



The Stooges

BY JAAN UHELZKI



Long before images of self-flagellation, peanut butter smearing, and bloodletting cemented a certain sensational, albeit one-dimensional, perception of them, the Stooges – Iggy Pop (né James Osterberg),

Ron Asheton, Scott Asheton, and Dave Alexander – were just four kids oozing boredom and frustration in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the genteel university town forty miles west of Detroit. They couldn't have known it, but the musical relief they sought and found would spark a time-delayed revolution in sound, style, and performance, making the Stooges one of the most influential groups in modern-rock history.

For a brief and beautiful period from 1967 to 1974, the Stooges were rock's greatest and most dangerous *provocateurs*, playing uncompromisingly ferocious and theatrical music. While largely unappreciated (if not downright hated) in their own time, the outrageous quartet – and briefly quintet, with the addition of guitarist James Williamson – has influenced several generations of musicians. Kurt Cobain of Nirvana listed the Stooges' *Raw Power* as his Number One record in his private journal. White Stripes frontman Jack White has called *Fun House* the "greatest rock & roll record ever made"; Sonic Youth, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and the Sex Pistols have all recorded covers of their songs.

While it may seem a bit hyperbolic, a very real argument could be made that the Stooges spawned seventies glam and punk, eighties alternative rock, and nineties grunge. And if one looks closely, you can even see a little of Iggy Pop in the bleached-blond hair and surreal, go-for-broke stage antics of Lady Gaga.

Hailed as American primitives, the Stooges, as their name suggests, celebrated the instinct over the intellect, which makes the fact that they came together in Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan, even more ironic and delicious. In the summer of 1967, the foursome moved into a vacated frat house on campus and promptly began saturating themselves in drugs and obscure Harry Partch records, coaxing what could only be described as "noise" from instruments bought, stolen, and handmade.

The house was a sort of "anti-Think Tank," as they experimented with unorthodox sounds, strange ideas, and all kinds of bad behavior.

"We just put aside regular music and started from zero," guitarist Ron Asheton said in 2007, two years before his death. "Iggy was an accomplished drummer, and I'd played in a high school band. We knew how to play *normal* stuff. But we didn't want to."

"We liked all the bands that were popular, like the MC5 and Kinks, but we knew we could never be like those groups," adds drummer

Scott Asheton. "Jim's idea from the beginning was to be totally different. We set out to accomplish that."

According to Iggy, the band did nothing but talk bullshit for months and months, and he often had to lure the other members into rehearsing by offering them hashish. But despite the outward appearance, the Stooges were very serious about their music and very ambitious. As Iggy remarked in his autobiography, *I Need More: The Stooges and Other Stories*, "I never wanted to be anything but at the top, the most noticed or the most famous."

But what did they become famous for? In the early stages, it was for the scorn and ridicule heaped on them by a generation known for "peace and love." Quite simply, the Stooges were the most despised band of the sixties, running neck and neck for the title with New York's Velvet Underground . . . and they rather reveled in it.

"People would come to see us because they hated us, and that was part of our appeal," remembers Scott Asheton. "We all felt we were outsiders, and we kind of wanted that. In a world of being original, you have to be something that other people aren't and do stuff that people haven't done."

For the Stooges, "original" meant jamming with a vacuum cleaner, smearing oneself with raw hamburger meat, and composing two-chord anti-anthems like "I Wanna Be Your Dog" and "No Fun." It was the sixties, all right, but they were the bad acid trip that no one wanted and a far fucking cry from Woodstock.

