



ARMED AND HAMMERED

Armed and Hammered is one of Toronto's longest established punks bands. Spawned in Toronto's Kensington Market punk rock scene in 1989, they've survived numerous lineup changes. Today AAH consist of founding members Mopa on vocals and Kyle on drums, guitarist Big John, who joined in 1992, and bassist Cindy, who joined last year. In December they released their first CD, It's About Fucking Time, on Obese Records. MRR correspondent Barbara Isherwood spoke to AAH this March.

MRR: I've read that Armed and Hammered started as a spin-off from the Bunch of fucking goofs.

Mopa: That's not really the right way of putting it. Me and Kyle used to hang around with the Goofs when we were younger. Our first jam space was at the Fort Goof, legendary hangout of the BFGs. Thor, who was with the Goofs, was with us. There's definitely a connection there. But there was no one in the Goofs when we started playing.

Kyle: Since that time we've probably had as close, if not more ties with Suckerpunch. We had one of their guitarists, and Cindy used to play bass with them.

Cindy: What it boils down to is, we're a Toronto band, and all the bands that are in Toronto play in the same clubs, we party together.

MRR: Has the sound changed a lot since 1989?

Kyle: Style-wise I don't think it's changed a lot. We might better playing now.

Cindy: The gear has changed. The bass player that I replaced doesn't play the same way I play, but it's not a drastic difference.

Big John: We still do songs that were done in

1989.

Mopa: In reference to the genre [of punk rock], it's basically the same, but I would say that there is quite an evolution. People have developed a lot as musicians. Looking at people's musical sources, for some that's changed, for others not. In terms of what I was listening to eight years ago, it's drastically different to what I'm listening to now.

MRR: Who are some of those influences, past and present? There's a song dedicated to GG Allin on the CD, who's a fan of his?

Mopa: I am. He was like the Howard Stern of punk rock, and that's kind of a neat idea. Although there was a very surface ideology that he used in terms of "shock rock". I wouldn't really call it punk rock, but then again I would be lying if I say most of my influences are punk rock.

Big John: I listen to pretty much everything, from swing, rockabilly, country, punk rock, hardcore. I take my influences from absolutely everything.

Kyle: Whatever's on the turntable, although mine's not working right now, so actually I'm not really influenced by anything at the moment, except for booze.

Cindy: Daily living and what you're going through is more of an influence than what you're listening to, unless you're in a clone band.

Big John: We do a bit of everything, punk rock, surf, a bit of ska, but I wouldn't want to say we're influenced by any of those. We play what comes to mind.

MRR: The tunes on the CD, do they span the history of the band?

Mopa: Most of the stuff is more recent. The oldest is Terminal Rage.

MRR: Does it still mean the same thing to

you?

Kyle: It's probably angrier, because we used to play it at half the speed. I think we still do it justice to this day.

Mopa: Lyrically, I can't say it's the same thing, because that's stuff that I was thinking of eight years ago. Although I can understand why and where, and put that in a reference of a time and place, what I was dealing in my environment at the time. However in terms of what's happening then and now, no.

Kyle: On the other hand life still sucks now, so it's not that much different.

Mopa: There is very much a cyclical repetitiveness in our life, so in that sense, yes.

MRR: Your songs do tend to be about grim topics.

Big John: That's 'cos life sucks, and that's all it comes down to.

Cindy: We're not a bunch of happy campers. We swear a lot and are pissed off a lot.

Big John: Except for Dean, he's trying to rise above it all.

Cindy: And we're pulling him back down with us.

MRR: So Mopa, you write all the lyrics? Are you the one with the most to say?

Big John: The singer should be singing about something he wants to sing about.

MRR: Has what you are writing about changed since 1989?

Kyle: A lot more of our friends have died, for one thing. That changes your outlook on things.

Mopa: Songs like Dead Friends are closer to what I was writing about in 1988. Keiran, our old bass player, said I tend to write about me living in a particular environment. That's really changed, even in the way I

think and/or look at stuff, the people I know, and what is or isn't important to me. I would be lying to say that there isn't a high level of alcoholism and even drug abuse that is incorporated as an element. However in 1988, that was a real important part of my life, to drink and do drugs. What's more important to me now is political and social responsibility and activism, because I see that as the roots of punk rock. Songs like "Non-insane Automatism", "Riot" or "Kill Again", "Movement in the Treeline" are about the social and political climate. That's not to say that's the only relevant thing, or that we can't do a song about drinking.

