, in the first place, not rhetorical. They weren't talking revolution, they were making it (as far as they were concerned), and the only "political" song they cared to put on *Kick Out the Jams* was John Lee Hooker's 'Motor City Is Burning'. And if that makes a Marxist revolutionary, then both Hooker *and* Gordon Lightfoot can be hung on your bedroom wall next to Mao and Huey.

Rather, the Five's politics were an outgrowth of their unsophistication, their teenage frenzy and their musical stance, which encompassed both. They carried them into each successive battle like a tattered flag, doing macho duels with the forces of Good Vibes and Capital M Music. That's what turned people off, that is what caused them to be accused of being a crew of violently irresponsible scions of senseless bloodshed.

Those accusations were, and are ridiculous, anyway. The biggest fear that any of their politically aware admirers in Detroit had was that they weren't political *enough*, that star status came before politics. It was a confusing time, but it's still a confusing time. Then again, maybe it always will be where the MC5 are concerned.

II

**The people on Shakin' Street
they find it so shockin'
But all of the kids
just keep on rockin'
They ain't got no time
to think about stoppin'
They gotta get down,
and do a little stompin'**

THE INTENT OF THE Five *was*, of course, primarily musical, because they were a rock and roll band. "Rock and roll IS the revolution," was about the heaviest political statement they ever made, when you stop and think about it, and that's not so heavy. The attempt to make *Kick Out the Jams* seem like a Maoist tract, or an excursion into jazz-rock is simply ludicrous. That album has far more to do with the Who than with Sun Ra, and it always did.

The captivating influence the Five possessed, was basically that of naive white boys playing (discovering?) techno-rock, the sort that pushed electronics to their earsplitting limits. The idea was to see how close to the threshold of pain one could come and still survive. If that

seems a familiar idea it should. 'I Can't Explain' was a hit in Detroit, the Who did it, and rock theatre was *their* idea in the first place.

The Who are the prototype for the Five, along, with the nastiness of Them and the power of the Rolling Stones. But more than anything else, the Who. Wayne Kramer and Fred Smith's cosmo-wiggle stage act was directly linked to Peter Townshend's stage moves, only more-so, and Daltrey must've been the major influence in Rob Tyner's mike-dangling, stage humping act. It was almost a surreal parody, right down to Dennis Thompson, who kicked his set with the abandon and power and sweat of Moon, and the Entwhistle-like Mike Davis, content to stand in the shadows of his bass amp, amidst the carnage.

But the Five took things much, much further than the Who. If 'I Can't Explain' had been a warning as clear as Hiroshima that a new day was dawning in rock and roll, then 'Kick Out the Jams' was the guerrilla rock equivalent of the Viet Cong. They even *called* it guerrilla rock in those days, fittingly enough. It was subversive in a certain term, for sure, avant garde and liberating as well. And though the time is past for taking rock AS revolution seriously the time is not past for seeking help from it.

The Five were a Polaris missile, as well, sleek and self-assured, truly developing children of the Sixties' technocracy that they'd grown up in. But with all the built-in limitations as well, of course. Still, they *had* passed beyond the thresholds opened by the Who (who never did much with that part of their trip anyway) and into a post-cataclysmic ozone of the spirit where the spitfire images that they projected with Burroughsian glee were only the beginning of something big and *really* apocalyptic.

That is, I mean, the MC5 were cosmic.

III

THE BLANKET STATEMENT TO THE FOLKOSPHERE

We the MC5 know that there is altogether too much confusion on this planet, Terra, Sol 3...CANCER OF THE MIND AND BODY OF THE SPECIES!!!...all leading to ultimate chaos and destruction. Never before have we seen a planet so AFRAID of the necessary and indicated alterations to resolve the gross imbalance that exists on the Planet as a whole...at every site of our energy blast we have witnessed...the colonial White Man's brutal degradation of the World that gave him life and breath. The sight was and is a stink to our nostrils...