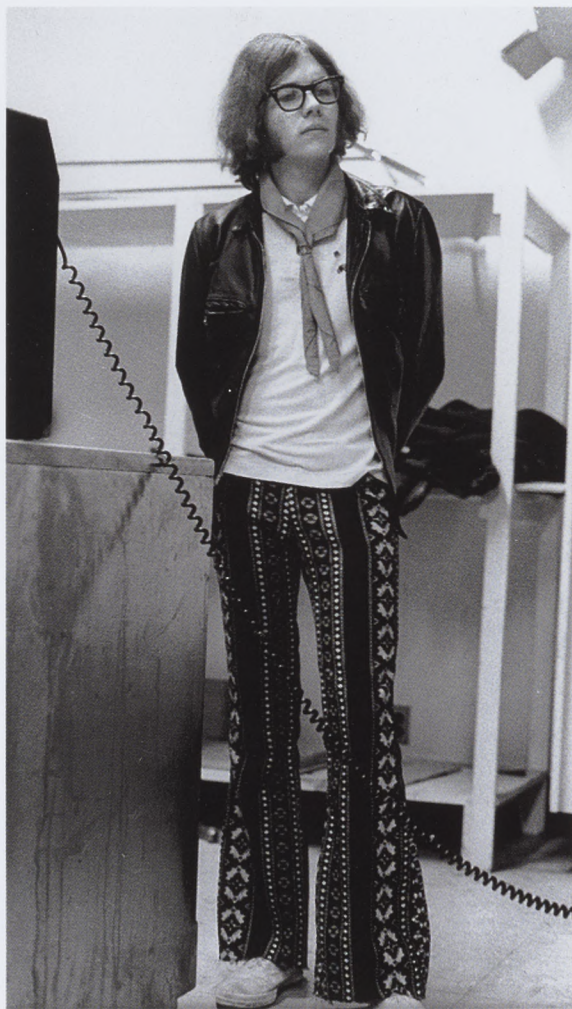


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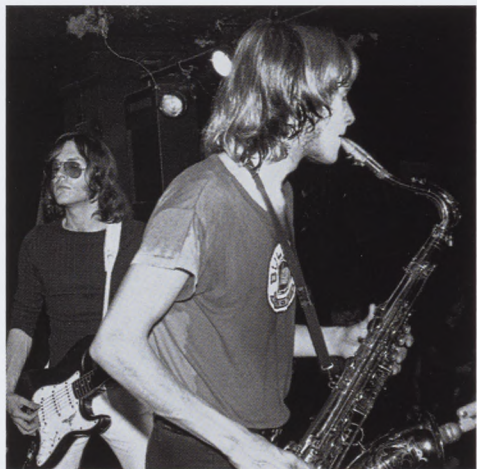
The Stooges in Elektra Studios: Dave Alexander, Scott Asheton, Ron Asheton, and Iggy Pop (clockwise from top left), 1970



From Ann Arbor to the world: The original Stooges in 1968



Backstage in Birmingham, Michigan, Ron Asheton waits to play, 1969.



Ron Asheton and saxophonist Steve Mackay at Ungano's, New York City, 1970

In hindsight, it seems perfect that the Psychedelic Stooges (as the band was originally billed) made their debut on October 31, 1967, at a private Halloween party attended by the MC5 and manager John Sinclair. The "avant-rock" MC5 ruled the Detroit underground, and their patronage – the Stooges would become known as the Five's "baby brother band" – gave the fledgling group an advantage on the cut-throat Motor City music scene. They needed it. When the Psychedelic Stooges had their proper unveiling at the Grande Ballroom on January 20, 1968, as a last-minute fill-in for the Amboy Dukes, they were more an art happening than a musical experience.

The nascent band members were a sight – and sound – to behold. For the occasion, Iggy Pop had smeared Stein's clown white makeup on his face, donned a turn-of-the-century maternity dress, and wore a headpiece that consisted of starched pieces of aluminum foil that were glued onto a rubber bathing cap. It was a pretty frightening vision, but not half as frightening

as the discordant bleats that roared from their instruments. Scott Asheton pounded on a set of oil drums with a ball hammer, Ron Asheton viciously strummed his guitar while never making eye contact with the audience, and Dave Alexander was either too frightened or too inebriated to do more than sway back and forth over the scarred wood floor, hugging his bass to his rangy chest.

Iggy, however, was in his element, playing a Hawaiian guitar, or manipulating instruments of his own invention like the “Jim-a-phone” (basically a microphone with a funnel around it). At one point, he leaped off the stage, robes flying behind him, and pushed a female member of the audience on her pretty behind, all the while issuing a series of bellicose war whoops. He would whip himself up into a tribal frenzy, his face contorted in a state of epileptic ecstasy, a single hand fluttering behind his perfect blond hair, in insult or salute, as he hurled his body through negative space – right out into the audience, and as a result, inventing crowd-walking, which he claims as one of his greatest contributions to the rock canon: “No one had ever done that before, but I decided I wanted to break through the proscenium to see what lay on the other side. I liked what I found there.”

You could hardly ignore this kind of crude spectacle, or the infusion of noise and anxious, insistent vibration: the cadence shrill and punishing. The Stooges were odd and unflappable, and unlike anything that had tumbled out of the Midwest, or anywhere, for that matter. Those early audiences really didn’t know what to make of them, stunned into utter disbelief by performances that concentrated unheard-of levels of noise and theater and mystery and danger into sets that rarely exceeded twenty or so minutes.

