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**Graded on a Curve:
Tav Falco's Panther Burns, *Red Devil***
BY JOSEPH NEFF | JANUARY 17, 2013



Tav Falco's Panther Burns are one of the truly inspired entries in the annals of fringe-roots musical science. They ruled the roost throughout the '80s, uncorking the potent zest from bottles labeled blues, rockabilly, R&B, country, small-scale rock 'n' roll, and even tango music, combining it all with an amateurish verve that was unlike almost anything else happening at the time. Their essence still kicks with undiminished strength and one of their most forceful records was 1988's tidy and dynamic *Red Devil*.

Much has been made of the importance of the city of Memphis in the history of 20th century music, but what sometimes gets overlooked is the weirdness that hovered around the edges of all the greatness. Looking back upon what all happened provides essential insight into creative synthesis and mutation, but basking in it all too often ignores how these big steps in the march of modernity weren't consciously conceived as such, far more often simply being the survival tactics of poor people, their very actions frequently ignored or even derided by the arbiters of taste at the time.

Robert Gordon's indispensable book *It Came from Memphis* did a fantastic job of relating some of the low-culture kookiness that fueled the city to its current renown as a true hub of modern culture, its chapters alternating tales of whacked disc jockey Dewey Phillips and professional wrestler Sputnik Monroe with considerations of far more well-established Memphis phenomena like Sun Studios and Stax Records, classic early blues survivors like Furry Lewis, and the fascinating career of the late great Alex Chilton. But an exalted, museum-like air does persist in being attached to the achievements of that truly crucial locale. This doesn't really do Memphis' cultural history a disservice as much as it only imparts a portion of the picture; how it all relates to right now. Maybe that's why Gustavus Nelson, more (in)famously known as Tav Falco, remains such a divisive figure. Many complain that he can't sing, and still others gripe that he's an eccentric non-talent whose sideways swagger endeared him to far more legitimate artists from his home city like Chilton, drummer Ross Johnson, and the truly indispensable Memphis denizen, Jim Dickinson.

But others, this writer very much included, find in Tav's best material an enduring rumination upon the oddball disposability of a time that now seems very far away but continues to hold a huge impact upon contemporary art, music most especially. What's missing is the anonymousness and occasional opprobrium that accompanied those un-self-conscious groundbreakers of yore.

The existence of Tav Falco's Panther Burns is very much analogous to the trash culture gush of The Cramps, a group that struck a chord with Chilton, who brought them to Memphis for recording in the late-'70s. But there is an important distinction to be made between the two. Where The Cramps, or more accurately the vast majority of their fans and followers, identified Lux and Ivy as merely a reaction against the dominance of middle and highbrow culture, the attitude of Falco and his cohorts was a bit more complicated, combining a rejection of the antiseptic safeness of the modern with an engagement with very up-to-date and occasionally avant-garde modes of expression.

It's important to note that Falco's twisted trip began as a video maker in the late-'70s, notably documenting the sessions for Chilton's wondrously convoluted masterpiece *Like Flies on Sherbert*. This circumstance resulted in a long connection between Falco and the former Box Tops/Big Star lynchpin, the meeting having an almost immediate effect, with Chilton joining the first lineup of Panther Burns on guitar and drums in '79.

Along with Tav, the other members were Ross Johnson on drums and Eric Hill on synthesizer. The very inclusion of that last instrument should be a tip off that the point of Panther Burns was very far from any stale retro trip. With the "She's the One That's Got It" 7-inch (recently reissued by Mighty Mouth Music), they knocked out an absolutely killer 4 songs of crap-fi mayhem, all covers, with nary an iota of pretense toward originality. This was followed by the *Behind the Magnolia Curtain* LP in '81. Co-released by Panther Burns' label Frenzi and Rough Trade in the UK, the record is easily one of the most bent bits of business to have arisen from its decade.

Finding Jim Duckworth replacing Johnson on drums, Ron Miller added on bass, and including on four tracks the Tate County Fife & Drum Corp (a

group that included blues legend Jesse Mae Hemphill), *Behind the Magnolia Curtain* remains the single most essential document in the groups' discography. About a thousand miles away from the much more well-behaved roots excavation of The Blasters (while exploring many similar rudiments), it was reissued a couple years back by Fat Possum on 2LP/CD with the band's far less damaged 1982 EP "Blow Your Top." But if *Behind the Magnolia Curtain* is Panther Burns most necessary album, there's really no consensus on the release that lands in second place. They issued a handful of highly worthy records as the '80s progressed, and this writer's pick as the best of that bunch is '88's *Red Devil*, a 10-song dilly of a disc that expresses in concise fashion exactly what made this band so special. It was issued way back when by the prolific French label New Rose and also licensed to Citadel in Australia, but my well worn though still sturdy copy was waxed up for Canadian consumption by the ultra-obscure label Right Side.