WE SPEAK TO YOU AT THIS INSTANT!!! WE COME TO YOU WITH THE JOYOUS MESSAGE OF YOUR OWN CAPABILITIES WHICH ARE LIMITLESS AND WAITING FOR THE TOUCH OF YOUR ACTIONS!!! WE CALL UPON ALL FREE ANIMALS (YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE) TO TAKE UP THE BANNER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE FLAMING SWORD OF REALITY AND SLASH ALL BONDS WITH THE DEATH WORSHIPPING SALAMANDER CULTURE OF THE MENOPAUSAL, ROTTING CADAVERS OF AMERICA!!!

WE, THE MC5, DEDICATE OUR BILLIONS OF MEGATONS OF ENERGY AND EVERY DROP OF OUR BLOOD TO SEE THAT THIS BLASPHEMY STOPS NOW!!! WE ARE PISSED...COME OUT!!! COME OUT NOW!!! THIS IS THE SUMMER OF DANCING UNDER THE SUN-GOD! THE TIME IS RIGHT NOW!! WE CALL FOR...CONSOLIDATION, A GATHERING OF OUR ENERGIES, A POLARIZATION OF THE COSMIC ENERGY THAT BURNS THROUGH US ALL!!! WE MUST SAVE THE PLANET AND OUR PEOPLE!! WE MUST REALIZE (MAKE REAL) OUR HUMAN POTENTIALITIES TO THE ULTIMATE!!!...THIS IS OUR PROGRAM...THIS IS OUR

**CRY...IT IS OUR LIFE!!!!...WE SALUTE YOU! WE PRAISE YOU FOR YOUR STRENGTH!
WE BLESS YOU!! WE STAND ON THE PINNACLE OF COMM, OUR FISTS RAISED IN
THE CAUSE OF OUR PEOPLE, OUR PLANET AND THE BALANCE OF THE IMMORTAL
UNIVERSE...WE ARE WITH YOU!!! WE ARE YOU!!**

– THE MC5, 9 APRIL 1969

UNFORTUNATELY, THE MC5 never put 'Black to Comm' – "the Hydrogen Bomb" as what Wayne used to introduce it – on record. It was a totally exciting, communal, highly ritualized experience, designed to shake people up and – more than just EX-cite – IN-cite them. With Sinclair and the rest of Detroit's inner-circle hip pulling horns, percussion and whistles out of the seeming void while Tyner chanted and sang lyrics even more bizarre than those in the interior of "Starship", 'Comm' opened with a five minute guitar line – from Fred Smith's monster Mosrite – that was more than a mere solo. It was the sound of The Beginning. Like winding up a yoyo. And when the yo-yo made its plunge, the band came in, like a herd of unknown beasts, thundering and storming as though they were the very Armageddon.

It was not the energy release, the gradual peaking and building of the Apollonian Grateful Dead, it was Dionysian high energy all the way, with no letting up, blasting and surging with a relentless, nervous energy, a total RELEASE. "Let your love COMM down, let it come on down, I said, DOWN DOWN DOWN, let it comm on down, in the Midnight Hour, I said GET DOWN GET DOWN GET DOWN," Tyner sang and the building grew and grew and grew, and they *really* exploded, after you thought they already had; then a twenty-minute drift of various degrees of insanity, all intense, a gathering together, to build once again for the climax, and 'Black to Comm' ended as it began, with a screaming, soaring burst of feedback from the holy, righteously charged guitars and amplifiers of the equally holy, righteously charged guitars and amplifiers of the MC5.

But what did it all mean?

The MC5 had been almost consciously chosen – maybe they *were* consciously chosen – by Sinclair and company to be Shaman for an entire community. ("Poet is priest," in Allen Ginsberg's famous words.) Indeed, Sinclair himself was more visionary mystic than Marxist politico, at least at that point, as his liner notes to *Kick Out the Jams* bear out:

The MCS will bring you back to your senses from wherever you have been taken to hide. Their whole lives are totally given to this music...They are a working model of the new paleo-cybernetic culture in action.

