

THE STORY SO FAR OF THE RED CRAYOLA & THE RED KRAYOLA



A Biography

Incorporating details concerning some of the collateral activities of Mayo Thompson and other related material for the period 1966-2004

The Red Crayola was started by Mayo Thompson and Frederick Barthelme in mid-July 1966 in Houston, Texas. Like everyone else, they wanted to be rich and famous, and regarded the band as a way forward. They also wanted to be right. Though they would have been hard pressed to say what that consisted in, they had feelings about what it didn't. At first there were just the two of them. Over the summer they tried out other players but were unable to find anyone ready, willing or able to fill the bill. In September they met Steve Cunningham, and he, along with his friend, Bonnie Emerson, joined. Soon they added Danny Schact and settled for a time as a five-piece. They were managed by Luana Anderson, who got them gigs wherever she could. They eventually became house band at a small club run by a friend, Mark Froman - Love. After taking part in the first round of a battle of the bands organized by KNUZ, a local 'top 40' radio station, they changed the line-up and, with Cunningham, formed the trio that went on to make the first records. They also formed an auxiliary group, the Familiar Ugly, to accommodate associates who wanted to participate in the impenetrable din but weren't part of the band.

The Familiar Ugly was loosely organized, a variable body that could expand to accommodate indefinitely many accomplices and accompanists doing virtually whatever. It was built around a hard core - Jamie Jones, Mike "FRB Rapho" Metyko, "Red" George Farrar, Joe Pritchett, and Bill "Smith" Smith.

From the outset the RC felt that authenticities in respect of the operative orthodoxies of popular music were not only unachievable but uninteresting. Passing familiarity with vanguard traditions, among other things, committed them generally to an aim to do something new. The prevailing mood indicated that 'pushing the envelope' was the only viable approach to the problem, and reflected their sense that relations of reference could be shifted. They took the idea seriously and proceeded, acting on the premise that, in effect, whatever they decided to do was worthwhile, provided it could be sustained. To their way of thinking, function reduced to its instances, whatever they consisted in. They gravitated naturally to, so-called, 'leading-edge', 'underground' and 'experimental' discourses and by November had developed a repertoire adequately indexical to the very idea of popular music in general, but related to such strategies.

Accompanied by the hard core Familiar Ugly their second evening in the battle of the bands - held in the central plaza of Gulfgate, Houston's first shopping mall - proved interesting enough to attract the attention of Lelan Rogers, then house producer at International Artists Records. He happened to be there, buying a parakeet. IA's motto was to become the battle cry of the one-stop distributors - "Keep on trans-shipping!" The label was home to the 13th Floor Elevators, Texas' premier Psychedelic Music band. Elevators music came replete with a philosophy. Their liner notes elaborated on how things had changed for man since the time of Aristotle. Given mind-altering drugs, new ways of thinking were now possible. Their

signatures were that Psychedelic commitment, the magic of Roky Erickson, and an electric jug. According to Rogers' blurb on the back of their first album, DJs across the country were asking, "What's that funny little noise in that record?" RC saw how musical expressions might be considered psychedelic or might even actually be psychedelic in effect but also saw that they might be, in indefinitely many senses, instrumental to a lot else. They wanted to make a record that caused DJs to ask, "What's that funny little record in that noise?"

Their music was addressed as particular in and to conditions. They felt that, through generating tokens specified on their terms, new terms would necessarily be generated, terms that expressed and exemplified what seemed to them more interesting relations. Music at all was understood to fall out by types, within contextual limits, and in the world, according or not with traditional conventions. They were convinced that the relations they were working on might lead to fresh inferences that would in turn indicate new forms of description and explanation. They found themselves moving in relation to such a possible world.

The RC reached the final battle, held in a circus tent in the Gulfgate parking lot. On the night, the Familiar Ugly numbered over twenty some odd strong, filling the stage, spilling off it to the sides, and milling around among the audience giving away neckties and toy garden implements. Despite their strong showing, they lost to the even stronger sextet of Johnny and Edgar Winter. Nevertheless, in December 1966 Rogers signed them to International Artists and, early in 1967, with the Familiar Ugly, and him as producer, they met at Walt Andrus' studio and recorded their first album. During the freakout sessions for *The Parable of Arable Land* the Familiar Ugly numbered more than fifty, among them a biker who, riding by, had been intrigued by so many people waiting outside the studio. The sound of his chopper was the first sound on an album consisting in two extended freakouts and containing five songs and one 'free piece.' "Hurricane Fighter Plane", the lead song, became their anthem.

