

## Tuning In Iron Oxide, a different kind of metal music



I met Jeff Curtis in the dorms at Kent State University in the early Eighties. It was a hot Autumn afternoon, and I was playing the Sex Pistols a bit too loudly—if that’s even possible—and a mop-haired young Warholian knocked on my door and asked me to turn down the music a bit. I’ve often flattered myself and assumed that Jeff was just curious as to who else was listening to “new music” during the days of Springsteen and Led Zeppelin, but then again, Jeff probably just wanted me to be quiet while he was illustrating one of his comic books while listening to the Velvet Underground and eating popcorn.

Jeff went on to release his Sub Comics series while playing in many local bands—post-punk bands and art school bands and all sorts of interesting bands like Ghosts Before Breakfast, The Crummy Fags, and the Gang of Four-inspired minimalists known as J’Accuse. Kent was a hot-bed back then for new music, although Akron and Cleveland seemed to get more ‘national’ attention for their groups, and eventually, like rivers converging into an ocean, he and many other like-minded punks and artists relocated to Cleveland.

Fast-forward some 15 years and I had returned from Chicago and was curating a propaganda art exhibit at Lyz and Kristin Bly-Roger’s Newsense Gallery in Lakewood. Jeff was part of the show, and he brought along his freshly-minted punk rock grrrrlll-friend, Kat Stewart, to the opening. Definitely a time-warp trip—history repeating and all of that—and he told me of his latest band—the all-bass, all-the-time Black Cabbage. They were playing shows at Pat’s In The Flats, etc. and we stayed in touch.

Capsule in Lakewood had opened—a cool space on Madison where lots of experimental music was starting to happen on certain nights. I finally made it to one of their shows there. After hearing an interesting set from faux-rap karaokesters Human Host from Baltimore, the newly-transplanted Minnesotan Jay Krasnow and his amazing triple-necked lap steel guitar, and some egregious death-metal shite from a band no one knew, Iron Oxide—Jeff and Kat’s latest project—took the stage, replete with a blind theremin player from Los Angeles and guest drummer Wyatt Howland. Regarding mud huts, Ayn Ryn, Anti-Capitalism, the efficacy of Kent, obscure German bands and cohegencies..the rest is detailed below.

***Cool Cleveland: Who are the members of the band, and what instruments do you play?***

**Jeff:** I pretty much always control the electric bass guitar, played through various and sundry effects pedals. Sometimes I also play it with an electronic Shruti [Indian drone generator] box, a slide, or a drum stick. Kat controls whatever she's in the mood to control at any given time. Lately that has been the electric bass guitar, but in the past has also included: Farfisa combo organ, home-made electric drums, electric violin, home-made elektrokakaphone, three-stringed electric guitar, etc..

**Jeff, I know you have been playing bass for decades, but Kat, is the bass a new instrument for you? Have you played other instruments before?**

**Kat:** I always wanted to learn an instrument when I was a kid, but I never had the money to buy an instrument or get lessons. When I was 15, I finally talked my parents into getting me piano lessons, which I only took for a year. When I moved in with Jeff about two and a half years ago, he started teaching me how to play bass, and eventually I got my first instrument, for \$77 on eBay.

**Jeff--you have been in countless bands, from the Colloquial Boys back in Toledo to J'Accuse in Kent and now Iron Oxide in Cleveland. What other bands have you played in, and feel free to make note of who else played in those bands that have gone on to do other projects?**

**Jeff:** Gosh.. Well I guess I'll limit it to the most notable bands which some people might actually know about.. The first band I joined when I moved to Cleveland in 1988 was My Dad is Dead, which up til that point had mostly just been Mark Edwards' own one-man band. I did several small regional tours with him, and recorded songs for several of his albums. A few years later, I ended up joining the band Gem, led by Doug Gillard, previously of Death of Samantha and eventually of Guided by Voices, as well as Tim Tobias, who also eventually joined GBV, and local drummer-supreme Scott Pickering (recently of the Flat Can Company)- All of us had actually played in My Dad is Dead at one point or another too! The most recent band I was in before Kat & I formed Black Cabbage was the mighty Satan's Satellites, who were sort of the house band for the Beachland Ballroom, since our Farfisaist was none other than Beachland co-owner Mark Leddy. That was a fun band to be in, and a real musical education, since it was the first band I was ever in that primarily did cover songs, and fairly traditional 1960's-style garage and R & B songs at that -- it was the first time I ever had to learn to use really traditional bass playing techniques like the 'walking bassline' or the famous '12 bar blues' progression.. So it was nice to then go and form Black Cabbage/Iron Oxide, which is by far the most unorthodox band I've ever been in!