“Yup, eighteen minutes of pure dynamite. We got on, we got off,” Ron Asheton remembered proudly. And that was only their second show . . .

“The funny thing is that people used to feel sorry for the group,” Iggy recalled. “They’d say, ‘He’s a nice guy, but he’s going crazy.’ And they’d say to me, ‘You used to be a good drummer, what happened?’”

What had happened was that in becoming Iggy Pop, Jim Osterberg was not just shedding an old skin, he was reacting to the exercise of the new musical vocabulary he and his Stooges were devising from scratch. Even those riveted by Iggy’s unpredictable performances seldom mentioned the music, unless in a derogatory fashion. Yet when they dumbfounded the Detroit scene by scoring a contract with Elektra Records in 1968 before they even had any discernible songs, it was the sound of the Stooges that sealed the deal.

Danny Fields had come to Detroit to scout the MC5 for Elektra and somehow convinced label boss Jac Holzman to take a chance on the still evolving Stooges, as well. “The MC5 were dynamite,” Fields told journalist Ben Edmonds. “It was loud and fast, they did leaps and splits and spins, and they had thousands of kids screaming. What else does a record company need to see? It was a total package, and I was overwhelmed. . . . But then when I saw the Stooges, it was love at first sight. Even more than Iggy as a performer, which would have been stunning enough, it was the sound of the band. . . . With the Stooges you went sailing right over the cliff of modern musical taste into places you’d never been before. Art, to me, was something I couldn’t imagine in my mind, and that’s what the Stooges showed me. It was like they were making the music I’d waited my whole life to hear.”



A 1968 poster advertising appearances with the MC5



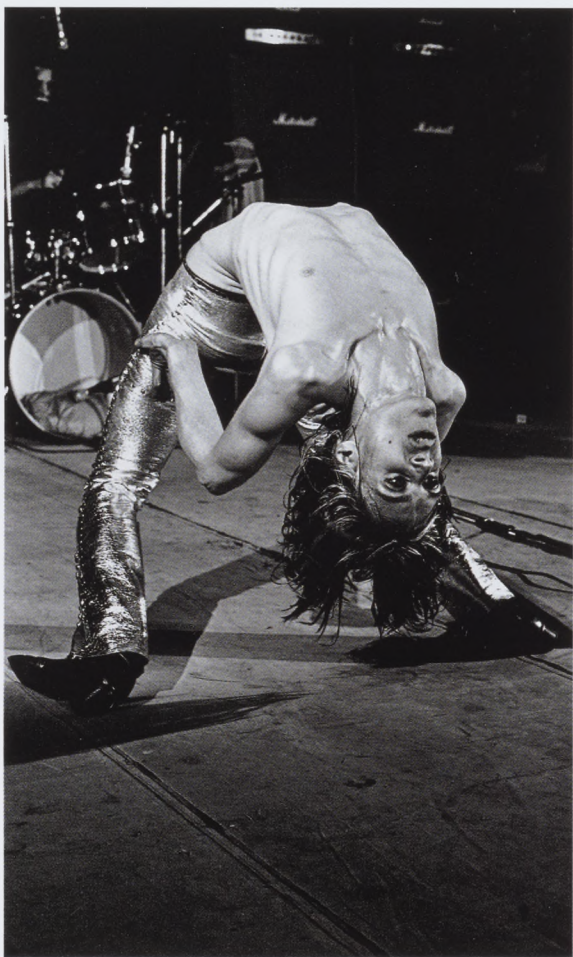
Iggy pioneering crowd-walking, 1969



Ron Asheton, James Williamson, and Pop (from left) at Max’s Kansas City, 1973



Pointing and shouting: Iggy fronts the Stooges, Cincinnati, 1970.



Iggy at the height of the Stooges' glam-punk glory, London, 1972

Before the Stooges entered the studio, Holzman flew the band to New York to see what the label had bought for the princely sum of \$5,000. Unfortunately their repertoire consisted of only five songs: "I Wanna Be Your Dog," "1969," "No Fun," "Ann," and "We Will Fall." When he asked if they had any more tunes, the Stooges were ashamed to admit they didn't, and – thinking that it might jinx the deal if they told the truth – they replied: "Of course." By the end of twenty-four hours, they actually did. Ron Asheton and Iggy Pop stayed up that night at the infamous Chelsea Hotel and knocked out three more songs, "Little Doll," "Real Cool Time," and "Not Right," which they only rehearsed once before taking them to the studio a day later.