Though the album enjoyed broad popularity, the RC had no thought to repeat. After *Parable*, along with the Familiar Ugly as a formal entity, song form was dispensed with in favor of feedback-pieces, sound-as-music pieces, time- and no-time pieces, compressions and motions, instrument exemplifications, one-second pieces, music within music, and unhearable music. They recorded works along those lines for what they intended to be their second album - finally released nearly three decades later by Drag City - *Coconut Hotel*. Tapes of the sessions were heard by Kurt von Meier, a professor of Art History at U.C.L.A. and he was amused and cheeky enough to organize invitations for the RC to perform in California. His overtures to the organizers of Monterey Pop were declined but the band got invitations to play an Angry Arts Festival event at the Venice Pavilion and at the Berkeley Folk Festival in the summer of 1967, their first adventures outside Houston and its immediate surrounds. They were



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taken in stride by festival goers, although, at the end of their first show in Berkeley, they were accosted by some who accused them of having killed a dog with their feedback – an ominous portent. At the 4th of July finale outdoors in the Greek Theater they played to the amplified pattern of drips from an ice-block melting onto aluminum foil in the summer sun. The performance, dedicated to the troops in Vietnam, was broadcast, as were all performances that afternoon, by a Bay Area radio station. The DJ however failed to recognize what they were playing as music. Thinking what he was hearing meant something was technically amiss he continued to make announcements and vamp over the first several minutes of their performance until things could be put right. Finally someone notified him that things had been right all along and he went at last “over to the Red Crayola”. His historic vamp is immortalized on the double album, *Live 1967*. At the close of festivities, a local newspaper pronounced them “Bummer of the Festival”.

At the festival they had the good fortune to meet one of their few heroes, John Fahey, master of the American music index and finger-picked guitar. There was an immediate affinity. He sat in at one concert and, after the festival, arranged for them to open for him at the New Orleans House, a local club and restaurant. Within ten minutes their music cleared the room and the manager paid them \$10 to stop. They took the money and left the stage. It was their last performance in the U.S.A. for some time.

Fahey and they also contrived to record, going into Sierra Sound in Berkeley and filling four master tapes. IA freaked out upon learning of the session and insisted on having the tapes before they would fly them back to Texas. The tapes were reluctantly delivered, and subsequently tragically lost. IA and the band parted company. Soon after, Barthelme moved to New York and the RC disbanded.

Late in 1967 IA contacted Thompson to make a new album. He contacted Cunningham and early in 1968 they recorded twenty pieces, mostly songs, for the album, *God Bless the Red Crayola and All Who Sail With It* with the drummer, Tommy Smith – in the meantime they had been obliged to change from Crayola to Krayola following a letter from lawyers representing the manufacturers of the famous crayons ordering them to desist from using the name ‘crayola.’ *God Bless* did not do as well as *Parable*. IA did not invite them further, and, as Smith was in demand elsewhere, there was no question of performing live. They disbanded again.

In 1970 Thompson recorded and co-produced his solo album – *Corky's Debt to His Father* – with Houston legend, Frank Davis, and one of the city's great musicians, Roger “Dr. Rocket” Romano for Walt Andrus' new label, Texas Revolution Records. *Corky* featured several of Houston's best players – members of Romano's band, Skinny Minny, Chuck Conway, drummer of The Children, and others. *Corky* embraced the traditions it crunched. In 1971, again with Davis and Romano co-producing, Thompson reunited with Barthelme to record a single for Texas Revolution under the name Saddlesore – “Old Tom Clark” b/w “Pig Ankle Strut.” Davis sang the tale of the life and death of the famous outlaw, and the b-side, to great effect. The guitar work of Brian “Firefingers” Feehan was also featured, along with a vocal from Cassell Webb, singer of The Children. It sat on the A&R desk at Warner Bros. for two weeks but, in the end, Warners passed and the record did not reach the public until its release by Drag City in the 1990s. *Corky's Debt* didn't enjoy its first public release until it came out in the United Kingdom late in the 1980s.

In 1973 Thompson began collaborating on music, and on art projects, with Art & Language, a group of conceptual artists with sections

at the time in England and New York. Works included the album *Corrected Slogans* (1973-6), the video “Nine Gross & Conspicuous Errors” (1975), and “And now for something completely different... Fox 4” (1976), a segment of the film, *Struggle in New York*, made by the Yugoslavian conceptual artist, Zoran Popovic. All featured Jesse Chamberlain (Harry Toledo, The Necessaries, John Cale, Eliot Murphy) on drums.

