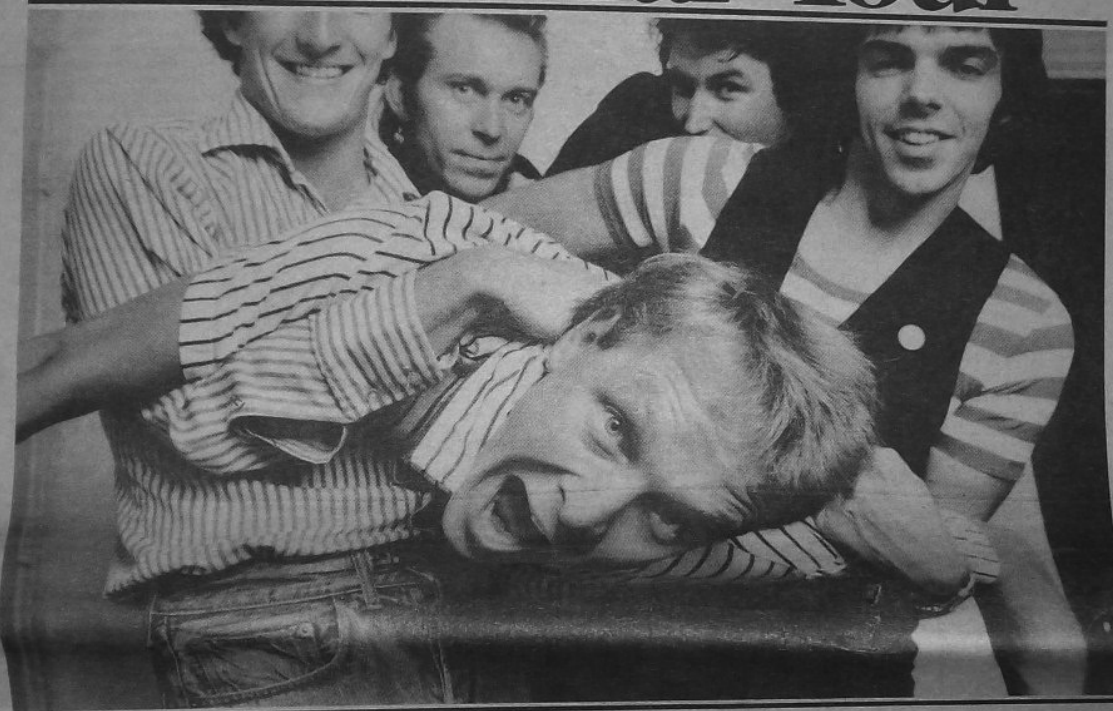


This issue in three sections

READER

VOL. 8, NO. 41, OCTOBER 18, 1979 SAN DIEGO'S WEEKLY

Two Dollar Tour



Photograph by Jim Cobb

On the road with The Penetrators

"If I've had a nutritional meal in the last year, it'll come as a surprise to my stomach," quips Dan McLain in between resounding burps. It is almost midnight and we are sitting outside a Sacramento Taco Bell, trying our best to savor one of the few semisolid meals we've had in three days. McLain continues with an observation on the human body's tolerance for abuse. "My system's used to junk food and beer. Anything with excess vitamin value makes me throw up." He laughs and belches in an inimitable syncopation. Twenty-four-year-old McLain is the drummer for the San Diego new-wave rock and roll band called The Penetrators, who, with a couple of girlfriends, an equipment carrier, and a tag-along writer in tow, have limped into Sacramento, a one-night stop on their statewide tour. Actually, to call the travels of this impoverished caravan a tour may be a bit misleading, too momentous. McLain wipes a dribble of beans from his face and comments, "When I think about the Rolling Stones carrying sixty people on their tours, I can see why those jet-set druggies have been able to hang on so long. If we had a fraction that many, we'd be doing just fine." The amorphous mash of beans, cheese, tortilla swims before my eyes, and

combined with my inebriated frame of mind, inspire me to wonder, silently, "What the hell am I doing here?"