THE MUSIC IS THE SOURCE AND EFFECT OF OUR SPIRIT FLESH. The MCS is the source and effect of the music, just as you are. Just as I am. Just to hear the music and have it be ourselves is what we want...WE ARE A LONELY DESPERATE PEOPLE PULLED APART BY THE KILLER FORCES OF CAPITALISM, AND COMPETITION AND WE NEED THE MUSIC TO HOLD US TOGETHER. SEPARATION IS DOOM. We are free men and we demand a free music, a free high energy source that will drive us wild into the streets of America yelling and screaming and tearing down everything that would keep people slaves.

The MC5 is that force. The MC5 is the revolution in all its applications. THERE IS NO SEPARATION. EVERYTHING IS EVERYTHING. THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR...The MC5 is here now for you to hear and see and feel now! Give it up, come together, get down...what you have here is a testimonial to the ABSOLUTE POWER AND STRENGTH OF THESE MEN. GO WILD! THE WORLD IS YOURS! TAKE IT NOW AND BE ONE WITH IT! KICK OUT THE JAMS, MOTHERFUCKERS! AND STAY ALIVE WITH THE

MCS!
(all emphasis added)

Those are hardly the words a traditional Marxist-Leninist would have chosen to describe a revolutionary attack force. Rather, they are words of exhortation from a High Priest, a religious leader; the early White Panthers statements in general, and Sinclairs writing almost papal bulls. The slogans ("Everything is everything", "There is no separation", "There is nothing to fear", "Separation is doom" – Rob Tyner came up with that one – "All power to the people") became invocations, part of a liturgy whose time had come.

To understand why the MC5, you have to accept their metaphysic as more than a riff – or if only as a riff, as a sincerely meant one – and Sinclair and the MC5 as true-believers. At different levels, perhaps, or from different perspectives, but there's really little question that they all believed it.

If the band saw it all as a game, at any rate, they played with such zeal and intensity that it was hard to see how they didn't take at least the *game* seriously. Politics? Sure, its political, they might have said, but only at the highest political level. Right then, Sinclair and the Panthers agreed with them, because they were only transitionally Marxist, they were still in the process of losing their hippie-ness. But as the Five became more hard-core in their rock and roll stance (and the Panthers more entrenched in the Marxism) a split was inevitable.

Rob Tyner and I talked for a few minutes the other night and we both agreed that, were *Kick Out the Jams* released this year, it would not meet with half the resistance it did then. That's unquestionable, to me. People are ready now.

The worst part of the reception the Five got, was summed up by Sinclair in *Liberation Music* in *CREEM* last winter: "...a revolutionary consciousness...is finally the cosmic consciousness we used to talk about before it started to sound corny – and we have to realize that *it only started to sound corny because there were so many cynical creeps around us who were laughing at our naivete and ripping us off for what we had created out of it at the same time.*"

Unfortunately if the Five ever *did* see themselves as mystics *or* revolutionaries, it was certainly only an adjunct to what they really wanted to be: rock and roll stars. At a higher, more conscious level perhaps, but rock'n'roll stars nonetheless. Sinclair, seeing that the band from his perspective (and he was as close to one of them as could be, at least for a time) saw them as a device for furthering HIS ideas, which weren't necessarily theirs. Thus, John's letter from Jackson Prison to Wayne Kramer: "You wanted to be bigger than the Beatles, while I only wanted you to be as big as Chairman Mao."

I don't buy the idea of stars, because the whole star trip is antithetical to what the alternative culture represents: stars aren't an alternative at all, they're part of the whole Frank Sinatra entertainment business, which is just another symptom of the fucked-up society we're all fed up with.

On the other hand, I don't think rock'n'roll can define our ideology for us, either. Or rather, it can point out where our ideology is leading us; as Greil Marcus pointed out, if *New Morning* can be used by the Weather-people to define their ideology then it serves its political purpose on that level. But to consciously parade rock'n'roll stars (and stars they wish to remain, for the most part) as our theoreticians is pretty ridiculous. I mean, do you really see David Crosby and Paul Kantner as the leaders of the future? Do you want them to be?