Part of the appeal of Panther Burns was their general lack of concern for polish and even consistency, but *Red Devil* presents the band at their most together and lively, with all the songs save one from a wildly disparate yet quite complimentary group of sources. The first, "Oh, How She Dances" comes from one of *Red Devil's* numerous instrumental contributors and producers Jim Dickinson, the song first heard on his brilliant '72 LP for Atlantic *Dixie Fried*.

"Oh, How She Dances" finds Falco impersonating a sideshow barker, and as he stumps for lurid, freakish spectacles and eventually breaks into song, the decidedly outsider vibe of his voice combines with the looseness of the music to legitimately conjure the atmosphere of a traveling troupe offering their oddities under a meager tent in the early, far less proper decades of last century. And yet it's also tweaked enough to register as part of the '80s underground's rejection of the advances of refinement.

A swell take on "Driftin' Heart", one of Chuck Berry's less celebrated and also somewhat eccentric early songs comes next, the group choosing not to alter the tune but instead enhance the original's instrumental majesty with some simply gigantic bass playing and the gently lounge-kissed strains of piano and trumpet. It successfully radiates the aura of a dive where

everyone is dressed to the nines and the all drinks are colorful and on fire.
How swank.

Next is a terrific reading of the Lee Hazelwood classic "Poor Man," the unusual nature of Falco's pipes a fitting extension of the huge, booming voice found on the original version. And the way the band locks into a simplistic but warmly inviting groove, never too busy or touched with flash, really emphasizes their understanding of the non-showboaty instrumental grandeur that made the '50s and '60s such a deep well of musical delights.

From there the group transforms "Two Little Puppies (and One Old Shaggy Hound)," a song credited to old-time blues songster Jim Jackson, into a raunchy racket that's sorta comparable to a skuzzy garage-punk combo falling under the spell of the minimalist blues that oozed from the fingers of R.L. Burnside. It's a twisted, tremulous mess, and it also serves to prove that while Tav is definitely left of center as a singer, he is also capable of great power in front of the microphone.

"Tram," a stomping and massively basic take of Lowell Fulson's chestnut "Tramp" (more famously covered by Otis Redding and Carla Thomas) rounds out side one, and it locates a ludicrous firestorm of stripped down funk, the kind that raised the rafters on those now mythical backwoods dives that got so over-packed with cavorting revelers that drinks were spilled, glasses and bottles ended up smashed, and by the end of the night everyone's sweat ended up mixed together and the whole beautiful throng somehow managed to momentarily forget the horrible burden of life's troubles. Yes, all this and Tav even managing to briefly shift the song's smack-talking lyrics into an unexpected riff on class-structure in the long gone South of yesteryear.

Side two opens with the sole original "Ode to Shetar," co-penned by Tav and Panther burns guitarist George Reinecke, and it's a burning slice of '60s-garage rock motion informed by the sort of appealingly stilted, Eastern-tinged mysticism that's totally disappeared as globalization has brought the realities of the other side of the world right to our computer screens.

From there the band tackles "Ditch Digging," an Eddie Floyd/Sir Mack Rice song recorded by Memphis titan Rufus Thomas, and the grand Stax-like strut is in full effect. Interestingly, this song also proved to be the inspiration for the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion's "Ditch" as found on their classic LP *Orange*. The version here stays much closer to the vibe of the original however, and its infectious dance-craze attitude is hard to top. A fresh, torrid take of Crazy Cravan and the Rhythm Rockers' "She's the One to Blame" keeps Red Devil's examination of roots knowledge steadily on course, giving the proceedings a touch of rockabilly inspired flavor. And that previously mentioned instrumental simplicity returns with a cover of the Betty James obscurity "I'm a Little Mixed Up." One of the record's high points, it provides a fine example of the hotwiring of R&B sizzle and C&W gusto, the very ingredients that R&R was made of. A tightly-wound, cooking version of The Nightcrawlers' "Running Wild" completes the album with true panache.

Red Devil was also issued on CD by New Rose with the entirety of the "Sugar Ditch Revisited" EP tacked on, but it omitted "I'm a Little Mixed Up," which to these ears is a real drag. This album served as my introduction to the warped world of Tav Falco's Panther Burns, and none of its tracks are disposable. If not the peak of this one of a kind group's powers, it does come very close. The record's general obscurity is undeserved and a reissue of its charms would be a very righteous maneuver.