**Jeff, the Kent music scene that spawned so much music of quality back then and actually brought/attracted so much attention (I remember the original Devo suit always on display in JB's, I remember the american agent for Ireland's Stiff Little Fingers trying to get punks to sign a petition to let them tour in America; I remember the Bettys and the F-Models) is a dead, dog-gone deal these days. Why do you think "scenes" don't tend to last very long and**

**what remains is such a pale shadow of its former glory?**

**Jeff:** Actually, we just this past weekend went to a show our friends Dead Peasant Insurance were playing down in Kent, at a place right next door to where JB's used to be, called the Electric Cafe Co., and I have to say, it seemed like a *much* more happening place than any club I've been to up in Cleveland lately! Not only was the place comfortable, inexpensive, and had a decent sound system, but the customers -- far more than you would *ever* see at a similar show anywhere up in Cleveland -- were all very attentive, enthusiastic, and appreciative. I can't even remember the last time I'd been to a show down in Kent, but the atmosphere of that place, and the welcome reception that DPI received there, gives me a lot of hope for the Kent scene -- I'm hoping that we'll get a chance to play there soon ourselves. Then later in the week we went back down to Kent to see DPI once again at the infamous Outpost, which when I was in Kent always had the reputation of being a dangerous biker bar, but which is now a fairly decent (and large!) concert venue. At both of these shows, there was easily at least 3 times the number of people I would have expected to see at a similar show in Cleveland. I think Kent really seems to be happening right now...

**Kat, I seem to recall that you hail from Tacoma, Washington. What brought you here?**

**Kat:** An airplane, hardy har har. Tacoma is the kind of place where all you can think about while growing up there is how badly you want to leave. I visited Cleveland a month or so before I moved here and liked it better than anywhere else I've lived. People are always complaining about how Cleveland sucks, but I've seen a whole hell of a lot worse.

**And how did you and Jeff meet-up? You are, after all, the post-Indie darlings of the dating set around town, I hear?**

**Kat:** Hey, I'm not post-Indie--I'm post-punk! We met each other through an Internet mailing list called fallnet, and started emailing back and forth, then sending each other mix CDs, and you know where that leads.

**Iron Oxide's performance at Capsule was heavy, concussive, creepily-familiar with factories and industrial debris and collapsing Infrastructures of economic engines. Are you guys anti-Capitalist or anti-Industry or are you in some maverick, Ayn Ryn-way actually celebrating factories and industrial squalor?**

**Kat:** Sort of both and neither. I grew up in a town full of arsenic pollution so bad that they had to replace all the soil in some neighborhoods. Naturally, we all knew it was horrible, and everyone had their own stories of acid rain eating the paint off cars, or people dying of weird diseases, but when that's all you know, it's what you become accustomed to, and you develop a sense of distance from it. So, I've got a weird attitude towards it. "Jaded" is probably too harsh of a word. I consider myself anti-capitalist, but I wouldn't say I'm anti-Industry -- I don't want us to all go back to living in mud huts.

**Jeff:** I guess my take on it is that we sort of are using our music as a kind of mirror of our environment--as a reflection on the state of the Cleveland/Northeast Ohio 'Rust Belt' heritage, which isn't just a cute nickname, but a living, breathing - or maybe dying - reality. I don't know that

we're so much celebrating industrial squalor as reveling in it,...rubbing people's noses in it. It's inescapable here, as much as people try to or want to ignore it; it's all over the place, and we're making people aware of it.