The best you can do in a situation where a rock and roll group is tied to a political party is posit the band as the leaders of some sort of cult, and that's precisely what the Five and the White Panthers tried to do. And it had to be a cult more dedicated and committed, more willing to follow wherever the group led, than the cults that Dylan, the Beatles and the Stones had *unintentionally* fostered.

One would be either totally committed to the cult, or else be dedicated to its extermination. It had to be not only heavy, but heavy-handed, the Five had to be defined as the very best rock'n'roll band in the whole world, or it was no good. Again, the problem of no middle, no half-way. When their message wasn't seen as that, and that first and foremost, they were doomed politically. Which meant that their music didn't get heard as much as it honestly should have, which doomed them musically, as well. Which finally doomed the whole cult. Crunch.

The Five and the Panthers grew further and further apart, internally, and made more and more mistakes externally, because the definitions began to differ on so many levels. The Panthers, under pressure from other breeds of radical cats, were becoming more and more oriented to the whole rock'n'roll star trip, which they were forced into doing because of a sort of naivete. They had never had the Big Time to deal with before, and they saw it as a goal, without seeing the traps it held.

Externally, there was such a lack of preparation made when the Five moved into the national consciousness that it came off as a rock'n'roll star trip, one of the best, I'm sure, but only that, nonetheless. Where the proper preparations were made, the result was success; people loved it and the political objections were few. Where they weren't disaster resulted.

It was different at home of course, because the Five had had five years in Detroit to acclimate their audience, and to sweep a large portion of that audience along with them.

But they hadn't much experience out side of Detroit, aside from that abortive concert in Lincoln Park in Chicago, during the Democratic Convention in 1968. They were the only group that played there, and it managed to get them loved by certain Yippies, and even written up by Mailer in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*. But it didn't give them any roots in the Chicago community with their audience there.

IV

**Baby baby help me,
you really really must
I need a healthy outlet
for my Teenage Lust
– 'Teenage Lust'**

SINCE THEIR POLITICS alienated them from the Biz, however, there was nobody left for them to relate to *but* us. And I don't think that the MC5 ever let an audience of freaks down when they got a chance to play for them.

Of course, the young audience was what mattered to the Five in the first place, because they were *the* audience for hard rock and roll. The Five and Sinclair understood that at a meat level but they had an awful hard time carrying out the program that went with it. What had worked so smoothly and efficiently at home just wasn't going to work on a national level, probably because – as John noted in a recent letter – "we tried to do too much at once."

The problem of time was complicated by Sinclair's repeated courtroom battles. By summer he had been convicted in Oakland County for assault, where he was given thirty days (he was out on appeal bond in half an hour, which was about twice as much time as it took the pigs to cut off three years growth of hair). In the same trial Fred Smith, the Five's guitarist, had been acquitted, which did nothing to better the MC5-White Panther relationship. Next he was popped for crossing the U.S./Canadian border without registering as a "narcotics violator" – which his parole officer had explicitly exempted him from doing. Finally, in July John went on trial with his marijuana bust, and was of course convicted and sent to the slammer for 91/2-10. Half of which is due, in all fairness, to the fact that he was the manager of "that rock and roll band."

In the meantime the Five had moved to the country, living together in a new house which was separate from the bulk of the Trans-Love/White Panther community where they had lived for a year. Sinclair was still managing the group but a new force had entered. He was exactly what the "musicianly rock'n'roll star" part of the MC5 wanted most: Mr. Rationality, Jon Landau, their new producer. It was like Descartes visiting the Sphinx, the result of that coupling was a mutation as strange as any in rock'n'roll history.

The plan was to clean the Five up, to make them "Better Musicians". With Sinclair's influence dwindling, and soon to disappear altogether, Landau quickly became the major outside influence on the Five and the album that the combination produced, *Back In the USA*, has his hand stamped on it as much as *Kick Out the Jams* has Sinclair's.

