

Rank And File, The Kinman Brothers and Alejandro Escovedo - Together And Then Apart Part 1

The late seventies witnessed punk music enjoy great popularity – although *popularity* and *punk* are not terms you'd expect to find in the same sentence. I resisted inserting *commercial* between *great* and *popularity* in the opening sentence, as I didn't want to upset those readers with punk leanings filed away in their musical closet. Out in California, two bands that occasionally shared gigs during the *gory days of punk* were The Dils and The Nuns. The main players in The Dils were the Kinman Brothers, Tony, and his younger brother, Chip. Tony Kinman was born on April 3rd 1956 in Quantico, Virginia, while Chip first drew breath in Edenton, North Carolina on October 4th 1957. The brothers were the offspring of a career army officer and began life on army bases in North Carolina. As we shall see, while there they were undoubtedly exposed to country music. Hell, country music was practically indigenous in that neck of the woods. In time, their parents relocated the family to Carlsbad, California and Kinman boys attended high school in San Diego. Inspired, musically, not by the sounds made in Bakersfield or Nashville, but by the music of the New York Dolls and soloists such as Lou Reed, in 1977, intent on joining the punk music revolution, alongside X, The Germs, The Avengers and The Nuns, the Kinman brothers formed The Dils.

Dubbed "the American Clash" they went on to tour with the late Joe Strummer & Co. and in the three years they were together, The Dils, a trio, issued a number of singles, including the socio-political commentaries "I Hate the Rich" and "Class War." Sets by The Dils didn't consist strictly of high energy, hardcore punk music – *with the typical slam bam over in a flash tunes* - and the brothers experimented with longer numbers, slow songs and even used acoustic guitars onstage. While Chip played guitar and sang, Tony was the bass player and also chipped in on vocals. During the lifetime of The Dils the drum stool was occupied, at various times, by Endre Algovér, Rand McNally [really!], Zippy Pinhead and John Silver. In 1980, The Dils broke up. Chip moved to New York, while Tony settled in Oregon.....but we've jumped ahead a little.

Alejandro Escovedo was born in San Antonio, Texas on January 10th 1951, the seventh of twelve siblings – some full and some half-brothers. Music is an integral part of the Escovedo family genetic identity. Al's father Pedro [d. 2004], who was born in Saltillo, Mexico circa 1907, sang in mariachi and swing bands as a young man. Al's older brothers Pete and Coke [d. 1986], from his father's first marriage were born in California and went on to play in West Coast bands such as Santana, Azteca and Malo. Pete's daughter Sheila E enjoyed a successful solo career during the nineteen eighties, and also worked with Prince as a percussionist. Al's younger brothers Javier and Mario played in Southern California rock bands – Javier was in the '70's punk band, The Zeros. The Escovedo family moved back to California in the late nineteen-fifties, and initially settled in Orange, Orange County, before moving to Santa Ana and subsequently Huntingdon Beach. Al left high school at the age of sixteen. In terms of a career aim, Al dreamed of becoming a league baseball pitcher and for a time played American Legion baseball. It was Al's father who gave him his first guitar while a teenager and taught him a few chords, having traded some plumbing work for the instrument, but the youngster soon tired of playing the instrument.

Some years later, after attending gigs at local clubs such the Golden Bear, music began to make an impression on Alejandro's psyche, particularly the country rock sounds of The Byrds, Burritos and the legion of soundalike's that followed in their wake. In 1972 Escovedo moved to Washington state and picked fruit in the Yakima Valley, but was back in the Beach by the following year and then moved to Hollywood. It was there that he saw The Stooges and the New York Dolls perform. By 1975 Al was living in San Francisco and working at a local junior college when he became involved in making a student movie titled "**Eighteen And A Half**" about a band who couldn't play their instruments. Loosely based on Iggy Pop's life, a scene in the movie called for a band to perform in a club, so Al and fellow student Jeff Olener accepted the gig. In due course The Nuns were born, after vocalist Jennifer Miro and Richie Dietrich were recruited. The band went on to play its initial gigs at Mabuhay Gardens, sharing a stage with - yes folks, The Dils – who were now based in San Francisco.