Big John: We're not a straight edge band.

Mopa: But for me, I've gone from a total sense of nihilism, to becoming almost totally vegetarian, to going on the wagon, off the wagon, to doing drugs, to not doing drugs, to even holding down a full-time job.

MRR: You still find punk rock a good vehicle for expression?

Mopa: I think it's a very limited vehicle, however that's only as limited as how we operate, collectively. And it is only one vehicle. Looking at new technologies, I could get on a computer and publish an entire manuscript over the internet, that could be a vehicle, or being a participating in a talk radio show. What I do agree with philosophically... I had the opportunity to talk with Lydia Lunch, and she trashed Courtney Love, in terms of providing a role model, or giving a sense of direction for people, why go to the lowest common denominator, to pick up a guitar and play three chords, and slap a title on it? To say that there's only one vehicle, no. You could do it religiously, or philosophically, or where you work, or by not working...

Big John: Yeah, but picking up a guitar and playing three chords is kind of fun, though.

Kyle: The point is, we all have our vehicles, and when

we crash them together we get Armed and Hammered. It's quite an impact at that.

Mopa: You're going to find everyone bringing in different influences. There are songs where Kyle has written lyrics, or Cindy or John will say "try this". The end product is a cohesion of influences and thoughts.

MRR: Does the band come up with the music and you write the lyrics?

Mopa: 90% of the time. I see myself as a failed writer in life, Leonard Cohen being one of my archetypes, he did it, I didn't. The band came to me and say, "We've had this riff for three weeks now, when are you

going to come up with some lyrics?"

Kyle: A lot of it's very improvisational, until we have the song structure. On Stiff [GG Allin Makes Me Stiff], we started jamming on this riff, not intending to write a song. But we know each other and how we play well enough that we started playing changes at the right time.

Mopa: That song is really true improvisation, in how it came together. Just the fact that I could just sit there and go, "Blah blah blah blah da da da da da," it's almost like the philosophy behind free form jazz.



Nothing's together, but together it all works.

MRR: Is the title of the CD, It's About Fucking Time, a reference to how long it's taken to get it out?

Big John: It took us a year and half. It was the most apt title.

MRR: You'd put out various cassettes and EPs before this?

Big John: Yes, but I think the only other one that actually had a title was Fully Loaded, the rest were just sort of called "split 7" with... There was Piccolo Says, the tape we did, and More Punk Rock Than You.

MRR: Why did the CD take so long?

Kyle: Between a producer who was very hard to get a hold of, and various technical difficulties...

Big John: And we had a band member change during the actual recording of the CD.

Mopa: We redid it two or three times, I had to redo the vocals, because I had pneumonia.

MRR: How did it end up coming out on Obese Records?

Big John: Big Jim from Abalienation owns Obese Records, he's been friend for a while, and he phoned us and said he'd like to put out our record. Cheers to Big Jim.

MRR: Are you happy with the response it's getting?

Big John: We sold everything we had available at our release party.

Kyle: Aside from our CD release gig though, we haven't really released it to the public, except at shows. As far as being happy with the CD, we're really not that happy. The vocals are pretty low, from what we gave them to what we got back.

Mopa: There are fundamental problems with the mixing and the mastering, and the manufacturing.

Kyle: But on the other hand we recorded it totally live off the floor, no overdubs or anything. That's as close as we can get to live. We choke in the studio.

Cindy: The ideal thing would be to get a live recording, but it's really expensive.

Big John: A lot of our energy as a band comes from playing live. When you're in the studio playing and there's no one there, it's kind of flat. Armed and Hammered from day one has been about having a good time for us and getting out our frustrations, and not really giving a shit what anyone else thinks. So it's kind of moot for us, doing studio stuff.

MRR: So there's a cathartic element to what you're doing on stage.

Big John: Totally. When I walk off stage I gotta be alone for about five to fifteen...

Kyle: Beers

Big John: ...minutes, till I can even talk to anyone. When I come off, it's like, what's the point, reality sucks, and being on stage and having fun is all that counts.

MRR: Are you planning on touring to support the release?

Kyle: We could do what we've done in the last couple of years, and try the States again and deal with customs and total bullshit at the border. Or we could try Europe and

hook up with our good friends of ours, the Restarts, Keiran of which we used to play with. Or we could try Japan. It's a matter of getting there.