**Kat, how does your band tie into your Zine you produce, "Rust & Brique?" Is there a connection?**

**Kat:** Well, they're definitely based in the same aesthetic, the whole Apocalyptic industrial decay theme, but that's just because it's my main obsession, and a concept I really want to express. A big part of it is about appreciating places like Cleveland and how they really are--not how some city planner wants them to be. I can't really explain why I'm so hung up on rust in particular, though.

**Jeff:** Rust, what it is and what it does, and what it symbolizes, is just aesthetically pleasing and provocative, I think. "Rust never sleeps," as DEVO said..

**IF Devo said that, they were quoting Neil Young I think. Might new subscribers to Rust & Brique one day get an Iron Oxide mini-single included with an issue, much like kids could cut out the Bobby Sherman single on the back of Super Sugar Crisps in the Seventies?**

**Kat:** If you'll come install a lathe in the Xerox machine. . .

**Your guest theremin player, Pat Trip from Los Angeles, was a real extra bonus surprise. He was such a nice guy, and he DID look like a skinny Will Farrell. And there he was, seated in front of the rest of you, basically coaching and conducting' the theremin....this machine based on electronic wave lengths and ...magnetism I guess? And he's blind to boot. The whole atmosphere, and the music Iron Oxide made with him gigging with you,....to me it was like "Plan 9 from Outer Space" meets Jah Wobble-era Public Image Limited or a more ponderous, less hopeful Nick Cave, somehow. Were you surprised at the synergy that happened that night with Trip along for the ride? Was it what you had hoped for?**

**Jeff:** I thought it was really one of our best shows ever, overall. Besides Pat's great Theremin playing, Wyatt's drumming really added another dimension to our songs that we don't usually cover. I don't usually think that our drummerlessness is any kind of limitation for us, but sometimes it's nice to have that percussiveness nailed down, and Wyatt handled it beautifully.

**Meeting a blind man from Los Angeles who plays the theremin isn't an every-day-occasion. How did you guys ever hook up with him to begin with, anyways?**

**Jeff:** We met each other through an Internet mailing list called fallnet, and started emailing back and forth, and you know where that leads... er.. Well in this case, it led to Patrick making some Theremin-added remixes of some late proto-Iron Oxide, Black Cabbage songs. When he mentioned that he would be visiting Cleveland, we invited him to join us for a special performance here at Capsule, and the rest is history!

**Okay, I've done some describing of your band, but now it's your turn. Kat, if Iron Oxide was**

**a weather pattern, what would it be?**

**Kat:** A storm with that really concussive cloud-to-cloud lightning that scares the cat and makes your windows shake.

**Jeff, if Iron Oxide was an antique, what would that antique be?**

**Jeff:** A big old rusty steam-driven STEAM ROLLER!

**Capsule seems to have been a great venue for the more experimental fringe musicians in-town to cut loose and hone their skills. Plus, the ambience in there is just minimal enough and just original enough to be entertaining and provocative without being threatening or too forceful. There seems to be some disagreement at present as to whether it will remain open or become another Irish pub, which of course is what everyone needs in Lakewood! What happens next, then--for Iron Oxide, and also for the musicians who 'needed' Capsule?**

**Jeff:** We've actually just received word that the place has been sold, so things really are up in the air as far as that goes. The Monday night open mic series going on there was actually a continuation from one happening down the street at the Rockwood Tavern, which also closed down. It started out as a regular open mic night with your usual assortment of whiney emo-indie guys & fratboys with acoustic guitars singing acoustic covers of Radiohead songs and crybaby songs about their girlfriends leaving them. We started showing up at first doing some guerilla acoustic performances of old-timey folk and delta blues songs as "Acoustic Coup," with Amanda from Dead Peasant Insurance, and the wilder we got, word kind of got out that things were getting a little experimental there. And more noise-oriented people started showing up, and fewer sad emo kids. By the time the open mic night moved to Capsule, it was pretty solidly known as a 'noise-and experimental-friendly' open mic, and there have been many very interesting and cool performances there over the past few months. I have no idea if Jeremy, who hosts & organizes that open mic as a benefit for Cleveland's Food Not Bombs program, will be able to find another good spot for it, but I hope he will soon. Otherwise, we'll have to go back to just playing regular nightclub shows, which normally aren't nearly as spontaneous or interesting.

