

minimum wage ROCK & ROLL

by Bruce Dancis

Stereotypes have taken a pounding after being exposed to *Minimum Wage Rock & Roll* (Arista), the debut album by a Los Angeles-based band called the Bus Boys. With an abundance of satire, a keen-eyed critical perspective on such matters as the KKK, neighborhood segregation, abysmal wages and nuclear weapons, and some strong instrumental and vocal performances, this *black* rock and roll band (except for a Chicano drummer) makes good on their claim: "I bet you never heard music like this by spades."



In fact, we haven't—at least not for a long time. Considering rock's rhythm and blues roots and the centrality of figures like Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone in shaping the sound of rock for over 25 years, there are few black rockers today. Racially segregated programming practices on the part of most FM rock stations have contributed greatly to the distance between black and white audiences. Where it was once common for a fan of the Beatles or the Stones to also enjoy the Four Tops or Otis Redding or Aretha Franklin, it is now rare for either whites or blacks to pay attention to what is increasingly seen as someone else's music.

The Bus Boys openly address and have fun with this state of affairs. One of their best songs is a Berry-style rocker entitled "Johnny Soul'd Out" (with "ooohs" via John, Paul, George and Ringo), whose key line is "He's into rock and roll and he's given up the rhythm and blues."

Brian O'Neal, the 24-year-old founder and one of the main songwriters (along with his younger brother Kevin) in the Bus Boys, discussed the group's origins and outlook with *In These Times* recently in San Francisco. "I wanted to pick a name and a concept that doesn't hide the issue [of being a black rock band], but addresses it. That also was representative of our knowing that we were gonna be underdogs," he said. Many record companies "told us that a black rock and roll band wouldn't work commercially."

The way the Bus Boys address the issue is by wearing bus boy outfits, breaking into outrageous Steppin' Fetchit shuffles, and generally vamping on usual black musical patterns by playing hard-edged, often New Wavy music. O'Neal believes that their audiences understand the parody. "It can grab you on several levels—it's entertaining and the satire and



sociological comments are there for those who can comprehend."

Their songs seem to hit responsive chords among Bus Boy listeners. "Minimum Wage" ("I wash the dishes, I mop the floor/I'm glad I'm alive, who could ask for more") is one of their crowd pleasers. O'Neal explains, "Everybody can relate to it. Everybody's worked for less than they should get paid." Another song, the loose and funky "There Goes the Neighborhood," works particularly well with blacks and Chicanos in the audience.

At first the band played before virtually all-white crowds in the rock clubs around Los Angeles. But that is changing. Now, according to O'Neal, "the crowd is almost split—about 65

percent white, the rest others."

Appealing to such a multi-racial following seems both desirable and natural to O'Neal, who grew up in a Gardena, Calif., community "where there were a lot of different kinds of people—Samoans, Orientals, blacks, whites, Chicanos." He credits his political awareness to this diversity, as well as having "the opportunity to be around an educated environment." O'Neal's parents came from poor families, but now both his mother and father have master's degrees and have been long-time employees of the Los Angeles Board of Education.

O'Neal is well aware of what has happened to the popular music audience. "Over the years, it seems that blacks and whites, especially on a youthful level, separated, and withdrew from one another and made their cultural artifacts—their music and stuff like that—the personal property of each. Until the Bus Boys, only a few artists like Earth, Wind & Fire and Sly and the Family Stone had a point of identification for both blacks and whites."

But he is optimistic, not least because of the musical cross-pollination currently being led by groups such as Talking Heads. One of the most artistically challenging New Wave bands (*In These Times*, Oct. 31, 1979), the Talking Heads have recently moved into funk and African rhythms on their new *Remain in Light* album and added a number of black musicians to their lineup, while at the same time retaining their avant-garde tendencies.

O'Neal feels that the Heads, one of his favorite bands even before their recent changes, will reach the black community. "The music is so strong, it'll force [black radio stations] to play it. You can take that album to any party, any disco, anywhere black people are dancing, and they'll love it."

The Bus Boys have encountered some hostility among white rock fans—usually from people who came to hear another band on the bill and don't know quite what to make out of the outrageous black assemblage they're seeing and hearing for the first time. But for the most part, audiences and the press have been extremely enthusiastic.

The band signed a lucrative, multi-album deal with Arista and seems to receive extensive support from the record company. In the meantime, O'Neal is producing a new band called Roach and the White Boys, featuring a young black woman and an all-white backup band. More minimum wage rock and roll would seem to be on the way.

The fact that the Bus Boys are a black rock and roll band will initially cause people to pay attention. The fact that they are witty and engaging should make their attractiveness more than skin deep.

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