In 1977 Thompson moved to England and in 1978 he and Chamberlain reformed the RC and recorded a new album, *Soldier-Talk* (1979), for Andrew Lauder's Radar Records. The legal department at Radar wasn't troubled by the Crayola company's attitude, so “C” was on again. In a fortuitous convergence, Lauder had licensed the IA catalog from Lelan Rogers and eventually re-released both *Parable* and *God Bless*. New RC items for Radar included a remake of a “Wives in Orbit” b/w “Yik-Yak” single Thompson and Chamberlain had recorded live in NY that went unreleased. Radar also produced various promotional releases, including “Pink Stainless Tail” from *Parable*, and a fresh version of “Hurricane Fighter Plane,” which appeared as a flexdisc in *Zig Zag* magazine, a thoughtfully produced British magazine devoted in part to ‘underground’ music.

Soldier-Talk was petit-guignol, abstract intrigue met sotto-voce political assertion. It traded in part in a crypto-normal hyper-expressivity that had something to do with punk. Comprised of a set of songs, it approached the very idea of punk as activism, the thought of independence as identity, and politics of “will,” “can” and “nothing.” In addition to the RC it featured Lora Logic (X-Ray Spex, Essential Logic), Dick Cuthell (The Beatles, The Specials) and members of Pere Ubu, among others. Ms. Logic subsequently joined the band. The record was remaindered within a year and remains unavailable.

During 1978-81 Thompson co-produced with Geoff Travis of Rough Trade Records works by The Monochrome Set, Stiff Little Fingers, The Raincoats, The Fall, Cabaret Voltaire, James “Blood” Ulmer, Blue Orchids, Scritti Politti, and others, and worked at Rough Trade in A&R, and in various representative capacities. At the same time, the band toured with Pere Ubu, Scritti Politti and Gang of Four, and pursued assorted recording projects. In 1979 they recorded Rough Trade's first 12-inch release, “Microchips & Fish” b/w “The Story so Far”, with Angus Gaye and George Oban (Aswad) on drums and bass respectively, and Gina Birch (The Raincoats, Dorothy) and Epic Soundtracks (Swell Maps, Crime & The City Solution). Birch and Soundtracks joined and became mainstays. John Peel, noted British DJ, was not taken with “Microchips” and prophesied that, if RT went on putting out such material, it would go out of business. Other works from the period included the single “Born in Flames” – for Lizzie Borden's eponymous film – b/w “Sword of God” (1981), and the album *Kangaroo?* (1981). “Born” and *Kangaroo?* were both new collaborations with Art & Language. “Born” was a post-punk sub-disc anthem, a song of praise for a science fiction America following an imaginary successful social-democrat revolution. It featured a soaring vocal by Lora Logic. “Sword” reset a story of a battle between a Crusader and a Muslim warrior that turned on the holy terror of inescapable logic.

Kangaroo? traded in pop idioms, narratives and socialist realist themes signaling the demise of Punk as a seamless phenomenon. It was the up-market twin of *Corrected Slogans*, which was re-released by Recommended Records around the same time. During recording at Dennis “Blackbeard” Bovell's studio, Pere Ubu synthesizer genius and soprano skronk, Allen Ravenstine, and bass whiz-kid, Ben Annesley, were conscripted.

During 1981-2, Thompson also did a stint as guitarist in Pere Ubu. He



appeared on *The Art of Walking* and *Song of the Bailing Man*, and the single, "Not Happy" b/w "Lonesome Cowboy Dave," all for Rough Trade, and toured with them in America and Europe, showing up in their segment of the film, *Urbh, a Music War*.

In 1982 the RC recorded a single, "Future Pilots" b/w "Ratman: Weightwatcher," for Rough Trade, and did a version in German for Konkurrenz Records (Hamburg). Only the German version appeared. In 1983 the line-up altered. Ravenstine, Annesley and Thompson toured and recorded a new album, *Black Snakes*, at Sunshine Studios in Switzerland, with Chris White on drums. It was rejected by Rough Trade and became instead a joint release by Rec Rec Records (Zürich) and Pure Freude (Düsseldorf). When Annesley and White left later that year, Ravenstine and Thompson recalled Jesse Chamberlain and they produced the album, *Bismarkstr. 50/Three Songs on a Trip to the United States*. The "Bismarkstr." half was recorded live by Conny Plank at a concert at the close of the DIA Foundation office at that address in Cologne in W. Germany. The "Three Songs" half was recorded at Conny's Studio. *Black Snakes* and some of *Three Songs* featured more lyric collaborations with Art & Language.