**Who are you both listening to presently music-wise? Who do you recommend as someone worthwhile to check out?**

**Kat:** I've been into harsh and loud stuff recently -- The Dead C, The Boredoms, and Missing Foundation, as well as some early music concrete type stuff like Pierre Schaeffer. I recently discovered this composer named Tod Dockstader, who's pretty unknown, on that "Ohm" compilation that came out a while ago. He's worth checking out. I've tried really hard to get into current noise bands, but I've found them mostly pretty uninteresting.

**Jeff:** I usually end up listening to a lot of what Kat listens to, but in my own time I usually listen to a lot of various kinds of old music. After all these years I'm still very much into psychedelic garage rock from the 60s like the 13th Floor Elevators and the great and underappreciated Music Machine, but I also love old-timey folk & country music from the 20s & 30s, old-old jazz like Django Reinhardt, and old Delta blues recordings like Charlie Patton. We also both like a lot of weird

'world' music too, like the 60s/70s soul music from Ethiopia on the 'Ethiopiques' series of cds; Cambodian pop music; Bollywood soundtracks,etc. Two bands that are no longer around that I'd like to mention, too, are the Mens Recovery Project, who are sort of a hardcore punk band who listened to too many DEVO records and ate a shelf full of dadaism books; and the 39 Clocks--an impossibly obscure German band from the late 70s/early 80s with a weird kind of Velvet Underground meets Cabaret Voltaire-with-Peter Lorre-singing kind of sound.. Great stuff.

**Kat, I take it you hung out in the Tacoma scene before moving here. How do the two cities compare, in whatever categories you care to cite?**

**Kat:** Ha ha ha! There's no scene whatsoever in Tacoma, unless you count hanging out with nu-metal kids at the mall. Seattle is close enough to Tacoma to siphon off any creativity.

**Jeff, I'm wondering what your take is on the modern music scene in Cleveland, if you even have one? (You've always been a bit hard to pin down on things!)**

**Jeff:** Gosh.. it's weird...uh...I guess I don't really keep that close of tabs on the 'modern music scene' here, mainly because I really don't seem to care for a lot of what's going on with it right now. So much of it seems to be controlled by cliquish hipsters who are more concerned with what is cool to like or not to like more than actually trying to find new and interesting music. Right now it seems like 'noise' music is sort of a trendy new underground thing, but somehow what seems to pass for 'noise' music that makes it into most of the clubs is nothing but warmed over math-rock a la flavor-of-the-month Lightning Bolt, or 'experimental hip hop' played on laptop computers by basement-dwelling white guys. Nothing interesting at all. From what I've seen just in the last couple of weeks, Kent actually seems like the most interesting place to be playing right now.

**You two both play bass. You live together. You're in a band together. Does it help, or hinder, your personal relationship...all this co-mingled project-togetherness?**

**Kat:** I wouldn't recommend being in a band with your significant other to anyone. When it works good it works good, but the stuff you don't see onstage is the bickering and "creative difficulties" and getting in arguments because one of you wants to practice and the other wants to do laundry.

**Jeff:** I don't think I'd recommend it for most other people either, but I can't imagine it any other way myself. To me, there's little more rewarding than being so intensely-involved in the creative process of making and performing music with the one person that you are also intensely involved with. Music is such a *huge* part of both of our lives, and one of our biggest common interests--to me it only seems natural that we would have a band together.

**You used to be Black Cabbage. Now you're Iron Oxide. What prompted the name change -- hopefully not some lawsuit from another Black Cabbage band?**

**Kat:** Since we aren't anywhere near as goofy anymore, we decided to ditch the goofy name. We never got a single email from the 'other' Black Cabbage.

**Last question. Could you both please tell me what a "cohegency" is all about? Your emails announcing your performances used to feature this word all the time.**

**Kat:** It's sort of like the word inflammable--it's its own opposite.

**Jeff:** Yep. That is by far the most cohegent definition of cohegency there could be...

**Intrigued Clevelanders can learn more about the band and various other projects, like the online version of *Rust & Brique*, at <http://www.iron-oxide.com>. Keep on rocking in the free world! Devo might have said that as well, eventually.**

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