It was not a situation without parallel, however. The Five were, indeed, only one of a number of bands who had grown up in the latter half of the sixties, intensely related to the communities in which they were formed. The Grateful Dead in San Francisco, Country Joe and later Commander Cody and Joy of Cooking, in Berkeley, Barry and the Remains and J. Geils in Boston, Atlanta's surreal Hampton Grease Band, Chicago's guerrilla-theatrical Wilderness Road, and even Long Island's Young Rascals all were intensely localized bands, and each had many things in common.

Of course, there were other bands (San Francisco and Detroit, in particular, have produced several such) but these are the archetypes. Their sound represented the city in which they grew up, in each instance, from the stylized Long Island bar soul of the Rascals to the building, acid-like structures of the Dead's hours-long jams.

Almost as important, as each of these bands have "made it" in the Biz sense, they have lost their grip on their community roots until the Dead, for example, have a larger audience in New York than they do in San Francisco; either that, or, like the Remains, they broke up.

It was, of course, no different with the MC5.

When it came out, *Back in the USA* bewildered most Five fans. Some reacted bitterly, some hostilely, others were just confused. Yet, from a vantage point of a year and a half, the record hardly seems THAT bad; less flawed and less important at the same time.

The Five had, almost consciously, decided that they would reject what they were initially about. Talking to Deday LaRene in the fall of '69, they said, "You see, there are a lot of bands calling themselves rock and roll bands, when actually, what they're playing is mind music, not rock and roll at all...Our last album, unfortunately, there wasn't a lot of rock and roll on it. It was quote psychedelic unquote...We're now getting deep into a rock and roll theme ...It's closer to it than we've ever been and we really like it because rock and roll feels good when you play it. You feel good and the people listening feel good, because they can dance to it. I doubt very strongly if you could dance to the first album. How could you dance to 'Starship'?"

Well, since *I'd* seen hundreds of people do just that, it was no mystery at all. You just shook your thing in one direction or the other. Indeed, dance was the music's most important aspect, but the Five were convinced – half by Landau and half by themselves – that what they had been doing was improper and they were certain that one could *not* dance to *Kick Out the Jams*, even though that was, in large measure, what the album was all about. The band had begun to define rock in a much more limited sense than before, and you could pick a lot of their phraseology out of Landau's writings, just as you could pick a lot of their previous terminology out of Sinclair's.

Tyner: "Landau came into the situation and defined a lot of the things that we ought to be aware of..."

"The thing is," Wayne added, "before Landau came out here we were an amateur band." It was as though they were suffering from collective amnesia, as though they wanted to deny that they had ever made a record called *Kick Out the Jams*. They were denying that album, and denying it with a vengeance.

"That first album...wasn't an album," Kramer said. "It was just what we played on our gig that night. If they would've recorded us on another night, they would have gotten an incredibly better response...We were intimidated by the equipment." All that's true of course, but nonetheless *Kick Out the Jams* stands on its own merits and the Five should have been the first to see them.

The rejection, of course, went much further than a mere renunciation of the live album. It also encompassed a denial of the entire ethos and aesthetic out of which it grew. Mike Davis: "Our tunes were structured super-free. Like in each tune, everybody'd just play what they wanted to play and there'd just be a very general idea of what the song was gonna be, and the musician would just take that idea and go. So consequently our tunes turned out to be great conglomerations of no solid things."

Removed from their community audience, placed in a context where they were just a bunch of kids with some good ideas and a rather unique gimmick (rock'n'revolution was about as far as the Dee Anthony-Premier Talent starmakers could see it) they had to come to the Biz on *its* terms. They couldn't see any way to get the Biz to come to them on their own terms and the sad part is that they were probably right about that. Even sadder is that they needed to be that kind of star at all that doesn't make the Five sell-outs or pigs at all, because it was what they understood the situation called for. If anything, it was an honest mistake. They did what they thought had to be done, and no matter how much you disagree and abhor the concept, you have also got to be able to see that it *was* a mistake made honestly.

Landau put it this way: "I think that rock and roll in a lot of ways is bigger than that (politics)." Jon apparently didn't understand that the *Five's* politics were bigger than rock'n'roll because they encompassed them, and even transcended them. *Kick Out the Jams* remains a good and important album, because it attempts so much that matters to all of us. If the experiment was less than a total success it laid some very necessary groundwork, and taught some equally important lessons, for groups which were to follow.