MRR: Your touring to date has been in Canada and the States?

Big John: In Canada, we've only toured southern Ontario and Montreal. Canada's so big, so few places to play, such long drives.

Mopa: We have gotten a really good response, though, to the release from campus and community radio in Canada. On all the

Toronto stations it went number 1. New Brunswick, it was number 9, out west, Ottawa, Montreal, it did good. In a Canadian music magazine we were at the top of their chart for quite a while, and in another periodical we did quite well. So there is the ground work to probably do a fairly successful tour across Canada, but the financial and transportation issues are a challenge.

Cindy: It's about money. It takes \$2000 in gas to cross Canada, and three weeks of physically moving, to play five or six cities. Kyle: Whereas we could do five or six shows a week in the states.

MRR: How has the response to your U.S. shows been?

Big John: We did two tours in the states and had a good time doing it. Of course we want to play to as many people as we possibly can, but even if there's just three people, they're probably having as good as a time as we are.

Cindy: If we had a van and a bank card with endless money, we'd be touring right now.

MRR: So tell me an outrageous anecdote.

Kyle: Our shortest show, at Lee's Palace...

Big John: I wasn't in the band yet, so let me tell this, because I saw it from the audience's perspective. One of the shows that made me want to join Armed and Hammered was seeing these guys do one song and destroy everything — amps, tables, microphones, fuses — the whole power in the building went out. What song was it?

Kyle: Anarchy in Woolworths. Everything got demolished within two thirds of a two minute song. We were never allowed to play at Lee's Palace again.

MRR: Are you still destroying stuff on stage?

Kyle: Only when it's not ours.

Big John: One of my big hatreds in life is seeing some of these asshole young bands walk up on stage and trash their guitars because they know their mommy is going to buy them a new one. We don't have to posture or make destroying things part of our stage show to make sure everyone knows we're punk rock.

Cindy: It's stupid. I play in a band because I like performing. If I trashed my bass, then what am I going to do?

Big John: It would be even stupider for me to trash Cindy's bass. Cindy's the tough one in the band.



MRR: Cindy, are you the first woman to be in Armed and Hammered?

Big John: No, I was the first woman to be in Armed and Hammered. But I had a sex change.

Cindy: I'm the first person to play in Armed and Hammered that wasn't born with a penis. But I've got the balls, so that's all that counts.

Big John: Armed and Hammered is not a band with a girl in it, it's a band that happens to have a girl in it.

Mopa: I would say Armed and Hammered is a band that has a woman in it.

Cindy: I don't mind being called a girl. You can call me a bitch, you can call me a cunt, it doesn't matter.

Mopa: I think semantics are important.

MRR: When you look at Maximum RocknRoll, most of those bands are all guys.

Cindy: It's different now. In the olden days...I always wanted to play the drums, and my parents would support me to the end of the world, if I wanted to play guitar or piano. But drums, forget, because I'm a girl. But that is outdated thinking. Parents today are people our age. If you had a girl, you'd support her in anything she wanted to do.

MRR: Do you think women bring a different energy to a band?

Cindy: It might depend on the actual band, if there was a bunch of heterosexuals of different sexes playing together, then there might be a sexually energy going on. But you could have a bunch of homosexuals, or lesbians, and it would be the same thing. It all boils down to humanity and how they relate to one another.

MRR: Armed and Hammered have been positioned as nihilists. Can you comment on that?

Mopa: My ideas around nihilism stem from not being happy with the options of political systems that are available to me. I don't believe in the ideas of anarchy, communism, the

conservative right, or the progressive left. Right now I'm working in a very left wing, structured environment, I was also involved in right wing elements, like the military, and the Canadian government and I see each as being totally useless. Institutions like the church, the government, even so-called community groups or associations, I find them all at some level contradictory and retrogressive. I think hierarchy is as useless as anarchy, they're just different ways of manipulating people's individual charismas.

The fundamental ideas of freedom, of choice,

or speech, I think it's all a myth, a lot of it's based on values handed down to you from your environment, or your parents.

Contact Armed and Hammered c/o Mopa Dean, 374A Bloor ST W #2, Toronto ON M5S 2E8, Canada, 416.920.1465. or e-mail at mopa@passport.ca.