During 1986-7 Thompson was label manager for Rough Trade, and Blue Guitar, Travis' custom label through Chrysalis. Among others, he worked with The Smiths, bringing *The Queen is Dead* and "Panic" to market, met and introduced Derek Jarman to them and, with James MacKay, produced Jarman's first Smiths videos. He also produced Rough Trade's first compilation video, with Scottish poet and polymath, Ivor Cutler as VJ, did albums and singles with Primal Scream, Felt, Phil Wilson, and Blow Up, for Alan McGhee, and albums with The Chills, and The Shop Assistants, among others.

In 1988 Glass Records (London) gave Corky its first formal release, around the time Thompson began collaborating with the painter, Albert Oehlen (Ronnie & The Potatoes, Die Kirche Ununterschiedlichkeit, Jailhouse). During 1988-92 they produced versions of "Louie Louie" b/w "Wild Thing" for the Austrian artist Jörg "J.B." Schlick, recorded the album, *Malefactor, ade*, and contributed the instrumental, "Disco Death," to the soundtrack of Derek Jarman's film, *The Last of England*. Thompson produced the soundtrack featuring the music of Simon Turner, Barry Adamson and others, subsequently released by Daniel Miller's Mute Records. In 1989 Glass released *Malefactor*, marking a new beginning for the RC. It featured lyric and drum machine contributions by the artist Werner Büttner, performances by the German pop star, Andreas Dorau (Fred From Jupiter), and a clarinet leitmotif composed and performed by free-improvisation giant, Rüdiger Carl (Night & Day, COWWS Quintet, Jailhouse). In 1991 the single "The Red Crayolas on Forty-five" b/w "Your Body is Hot" and *The Quiet Album* were released on Oehlen's Leiterwagen Records. "Crayolas" took the much loved medley form operative at the time, where hits were strung together over a single beat. "Your Body" was a blues adaptation of an English translation of a German hot-love ballad found in a rental car. *The Quiet Album* comprised a banner showing a black and white reproduction of a photograph of Oehlen, Büttner and Thompson life-size, singing with their faces pressed against the closed windows of Oehlen's Porsche Targa parked in the snow in Hamburg. It was a limited edition, came in a white box modeled on The Beatles "White Album," and sold out immediately.

During 1993-4, following an introduction by seminal 'post-rocker,' David E. Grubbs (Squirrel Bait, Bastro, Codein, Bitch Magnet, Gastr del Sol), the band began working with Drag City Records of Chicago. Drag City weren't remotely interested in the possibility of hearing from Crayola company lawyers, so the band became RK again. In 1994 DC released the single "14" b/w "Stink Program" (DC48),

Corky's Debt (DC49), the Saddlesore single, "Old Tom Clark" b/w "Pig Ankle Strut" (DC51), the song "Columbia" on a DC artists compilation (DC20), and a new album, *The Red Crayola* (DC52).

"The eponymous album", as *The Red Crayola* came to be known, was recorded in Chicago at the studio of Steve Albini, (Big Black, Shellac). It was their first made in the U.S.A. since 1968. Mixed by the tell-it-like-it-is analog champion himself, it marked Thompson's return to America after seventeen years living abroad. It also marked the beginning of a rich set of productive associations with new American music luminaries such as Grubbs; drums/synth/production maestro, John McEntire (Bastro, Gastr del Sol, Stereolab, The Sea and Cake, Tortoise); one of America's greatest living guitarists, Tom Watson (Slovenly, Overpass, Tom Watson and the Best of All); the super all-rounder, Jim O'Rourke (Brise Glace, Gastr del Sol, Sonic Youth, etc.); the master of perfect error, artist, Stephen Prina; the legendary drummer, George Hurley (Minutemen, FIREHOSE); and, eventually, artist/drummer/guitarist/singer/songwriter, Sandy Yang; and the violinist and singer, Elisa Randazzo.