The Nuns debut single "The Decadent Jew"/"Wild" appeared on Howie Klein's independent 415 Records, an imprint that was later distributed through Columbia Records. In January 1978, The Nuns and The Avengers opened for the Sex Pistols at their last show at San Francisco's Winterland. The date,

January 14th 1978. Although punk music didn't die that night, Escovedo has been quoted as saying that had come to the realisation that the genre was just an excuse to "*screw the musical establishment.*"

The Nuns went on to undertake an East Coast tour, and in New York, Al met Andy Warhol, Brian Eno [ex Roxy Music], John Cale [ex Velvet Underground] and David Johansen [ex New York Dolls]. Smitten by the scene, where art rubbed shoulders with rock, he decided to hang around and the other Nuns headed back to California. In New York Escovedo lived for a time at the notorious Chelsea Hotel, but after Nancy Spungen was murdered he moved to an apartment on the Lower East Side. By then Al was working with singer Judy Nylon, when he received a phone call from Chip saying that The Dils had broken up, and that they should form a band. Back in California, Tony and Alejandro had occasionally performed in a *loose knit* group dubbed, Rank And File. Chip proposed that they marry country licks to a pounding punk beat.....and so began the second coming of Rank and File.

to be continued

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 03/05

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Rank And File, The Kinman Brothers and Alejandro Escovedo - Together And Then Apart Part 2

Last week we traced the musical journey undertaken, through the late nineteen-seventies, from coast to coast to coast of the USA, by the Kinman Brothers – Tony & Chip - and Alejandro Escovedo.

The pair began performing as Rank And File in 1981, initially with a back-line consisting of Barry "Scratchy" Myers, former Clash tour DJ on bass, and Kevin Foley the drummer from the Judy Nylon Band. Booking some *out of town* dates – a massive total of seven spread across a seven-week period, Rank And File hit the road. They played Dayton, Dallas, Austin, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle and Vancouver. In Portland they hooked up with Tony. On the trip Escovedo fell in love with Austin, a town he hadn't visited since his pre-teen years. After firing their bass player and drummer, Tony joined the line-up on bass, and the trio decided to make Austin, Texas their base. As they discovered, "*the progressive country scare*" had ended a number of years earlier. Undeterred, they hired drummer Jim "Slim" Evans who had played in local bands including Sharon Tate's Baby, The Chickadiesets and The Inserts. To begin with, Rank And File would play anywhere they could get a gig – be it a rock club or a honky tonk. In the process they refined their cow-punk sound, although they struggled for a period as their sound was too country for rock clubs and vice versa.

In Austin clubs, at the time, on most nights they could go see performances by Billy Joe Shaver, Townes Van Zandt, Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, Lucinda Williams or Nanci Griffith. Punk rock was also popular, holding court at Raul's, where the band played its first Texas gig. New wave music was also beginning to gain a foothold. It was a heady musical cocktail. Steve Chaney, an acquaintance of the Kinman's began managing the band, and soon scored them a Sunday gig at the Shorthorn in North Austin. Later, they began performing acoustic sets at the legendary listening, but now defunct, downtown venue, The Alamo Lounge. Their gigs at The Alamo finally *broke the ice* for the band in Music City, and their local popularity began to soar.

After scoring an opening slot with The Blasters on a West Coast tour, Rank And File signed with Warner Brothers subsidiary label, Slash Records, albeit aided by a helping hand from Dave Alvin, who recommended them to the label. In San Francisco they met producer David Kahne, who liked their musical approach. By the summer of 1982 Rank and File were recording their debut set with Kahne. Released later that year "**Sundown**" confirmed the marriage of Bakersfield twang and punk spunk. The Byrds, Merle Haggard, the late Johnny Cash, Gram Parson were all sonic ingredients in the mix. Los Angeles Times critic Robert Hillburn gave the recording a positive review, and "**Sundown**" brought the band a degree of [further] critical and commercial success. All the songs were penned by Chip and Tony, apart from the band's theme song "Rank And File" which featured the names – [Tony] Kinman, Escovedo, Session and Miller. Although lost in the mists of time, if I had to hazard a guess, the latter pair may have been members of the earlier California version of Rank And File. While a member of Rank And File, Al sang onstage for the first time, as the Kinman boys handled all vocals. His pick was the

Jimmie Rodgers' song "I Love The Women," aka "Last Blue Yodel." It was however the Kinman's that ruled the roost in the vocal and songwriting stakes, throughout Rank And File's existence as a band.

