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Spasm Band still twitching

You might think that after 40 years of playing together, the members of the Nihilist Spasm Band would be pretty good musicians—but you'd be wrong, at least in terms of their technical ability. And according to founding member John Boyle, they haven't had to work particularly hard to avoid acquiring impressive chops.

"I don't have to worry about that, personally, because I'm mildly tone-deaf," says the affable painter and pioneering noise musician, reached by phone at his home in London, Ontario. "I have real trouble humming a tune with any kind of accuracy. I can hear music well, though; I can tell when people are hitting the right notes and stuff. But there's no danger of me falling into that—and in my opinion, it isn't much of a danger for the rest of us, either."

He laughs, and says that when it comes to playing music, he's learned nothing. "But we've sort of found that what we do is so much more interesting than trying to learn something that others have done and then trying to do variations on it, which is basically what everything else is."

Ironically, the world's oldest noise ensemble began as a one-time-only project, when several London residents—mostly visual artists, writers, and philosophers—assembled to create a score for a film by pioneering intermedia artist Greg Curnoe. "Someone had the idea of getting little kazooos—I think mostly because they were red and black, which were the colours of nihilists and anarchists," Boyle explains. "But once we tootled on the kazooos then people's imaginations got going. We started modifying the kazooos, and within a week or so we discovered that we were a

band. That was how we started, but it was also the end of it, in a way: for whatever reason, no one had any desire at all to study our musical heroes and learn how to do what they did. It never happened."

That was in 1965. Since then, Curnoe has been killed in a cycling accident, and more recently bassist

Hugh McIntyre, the group's resident curmudgeon and polymath, passed away. But original

Offbeat
Alexander Varty



members Boyle, John Clement, Bill Exley, Murray Favro, and Art Pratten continue on, playing a regular Monday-night gig in the London region—as they have since their inception—and indulging in the occasional tour, like the one that will bring an expanded version of the band next Friday (October 14) to the Western Front. (Joining the surviving original members will be percussionist Aya Ohnishi and guitarist Tim Glasgow.)

After inspiring widespread indifference and occasional acts of outright hostility at home, it was on tour that Boyle and the rest of his Nihilist colleagues began to realize they were not alone in their noisy predilections. "We pretty much met universal contempt for the first 20 years of our existence," admits the veteran kazooist and instrument builder. "But late in the 1980s we played in Quebec for the first time, and had this wildly enthusiastic response from mostly young people. This amazed us."

The band subsequently found considerable acclaim in Japan, and has won praise from influential rock avant-gardists Sonic Youth and Negativland—not surprising, given the older performers' love of unclassifiable sounds, mutant instruments, and extreme volume. According to Boyle, there's

no such thing as a typical Nihilist Spasm Band set; one of the side effects of its members' studied ignorance is that nothing is repeatable. But the recordings that I've heard skate the line between sheer anarchic madness and idiot-savant primitivism, with steroidal-cave-man drumming, buzz saw-like shrieking, and clanking, atonal guitars prominent in the mix. The music isn't exactly formless, but no other band in the world works with forms like these.

"We still can't play music," Boyle reiterates. "But we can play our kind of music, and we know when we're playing it well."

And, increasingly, so do others.

"People used to get very angry when we played," the NSB spokesman recalls. "I guess they were expecting to hear some sort of conventional music, and they were offended when they didn't. And they were offended that we would have the gall to get up in any public space and perform. But there has been so much performance art as well as weird music over the past 40 years that people don't get angry now. Nobody throws things anymore."

Boyle seems a little disappointed that those days are gone, but contends that he and his fellow Nihilists are largely indifferent to public acclaim. "We're kind of an insular group," he says. "We play mainly for ourselves. And we can have a great night, and everybody knows it, even if there are only two people in the audience. Still, we're really excited about coming out west for the first time as a band, and we want to do our best. We hope people will check it out, and we hope they'll find it interesting."

They will, I think. Interesting, and perhaps a little abrasive, too. After all, these Nihilists wouldn't have it any other way. ♦