When I accepted the invitation to accompany The Penetrators on their six-day junket up the California coast (humorously billed as the Penetrators' World Tour '79), I realized I could not expect the comforts that might be afforded a *Rolling Stone* writer chronicling the movements of the latest rock sensations. Warnings from loved ones were abundant. My mother urged me to bring ample provisions, eat at least two meals a day, and stay away from drugs and liquor. Concerned female friends advised me to keep a close eye on my funds and moral virtue. Initially envious male friends, when informed I was unlikely to encounter alluring young groupies along the way, wondered why I was bothering to go at all.

However, I had resolved that nothing would dissuade me. For the last year, since witnessing The Penetrators nearly upstage The Ramones in concert at San Diego State, I have tried to goad, persuade, and plead with people to take seriously my estimation of them as the best San Diego rock band. My enthusiasm even led me to compare them with the renowned English group, The Clash. At the time I concocted that comparison I knew it smacked of hyperbole, but such an imposing reference point seemed the most effective way of

(continued on page 8)

By Steve Esmedina



Penetrators

(continued from page 12)

drums for two years), and the groups bombed.

Steady employment has also been elusive. He hung on for two years working the graveyard shift at a 7-Eleven, but was eventually fired, he was told, "for lacking the 7-Eleven spirit." He was an original partner in Monty Rockers, a record store specializing in independently released and out-of-print singles and imports, but relinquished his share in the venture because the business squabbles were no longer "fun." He is unemployed at the moment, except for work with The Penetrators and occasional jobs with another local band, The Crawdaddys. McLain describes himself as "an advocate of cigarette smoking, alcoholism, a divorcé, a cross to bear for my parents, and anything else you want to make up that will make me look bad."

For The Penetrators, this journey really began in the winter of 1977, when Chris Sullivan placed a classified ad in this paper. He was looking for a guitar player who could join with him to form a group that would play oldies hits. A musician named Scott Harrington answered the ad,

and when he and Sullivan found themselves to be compatible, another ad was placed — this time for a singer and a drummer. Gary Heffern offered his services as a singer, but Harrington wasn't completely happy with Heffern's talents. Sullivan liked him, though, and in January of 1978 Heffern officially became lead singer for the new group. Auditions for a drummer dragged on for three months; McLain was finally selected.

Initially, there had been no intention to pursue new-wave music, but Harrington's enthusiasm for it prevailed, and almost by default the group developed a musical identity. (The name was chosen because it sounded "tough and sexual.") Their first paying job took place in the recreation room of the Sea Colony Inn in Ocean Beach. After that came fraternity parties at SDSU, private parties in La Jolla, summertime gigs at Abbey Road, Glorietta Bay Park, and the North Park Lions Club.

Within a few months, however, Heffern and McLain were not getting along well with Harrington. The tensions worsened, and in December of last year Harrington left the group just three days before they were to open for The Ramones at San Diego State's Montezuma Hall. They called on guitarist Chris Davies, an old friend of Heffern's and an avid follower of

the group. A native San Diegan who had been playing guitar since he was fourteen, Davies had decided about a year before to make whatever living he could by playing music. The timing was perfect. From recordings he had made of Penetrators' concerts, he already knew most of the repertoire, and the Ramones concert came off without a hitch. In fact, it was a tremendous success.

The tail end of summer is beautiful. Framed by the rear window of Sullivan's car, the skies are clear, clean, aqua blue; the hills and cliffs are camel backs, perfectly sculpted; the highway to Santa Barbara is free of speed-freak crazies. Looking to my left, all I can think of is how gorgeous the ocean is, a flawless, curved piece of painted glass. We pull into a Santa Barbara gas station to fill up. When the last car is ready, no one moves, no engines start. What now?

"Burrppp!" offers Dan McLain. "Let's get some food and get ripped. We're not gonna play tonight."

There is no argument. McLain fishes out his food stamps and we walk across the street to the Food Basket. Everyone agrees to be taking this latest setback in stride, but I wonder, how do they feel, really? I'll

never understand musicians. They do not care how bad they look in the eyes of their peers, elders, or the media; they will do exactly what they want, when and where they want. They are a special breed of professionals: amateurs who don't realize they are professionals.