The following year, after completing a West Coast tour with newcomers Lone Justice, Escovedo departed – an argument had ensued regarding sloppy guitar playing - and the Kinman's brought in Austin based guitarist Junior Brown as his replacement. Brown's guit-steel days were in the future. Before he departed, Escovedo appeared with the band on Austin City Limits on a bill they shared with Delbert McClinton. The latter appearance was something of a coup considering the band had only released one recording. In early 1983, with Brown aboard, Rank and File undertook a five-week UK tour opening for Elvis Costello. In time, Evans departed and the Kinman boys moved to the West Coast once again. In January 1984 the Kinman brothers entered a Los Angeles studio to begin work on their sophomore album.

Supported by *hired guns* "**Long Gone Dead**," and with Jeff Eyrich in charge of the recording console, the sessions found the brothers still pursuing a cow punk beat – in fact the end product was probably more country sounding than their debut - but the disc failed to emulate the commercial success of their debut, and proved to be their final album for Slash. At one stage the talented Van Dyke Parks had been slated as producer of the second disc, so one can only imagine how it would have sounded. Moving to Rhino Records [who eventually became a Warners subsidiary!] their self-titled final collection in 1987, with drummer R. Kahr and guitarist Jeff Ross added to the line-up, amounted to a rock'n'roll album and quickly sank from sight.

When the "**Rank And File**" tour ended in New York, the band broke up and the Kinman's went on to form Blackbird, which, over a six-year period, from 1987, created dreamy pop music, underpinned by a synth and drum-machine, in the process cutting three forgettable albums. The brothers resurfaced in 1997 as Cowboy Nation, mixing traditional cowboy tunes such as "Back In The Saddle" and "Old Paint," with Kinman composed originals that sought to emulate the style. Their self-titled debut set appeared abroad in 1997 and was released in the States the following year on the Coconut Grove label. "**A Journey Out Of Time**" [2000] on Shanachie/Western Jubilee, was followed by "**We Do As We Please**" [2001] and "**Cowgirl A-Go-Go**" [2002], both on Paras Recordings. Slim Evans recently joined Cowboy Nation on drums.

Escovedo went on to form The True Believers with his younger brother Javier, and *current day* roots rock performer Jon Dee Graham later joined the line-up. In 1985 Capitol Records released their self-titled debut album, and although they cut a second collection it wasn't released at the time. It finally appeared as part of a 2 for 1 collection "**Hard Road**" by Rykodisc in 1994 [that featured their first and second recordings], seven years after the band broke up. Later, Ryko issued an album by Alejandro's rock band Buick MacKane titled "**The Pawn Shop Years**" [1997]. "**Gravity**," Alejandro's debut solo album, was released by the now defunct Austin, Texas Watermelon label during 1992. The same year Al teamed with Walter Salas-Humara [The Silos] and Michael Hall [The Wild Seeds and solo], and cut the Gurf Morlix produced album "**The Setters**" for Watermelon. To date Escovedo has released nine solo albums on American and European labels. No Depression magazine deservedly named him "Musician Of The Decade," although his career was sidelined for over a year, commencing in the Spring of 2003, when he was diagnosed as suffering from Hepatitis C.

In 2003 the Rhino Handmade imprint released a limited edition single disc "**The Slash Years**," now sold out, that contained all the material from "**Sundown**" and "**Long Gone Dead**," augmented by three tracks from the "**Sundown**" sessions, two of which were previously unreleased, plus a live version of "White Lightning." In early 2005 Collectors Choice released all three Rank And File albums in their original form, with sleeve notes by Chip Kinman.

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