Recorded in four days and produced by the Velvet Underground's John Cale, the Stooges' eponymous first album, released in August 1969, was an unmitigated flop. Misunderstood by critics and ignored by the masses, *The Stooges* struggled its way up to Number 106 on the charts and then quickly faded away.

Undeterred, the band recorded 1970's stinging masterpiece (and Iggy's favorite Stooges album) *Fun House* and, finally, 1973's *Raw Power*. When the latter was released, it was tantamount to the Stooges' comeback album, since they had been dropped by Elektra in 1971. But they didn't pick up where they had left off following *Fun House*; instead, Iggy reconstituted the band without Alexander and with the addition of Detroit guitar savant James Williamson, who had been hired to give them a more fulsome sound. Following a period of dual guitars, Ron Asheton eventually was moved to bass guitar, increasing the tension in a situation that was only fragilely held together at best.

It wasn't a surprise to anyone that only a year later they imploded on a Detroit stage. Iggy Pop and guitarist Ron Asheton didn't speak for more than twenty years, and the legacy

of this mighty band was reduced to the antics of a lead singer who rolled around in broken glass, smeared his bare chest with peanut butter, exposed his genitalia, and crowd-surfed. But history had another plan for the Stooges.

"Yeah, the first thing they would notice was that I was bleeding," Iggy has pointed out. "If we were lucky, they'd get past that and see how good the music was. I'm crazy enough to have thought that everybody was going to jump in and sing along — that people wanted to hear what we did and they'll get it. I didn't think we would sell a million records, but I thought, fifty thousand is good. I just thought more people would get into it than did. But I was never discouraged. I was willing to wait."

Little did he know how long he'd have to wait to get his band's due. Since 1977, Iggy has released sixteen solo albums, helping to keep the memory of his former band alive. No matter how great his success, though, there was always the specter of unfinished business with his former compatriots.

Over the years, hard-core and high-profile fans have urged the former band members to put their differences behind them and reunite. But you can thank Scott Asheton for their resurrection. He never gave up on re-forming the band and regularly made uninvited pilgrimages to New York to cajole Iggy to consider it, including an effort to mark their twentieth anniversary in 1997: The offer fell on deaf ears. "I still just knew if we got together again, it would be good," said the plain-speaking, no-nonsense drummer. "So I never gave up."

It was Pop who eventually asked the Asheton brothers to help him on his 2003 album *Skull Ring*. "I had a list of people I wanted to work with written on a sheet of notebook paper. I had the Stooges on the list right next to Justin Timberlake," explained the singer. Ultimately, Pop asked Peaches, Green Day, Sum 41, and the Ashetons to guest on the recording. But it was the four songs that the reconstituted Stooges appeared on that were so well received that they generated a flurry of offers for the band to play live. Which the Stooges ultimately did, debuting at the 2003 Coachella Festival with former Minutemen bassist Mike Watt filling in for Dave Alexander, who had passed away in 1975.

The three former friends, along with Watts and saxophonist Steve Mackay (who had played on *Fun House*), released a fourth album, *The Weirdness*, in 2007, thirty-four years after *Raw Power* came out, finally fulfilling Scott Asheton's dream.

"I never thought the Stooges were going to go on forever, but at the same time I never thought they weren't," said Pop. "None of us left to be in other bands. I certainly didn't. I have always been a Stooge."

As have they all — including Ron Asheton up to his death in January 2009. But even that hasn't derailed the dream. Since then, James Williamson was drafted into service to rejoin the outfit, and the Stooges will go on, performing *Raw Power*-era songs in the new decade. Why? Because with their clash of sound culture and aesthetics, the Stooges did much more than just make records. Ron Asheton's primitive guitar, inspired by the frenzy of Jimi Hendrix's feedback, the quirky mysticism of Brian Jones, and the incipient, angry guitar slash of Pete Townshend; Pop's confrontational exhibitionism and sex yodels; Scott Asheton's untutored trash-can drumming; Dave Alexander's blasts of bass rage; and James Williamson's loud, savage guitar raunch paved the way for generations of musicians with more will than talent, showing them it was all right to follow their dreams — even if their dreams looked more like nightmares. ☞



Keeping it raw: Iggy and Scott Asheton in New York City, 2007



Stooges strike again: Scott Asheton, Iggy Pop, Steve Mackay, and Ron Asheton (from left)