Hamburgers versus foot-long hot dogs, romaine lettuce versus head lettuce, pastry versus fruit, beer versus two quarts of tequila. Why not? We have nothing to do but get loaded. After some deliberation, we accept Sullivan's suggestion that we sleep tonight at Pismo Beach. This will aid us in making better time to Sacramento. We'll camp out on the beach, eat, drink a bit, then get up at dawn and leave. Aside from having nowhere else to go, Pismo seems like a good idea because it is Heffern's twenty-fifth birthday and everyone is excited at the thought of celebrating with a drunken beach party. Still, it is not comforting to think that the group's limited resources are going to be stretched to the breaking point.

The beach party is a lot of fun. We drink, eat, drink, and are merry until the rapidly falling temperature forces us to concentrate on avoiding pneumonia. In the course of the evening we join forces at least four times to push each automobile out of the sand, drunkenly try to best each other with our knowledge of old rock and roll hits, brave the freezing temperature of the ocean at 3:00 a.m. because McLain keeps insisting that it's "bitchin'," and, finally, bed down — Call and Charlene in their car; McLain and Cheri in their double sleeping bag; Davies in the back seat of Sullivan's car; Heffern in Sullivan's driver's seat, his forehead resting on the steering wheel; Peter Nowell in a straightjacket position amid the group's equipment in his van; Sullivan atop the van. I have a soft, silken mattress. I place an issue of someone's Los Angeles porno paper down on the fine, smooth sand as a bottom sheet, and use the latest *Rolling Stone* for a blanket. As I turn on my stomach and taste sand, McLain offers a good-night salute. "Hey, Steve, there's a couple of copies of the *Reader* in one of the cars if you need a pillow."

With red eyes, foul breath, unwashed bodies, and diminished expectations, we forge on to Sacramento, supposedly a four-hour drive from Pismo Beach. But several wild chases for gasoline result in a late arrival. Steve from Cheri's quarters first in Sacramento, there will be two less Poobies.

(continued on page 20)



Penetrators

(continued from page 18)

save us money. Sullivan parks off to the side of the motel and somberly details the plan. The Penetrators are not scheduled to play until the next day, which means there's an extra night of cash out and no cash in.

"Steve, to save money, we're going to trade two rooms for one room, so we'll have a place to sleep two nights. Now, in case that can't be done, you have enough to cover, right?"

I don't say no, but I don't say yes, either.

"Good. Now, you, me, and Peter are going to the office and act like we're the ones renting the room. Things are probably taken care of, but if not, you have about a hundred? Okay. Good."

Luckily, there is no problem juggling the reservations. Now comes the difficult part. How are we going to keep the human traffic unnoticed by the managers? The rest of the crew, who have remained in their cars and out of sight, is instructed to wait until the three of us have our belongings squared away. Then, casually, quietly, one-by-one, they can come in. We are to avoid unnecessary outdoor trips. When desiring entry, we must knock,

pause, then knock twice again. And the last one inside at night must post the Do Not Disturb sign on the door.

Once inside, with danger behind us, rock and roll restlessness sets in. "Let's go to the city right now," I suggest.

"What are you in such a hurry for?" asks McLain. "Why can't we just rest here for a while and go get some food later and go downtown tonight?"

"Yeah," says Heffern. "I'd kind of like to reserve my energy."

What's this? I think to myself. The Penetrators want to . . . mellow out?

The idea is to collect the evening's meal with the remainder of McLain's food stamps and enjoy a pleasant sunset picnic at a nearby playground. After an hour and a half of television (including a re-run episode of *The Monkees*), I stealthily, surreptitiously poke my head out the door to see if the coast is clear. We quickly pile into Nowell's van.

"I feel like we're starting in an update of *A Hard Day's Night*," fantasizes Heffern. "Steve, check out the window and see if any of those thousands of screaming groupies spotted us."

