

DIVERSIONS

The
Fleshtones

In

'Escape From Sunnyside Beach'

By Charles Lieurance



Photo courtesy of Emargo records

You've seen the movie, or at least you've heard the soundtrack.

Beach boho Steve Samson shows up on Sunnyside Beach one day in tiger-print briefs and a really gnarly buzz cut. He's with his friend "Snap" Henderson, a real-gone beatnik in paisley bermudas and a two-tone tank top. "Snap" wears a black beret, has a little goatee named Wilbur and reads "The Dharma Bums" as he walks on the beach.

The surf comes in to a really cheesy horn line, courtesy of the American Breed (who later go on to give the world "Bend Me, Shape Me").

Henderson comes up with some bongos out of nowhere and pats out a wild rhythm while he reads his prose poem "The Flower that Powers the Square Factories." Steve watches the girls. Steve's thumb goes up. Steve's thumb goes down.

Steve sees Delilah, a perky brunette who looks vaguely Neapolitan and says "neato." "Snap" thinks she's as square as a Mantovani record cover. Samson thinks she's hip in a real screwy kind of way.

Suddenly the latest one-hit wonders burst into a song under a beach cabana. The same horn parts come out of nowhere, some variation on a James Bond theme this time. The guitars grind throughout as if someone had kicked sand into the amplifier. The vocals, by some guy with next year's haircut, Wayfarers and floral shorts, sound like a cartoon cross between Eric Burdon and Buddy Holly. Enough hiccups and range to connect it with the roots of rock and enough gruff tunelessness to connect it with the more soulful side of the

British Invasion.

It's the Fleshtones and they escaped from the movie.

They escaped from the movie and took the horn lines with them. Fleshtones with horn lines will appear at The Drumstick Monday night.

The Fleshtones wrestled with the punk-trash scene through the late '70s and early '80s, trying to transplant the wonder of all that's cheap and cartoonish about rock 'n' roll into the sophisticated New York club scene. Some glorious garbage emerged, including the garage sprint "Cold, Cold Shoes," and a harmonica-driven piece of harum-scarum called "Shadowline."

"We were going through several lines of development," said the Fleshtones' most recognizable personality, vocalist, keyboardist and the host of MTV's "Cutting Edge," Peter Zarella. One was the gay disco line, a real cheap, beat-crazy leathery sound; then comes the Vindicator's TV-movie, theme-show, horn-line thing.

"Then we mutate everything together into some sort of psychedelic mayhem."

The Fleshtones, along with the Cramps, turned garbage to gold, taking all of the most trendy, commercially embarrassing moments in rock music — everything corny and superficial — and making it actually work. Not just functional, mind you, but right up there in the rock pantheon.

"The Cramps approached trash a little differently than we did," Zarella said.

"They found all that old psychobilly that emerged when rockabilly was in its death

throes. We came from the direction of old Freddie Cannon and Gary "U.S." Bonds singles."

Since then, the Cramps have become fixated with Russ Meyer films and the Fleshtones have made four albums of garage pop, each improving on the last. Their finest LP, "Hexbreaker" on I.R.S., made their sound positively epic. Although it was an album of mannerisms, these mannerisms are put together in a completely innovative fashion.

'It only takes a lot of work to make music bland and there are so many people dedicated to that mission. As for the rest, I'm as uncomfortable with flower power as the next guy . . .'

— Zarella

After "Hexbreaker," the Fleshtones broke with I.R.S.

"Our albums didn't really sell well by I.R.S. standards, and it was mutually agreed that we part ways," Zarella said. "It's all friendly. I'll still do I.R.S.'s 'Cutting Edge' thing. In fact, we're revamping for a whole new format for the show. It'll be on twice a month now."

This year the Fleshtones released "The Fleshtones vs. Reality," their first album on New York's Emargo Records.

Zarella doesn't consider this a step down.

"In fact, it's been a step up. We've shipped more records and are selling more than we did on I.R.S., even though it was a lot bigger label," he said. "The promotion for the album will be more interesting and the band gets to produce itself. You can't call that a step down."

"Fleshtones vs. Reality" is the band's most mature album to date, a high-energy tribute to Stax and flower power without a dead note in the mix. For variety's sake, Zarella includes the vocals of Wendy Wild, a member of side group Love Delegation, and bandmate Keith Strong, whose pipes are showstoppers in the Fleshtones' live shows. Strong puts his Bon Scott yowl to work on "Way Down South," a song originally laid to vinyl by Strong's side group with REM's Peter Buck, Full Time Men.

With all this cross-pollination going on, the Fleshtones' sound gets more varied and powerful with every album.

So how much work does it take to produce positive trash in the studio? Where do those horns come from and how do you get brass to sound that way? Since there aren't many "Snap" Hendersons and Steve Samsons around, how do you get yourself in the mood?

"It only takes a lot of work to make records bland and there are so many people dedicated to that mission," Zarella gives it to pop music right in the solar plexus. "As for the rest, I'm as uncomfortable with flower power as the next guy . . ."

And you just like what you like. I know, Peter, I know.

Cost for the show is \$6 and, as usual, it starts at 9 p.m.