In various configurations they would tour America, Europe and Japan over the next several years, and produce five new albums, release five old albums, make four singles, an Ep, and a compilation of singles - *Coconut Hotel* (DC62, 1967/1995); "Amor & Language" (DC53, 1995); "Chemistry" b/w "Farewell to Arms" (DC86, 1996); *Deliverance* (Leiterwagen, 1996); *Corrected Slogans* (DC96, 1973-6/1997); *Black Snakes* (DC104, 1983/1997); *Bismarkstr. 50/Three Songs on a Trip to the United States* (DC105, 1983/1997); *Hazel* (DC98, 1998); "Father Abraham" (DC119, 1998); *Live 1967* (DC92, 1967/1998); *Fingerpainting* (DC156, 1999); "Come on Down" (DC156a, 1999); *Malefactor, ade* (DC45, 1982/2000); "Blues Hollers and Hellos" (DC190, 2000); "Stil de Grain Brun" b/w "Radio Edit" (RuminanCe, 2002); *Japan in Paris in L.A.* (DC171, 2004) and *Singles* (DC257, 2004). Along the way they would also enjoy and profit from their passing associations with the pert 'new wave' vocalist, singer/songwriter, Mary Lass Stewart; So-Cal legend and multi-threat wind instrumentalist, Lynn Johnston (Slovenly); technical wizard and bassist, Steve Linn; the dynamic Spanish duo, the poet, Mémé, and guitarist/singer, Consuelo; and challenge conceptual artist and graphic magician, Christopher Williams, to come up with striking designs for their striking new releases. They would venture a song in clubland with remixes by Tranquility Bass, Schorsch Kamerun and Wendy Gondeln; work with supermodel, Rachel Williams; Singapore artist/dealer, Steven Wong; the doyenne of Los Angeles art gallerists, Margo Leavin; the artist/photographers, Alex Slade and Hei Han Kiang; and the fabulous Yonemoto Brothers, Norman and Bruce, who's film, *Japan in Paris in L.A.*, they scored.

After all that, they came to see, there was something like an evolution in RK thought as it was, something reflected and refracted in their takes on popular music. Each record could be understood in time, in terms of place of making, the situation and associations that went into it, and those that survived it. But it had to be faced: nothing added up. Mutation as permutation was a funny way of going on. There was no destination, rather only a progress, slow passage through states strung end to end, binding up things done.

"Amor" and "Chemistry"/"Farewell" together set the stage for the bliss, the sheer beauty and poignancy of *Hazel*. On it the band lived and died from their wish ever to make the most of the least that can be said. *Hazel* would endure in lived memory as something like the 'indie' rock equivalent of the *Parable*. That showed how much the very idea had changed in being the same. Like *Parable* the spirit it reflected bore fulsome witness to feelings that come with senses that one can get a fresh take on all that standard formulae, clichés, and semi-idiomatic possibilities promise. On "Amor" they had



surfing those waves of feeling in advance, reminding themselves and the world of the explosive power combined sensibility can afford. “Chemistry”, and “Farewell” finally seemed kinds of forecasts, warnings of darker entropic aspects, signs of frailty built into human machinations.

Deep down, *Hazel* was knowing – a situation at its peak is already in decline – but couldn’t help it. The world was anyway winding down as millennial hope for a new day in a better century wound up. It had been a long way out of the 1960s.

Still, as the sheep say, “the bleat goes on.” *Deliverance* twinned *Hazel*, just as *Corrected Slogans* twinned *Kangaroo?*, even though the nature of records as such is such that each stands as it were alone, as a single point of reference, a micro-dot or black hole of information concerning existence as it was at one time or another in the human condition as it is. Such deliberate design often finds its true limits in hindsight. *Fingerpainting* was made to reproduce the architecture of *Parable* and so, on this logic, was its twin. “Mother,” “Vile Vile Grass,” “Bad Medicine” and the rest were suited to the task – songs of the 1960s, brothers and sisters of songs that got recorded then – but the poor lost ones that had to wait for a certain understanding, ditto “Come on Down” – a thoroughly up to date rendition of one of the oldest of old favorites.

Strike an attitude and it will strike you back. By the time the band got to “Blues Hollers and Hellos” the energy that came from the return to America, the new label, the new cohort, the new spirit, was spent. “Blues” was abstract realism. It played in a back room of a world without art, a world where art can only be what you call what you made when you did what you could, if you did. And they did. So it was. And so it is, and probably ever will be.

In a world, this one, where pop songs play designated functional roles, are deployed in soundtrack relations by those who somehow need them sometimes to go on, glory is relished in part in and for its fleetingness. Sensations, like phenomena, are bounded things, feelings of rage, awe, pure emotion. Things end – glory halleluncin.

Whatever. RK music will ever be only focused in and on the feeling that it consists in, the one that comes and goes with being, here, there, any, every, and nowhere, all at the same time, always the same but, just the same, never the same.

Now, in 2005, following bang up shows in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, where they saw new faces, felt new curiosity, smelled fresh blood, Watson, Hurley and Thompson, The Red Krayola, are about to tour Japan again, then tour in Europe, and they have new recordings in the works. In nearly the thirty-ninth year of voyaging, God bless The RK and all who sail with it.