The question becomes, how much politics can rock and roll carry? I haven't the answer to that. But it seems explicit politics might tend to over-burden the medium, which after all is extremely simplistic at its root. Rock and roll is never going to carry the burden of defining our ideology for us, as I said before, but it is always going to point some things out, and more than that, there are going to be some things in it that will inspire us to think and act in certain manners. To the extent that rock can do that, it is a viable and necessary tool with which to wage cultural warfare. If we're still into that. I don't know exactly, and maybe

that's the trick; the Five's first single was 'I Just Don't Know' b/w 'I Can Only Give You Everything'. A juxtaposition which makes sense, even now.

Strangely, *Back in the USA* stands as the MC5's most lyrically political work to date. The entire second side, beginning with 'High School' and ending with the rousing Chuck Berry title song, is loaded with political lines. Of course, the majority of those tunes were written long before the Five had joined forces with Landau. And the ones that were written after ('High School' or 'Tonight' on the other side) are so self-conscious in their spirit that they are rendered useless and embarrassing.

But tunes like 'American Ruse', 'Human Being Lawnmower' and 'Call Me Animal' are probably the finest examples of politics in our music since Dylan's *Times They are A-Changin'* album. It's their very lack of self-consciousness that makes them successful, of course, and that's the trick.

Moreover, there is at least one lyric and musical masterpiece on the second side: it is Fred Smith's 'Shakin' Street'. It is perhaps the finest tune that the Five have ever recorded, and it is definitively Fred Smith's. Its Dylan-like lyric, its great guitar line and its vocal are all Smith's, and they make up one exquisite rock and roll song.

The lyric is precisely the sort of weight – fantasy, mythology – that rock and roll carries best. It is mythic and so is the structure of our music. Only the best of our music, of course, has carried such themes as well. 'Shakin' Street' stands with Chuck Berry and Dylan and a few by Townsend or Jagger-Richard or John Lennon, as a classic rock and roll song:

**Midnite Sam decided
to make the trip
All the way from New Jersey
on his girl friend's tip
He pulled into town
and met Skinny Leg Pete
Said come here boy,
I heard about the street
I heard about the place
where all the kids go
Now I've just gotta know
I'm about to flip**

**The kids on Shakin' Street
will never give in
'Cause all of their lives
they been livin' in sin
They know that they're bad,
they know that they're bad
They take for the takin'
and they shake for the shakin'
HA!
Shakin' Street
it's got that beat
Shakin' Street
where all the kids meet
Shakin' Street
it's got that sound**

**Shakin' Street
said you gotta get down**

That song defines all of us, as a people and as individuals: it delineates many of our strengths and our weaknesses and the music that carries its message is absolutely beautiful. There's joy and a truly positive attitude in Smith's voice as he sings the tune, and his guitar line is just so fine it's hard to believe that you're listening to the same record. Lines like "They know that they're bad/They know that they're bad" sum up the MC5's politic anyway and the verse that contains that line is as political as anything else in their repertoire. And, dig the carnal enthusiasm that lies behind that "HA!"

But *Back in the USA* was hardly a successful album. The overly structured music just won't work. Even the Five were dissatisfied with it; I told Rob Tyner the other night that it was Lester Bangs' favorite record by the band, and he said, "I even find that a little hard to understand." But, for that one song, *Back in the USA* is one of the great records of rock'n'roll. And it is towards 'Shakin' Street' that the Five have moved with their new one, *High Time*.

**Shakin' Street,
it's got that beat
Shakin' Street,
it's got that sound
Shakin' Street,
you know ya gotta get down**

High Time is back on Shakin' Street, for the most part, and that's right where the MC5 belong. As Deday LaRene put it in our review of *Back in the U.S.A.*, last year, "Now they're just as fine a rock and roll band as there is."

Still, *High Time* doesn't resolve any of the problems either we or the MC5 face, it doesn't begin to come to grips with the issues raised by the first two albums (and never settled within them because of the disparity between the two approaches).