Spending time at the park makes me feel as if we are committing an unpardonable sin. We shouldn't be standing here in a sandbox devouring half-raw hamburgers when the big city beckons us. It is somewhat disconcerting to see these intense, aggressive, badass punk rockers playing clumsy games of horse, arcing back and forth on children's swings, and tossing sand on a slide to ensure a swift descent.

Our itinerary in San Francisco begins with window shopping, and I really don't mind following Sullivan and Nowell as they scout for a pair of Beatle boots, or watching Heffern and Davies stand at the window of a posh restaurant and stare ravenously at intimidated couples who pretend not to notice. I don't even mind risking cardiac arrest by joining the whole group in a furious charge down a long alley in order to frighten strolling lovers at the opposite end. Considering where I am and what I might otherwise be doing, this isn't

at all a bad way to pass the time.

The Mabuhay Philippine Gardens, located on North Beach's upper-Broadway skin strip, is another of those numerous restaurants, which, seeking a novel method of beefing up profits, decided a few years ago to do double duty as a new-wave club. This place enjoys a relatively lofty reputation in the punk community; a number of well-known acts have performed here at early stages in their careers, and among musicians it is looked upon as one of those make-or-break showcases.

We walk in for the sound check while rehearsal for a skit is taking place. The club's manager, Dirk Dirksen, who is generally considered to be a first-class jerk, is to be honored by a local punk-theater group. While the actors work out their arcane routine, The Penetrators set up for the sound check and are loudly, gruffly informed by the middle-aged Dirksen of their place on the bill. "You guys are second, after The Aggravators, or The Reactors — whoever the hell. I don't give a damn. Got it?"

The Mabuhay is only half full as the show begins. The opening act, The Reactors, clock out after only twenty minutes, but even that seems too long. Those who deride new wave as inept garage-band garbage probably have this sort of unit in mind. I become discouraged about it myself when rank amateurs like The Reactors have the gall to go onstage. The same goes for the featured group, Next, a heavy-metal trio with expensive hardware and tuxedos, but little else. I am losing any sense of what is implied by the term "new wave." Too often it is a handy catch-all phrase for poseurs who have meager technical skills and no direction but still think they deserve an audience. At the Mabuhay, however, The Penetrators again manage to bolster my confidence, and they clearly win over the skeptical, jaundiced crowd.

I am not surprised to find that the evening's percentage, about fifty dollars, although more than they have received thus far on the tour, is hardly enough to

alleviate the band's monetary woes. Heffern, who is used to being broke, could care less. "I don't worry about that. Hey, we killed 'em. Did you hear 'em booing us when they heard where we were from? Well, they weren't booing at the end. Some guy who was booing told me that he only does that to bands he thinks are great so that they'll push harder. That's the stuff that counts: money will follow later."

Money had better follow soon. I don't imagine that every time they travel they want to play cat-and-mouse games at motels. We go through our routine once more at the Conquistador in San Bruno, and no one misses a beat. The Do Not Disturb sign is in place within two minutes. This is my last night (tomorrow The Penetrators share the bill with two popular San Francisco bands, The Dead Kennedys and The Go Go's) and the boys have parting questions and instructions. McLain is first to articulate the most important one.

"Well, Steve, what are you gonna say about us? You gonna write how the relentlessly savage rock of The Penetrators discouraged the other bands so much they gave it up? Hah! Burrpp!"

"What would you do if I say you guys bombed?"

"We'd tie you down and kick your teeth in."

"No," Sullivan says. "We'd tell everyone at home you became a heroin addict and a B&D freak."

After a few more stimulating farewell shots, I cuddle up on what has been my regular mattress all week: the ground.

Morning arrives, and as I leave, The Penetrators are barely conscious enough to offer their good-byes. It is an anticlimactic bon voyage. On the flight to San Diego, as I stare out the window, my eyes transfixed on PSA Flight 130's left wing, I have only one comfortable moment. I discover that, without realizing it, the Penetrators' World Tour '79 has indeed left me corrupted. I down my morning Bloody Mary too fast and what do you suppose emanates from my throat? A reverberating burrrpp! that Dan McLain might be proud of. □