Maybe that's o.k. If the MC5 have taught us anything it should be that we can't lean on rock and roll any longer, that we're going to have to do it ourselves and – finally – that rockin' out is sometimes (but only sometimes) the best solution.

When the Five attempt a return to a sort of metaphysical science-fiction-rock that could suggest some approaches, some ways out, on the second side of *High Time*, they fail miserably. The only successful tunes on the second side are 'Over and Over', a pointed slap at radicalism which isn't nearly as lyrically successful as the Who's 'Won't Get Fooled Again', even if its music is as successful in general, and 'Skunk', a scorching piece of jazz-rock funk that sputters occasionally but still manages to place the MC5 in the position of being one of a handful of white rock and roll bands to come to grips with avant-garde black music. Even 'Over and Over' is nearly ruined by a pseudo-cosmic recitation interlude that seems bogus and infantile.

But side one! Aha! Here is the distillation of the MC5, the crux of the issue! *High Time* is tuned right into what Iggy Stooze called "The dull throbbing undertow", to what Alice Cooper calls "Third Generation Rock," to what Grand Funk calls "our people."

The Five deserve to be the best Third Generation band because, in so many ways, they were the first. While Cream had stretched some of the Yardbirds' horizons, the Five had taken the Yardbirds, Them, the Who, the Stones and wrapped them up into a unique new

package that brought it all back home. More, they tried to deal with America with it, and if they failed in that, the attempt was almost infinitely admirable.

Listen to 'Sister Anne', which Greil Marcus says is the first song in seven years to remind him of Them's 'Mystic Eyes'; to Fred Smith's 'Baby Won't Ya', which is the third generation tradition of Bob Dylan and Chuck Berry's songwriting (and which Lou Reed alone approaches within the context of third stream rock); to Wayne Kramer's beautiful Beatles' parody, 'Miss X', which is what every band who ever tried to sound like the Beatles ever desired to accomplish. 'Miss X' is a whole new dimension for the Five.

In more ways than one though this is a Fred Smith album. All the promise in 'Shakin' Street' has been fulfilled, and I can't help but wish that he'd used that super-distinctive voice of his to sing at least one of them.

The only one of Fred's songs that's even minimally flawed is 'Over and Over', and that only because of the psychedelic interlude that just doesn't work. But 'Sister Anne', the story of a nymphomaniac nun, and 'Baby Won't Ya' work on so many levels it's amazing.

Listen to the lyrics of 'Baby Won't Ya' and you're transported. Smith is a rock'n'roll storyteller and that's precisely the songwriting anyone who's been through Dylan and Chuck Berry, Pete Townsend, John Lennon and Jagger-Richards will love best. There's one verse in 'Baby Won't Ya' that absolutely has to be quoted, for posterity or fun (sort of the dichotomy this album works on):

**I sat down
to the matters at hand
Tryin' to find a way
to get some peace
Outside my window
was a buncha gypsy-gypsies
Dancin' up and down the street
The lovely senorita
took me by the hand
Said Ooo-wheee!
baby woncha be my man?**

Finally, though, it's all rooted in solid rock and roll music, the crashing guitars of Kramer and Smith melding together all the way through like you always knew they could, Dennis Thompson's drumming returned to its frenetic state after the listlessness of *Back In the U.S.A.*, Mike Davis' bass playing as solid as ever. Tyner's vocals are better, too, because of the way they're mixed and because he's finally loosened up just the right degree.

I suspect that the MC5 had to go through those first two albums to get to this one. Certainly, this album can stand next to either of the other two; *Kick Out the Jams* is more important an artifact, but *High Time*, for pure music, doesn't need to take any bows to it. Not at all.

In the end, the resolution of all the problems that the MC5 have raised doesn't lie in rock'n'roll anyway. They are a band with a history, that is certainly true. But that doesn't matter anymore, I don't think. For right NOW, the MC5 are one of the finest rock'n'roll bands we have. To go back to what I said at the beginning, that's the way it always should have been.

Total word count of piece: 6273