

7 Seconds still committed to hardcore sound

By Bryan Peterson
Staff Reporter

"We can, with the help of Satyagraha, win over those young men who have been driven to desperation and anger by what they think to be the tyranny of the government and utilize their courage and their mettlesome spirit, their capacity for suffering, to strengthen satyagraha."

-- Gandhi

"A soul force revolution, it could give us what we need/ Destruction ain't no option, it's the end at any speed."

-- 7 Seconds, "Satyagraha"

One of the high points of my punk rock career was arriving at a 7 Seconds concert in Des Moines, Iowa, in a police car.

You see, a couple carloads of us from Omaha were driving to Des Moines to see 7 Seconds, the closest thing to punk icons who had ventured our way in some time.

I was in the back of a truck that got rear-ended on the interstate. The engine had overheated and was pouring out more smoke than those little machines which dot the stage at heavy metal concerts.

So we're coasting along on the shoulder, pouring out smoke, and some guy manages to rear-end us. No one was hurt, and the local police or highway patrol drove us the last eight miles.

They took us right to the concert. I've never seen anything so funny: all the kids trying to hide their beers when the police pulled in, only to see a fellow group of leather-and-spike-adorned weirdos emerge from the patrol cars with hellish grins on our faces.

After all that, 7 Seconds did not show up for the concert. Someone talked to the band on the phone and they said something about their drummer having been beaten up in Baltimore.

That was all right, because the local bands all rocked and everyone had a great time. And, of course, we laughed again and again about our arrival at the show.

That was one of three times I have been stood up by 7 Seconds. I have yet to see them live. The

band was supposed to play at the very first hardcore show I went to, back when I did not know what the circled A's on everyone's clothing stood for.

7 Seconds arrived around midnight, after the show already had ended, saying they had had problems with the promoter of their Denver show on the previous day. I still cannot understand how a dispute over a stolen boom box could make the band that late.

But that was all right, too. I still got to see Samhain, those scary guys who rose from the ashes of The Misfits. These guys made Bela Lugosi look tame, being clothed in shiny black and distorting their evil faces while singing about death and ghouls and death and stuff.

7 Seconds also stood me up in Kansas, but I had gotten used to their absence by then. If not for the band's records, I would have thought them a figment of the collective punk mind.

Those records kept the band alive, made it real to us who were stranded far from the thriving punk scenes of both American coasts. 7 Seconds was a band that cared and we had faith in them, even if they never showed up to perform at concerts.

The nine-song "Skins, Brains and Guts" EP on Alternative Tentacles Records established 7 Seconds as a premier thrash band in 1982, when most American punk bands still were busy imitating the Sex Pistols and playing in the slow 1977 style.

7 Seconds became synonymous with the thrash sound, a hyper-speed version of the already-fast punk genre. The band ranked with Dead Kennedys and MDC but was not as fast as DRI, the undisputed kings of thrash at that time.

DRI is now the rage of the speedmetal scene. The band has caught endless flak from those in the punk scene for its "sellout," much of which seems unjustified.

The band's musical interests changed, and so did its style. The band members have no obligation to play the same music they always have played.

7 Seconds is now also on the top of most peoples' sellout list, but the band has gone the opposite

direction, becoming highly pop-influenced and signing with Restless Records, a "mainstream" label.

The band formed around 1980 and just has released the "Soulforce Revolution" LP, which continues the band's drift away from its original thrash sound.

Any "real" punk will be quick to label the album as a lame pop record. 7 Seconds may have substantially changed its sound, but the band has not abandoned its heritage.

The number of American punk bands that has survived 10 years is small, and smaller still is the number of bands that have maintained any sort of integrity over the years.

I've had bad luck trying to see the band live, but 7 Seconds has shown consistent commitment to the hardcore scene over the years.

Band members played important roles in the formation and provision of continued support to Positive Force Records (Reno, Nev.) and Better Youth Organization (Los Angeles), both dedicated to providing constructive, hopeful music and roles for those involved in the hardcore scene.

7 Seconds' best release was 1985's "Walk Together, Rock Together," a short album whose title song was the band's best song ever.

The album was associated with several punk dignitaries, being produced by Ian MacKaye (Minor Threat vocalist and unwilling messiah of the straight-edge movement), who also provided backing vocals.

Don Zientara engineered the LP as he has nearly every early DC record. The album's cover was drawn by Brian Walsby, now a mainstay of punk art and album cover design.

Between the album's title song and a cover of "99 Red Balloons," "Walk Together, Rock Together" was the zenith and a major transition point in 7 Seconds' hardcore career.

Listeners have accused every subsequent 7 Seconds release of being wimpy, weak, or worst of all to green-haired punks everywhere, of being pop influenced.

7 Seconds is clearly no longer a thrash band, but the band is still firmly rooted in the punk style. "Soulforce Revolution" is an 11-song album full of matured musical style and lyrical content which reveals the band's continued commitment to soul searching.

The band is now a trio, with Kevin Seconds and Steve Youth remaining from the initial lineup and Troy Mowat, who has been with the band since at least 1985, still drumming.

The sound is a hard-edged pop, complete with occasional "na-nana"s and "wo-oh"s. "Satyagraha" and "Tribute Freedom Landscape" are among the album's best songs and both are among the most lively on the album.

The new sound has grown on me. I was initially ready to join others in denouncing this release as watered-down pop drivel. But I since have found the songs staying in my head and becoming more enjoyable.

In their best moments, the members of 7 Seconds unite words and sounds and grab the listener, as in "I wrote this in a notebook and I censored out the best/ I said I'll wish and wait and rest/ I said I'll hope you'll wait and rest and/ I hope that there's more time for me than this."

But too often the lyrics are overly obscure, too vague to leave any impression. The simplistic, anthemic lyrics of 1982 are no more, but 7 Seconds has moved from one extreme to the other.

The slogans of "No Authority," "I Hate Sports" and "Racism Sucks" have been replaced by meanderings like "Sometimes life can pull a fast one on ya/ And sometimes you really dig it when it does."

Such words detract from more meaningful passages. Some of the songs are quite clear but others slip

into bland fare like "Soul to Keep." The band faces some uncertainty ("4 a.m. in Texas") but presents a mostly hopeful picture in songs like "Tickets to a Better Place," "Mother's Day" and "Swan-song."

The album's only major flaw is a failure to develop the soulforce revolution theme, an absence of any struggle for social change rooted in truth and non-violence. The idea is touched upon in two songs but is otherwise neglected.

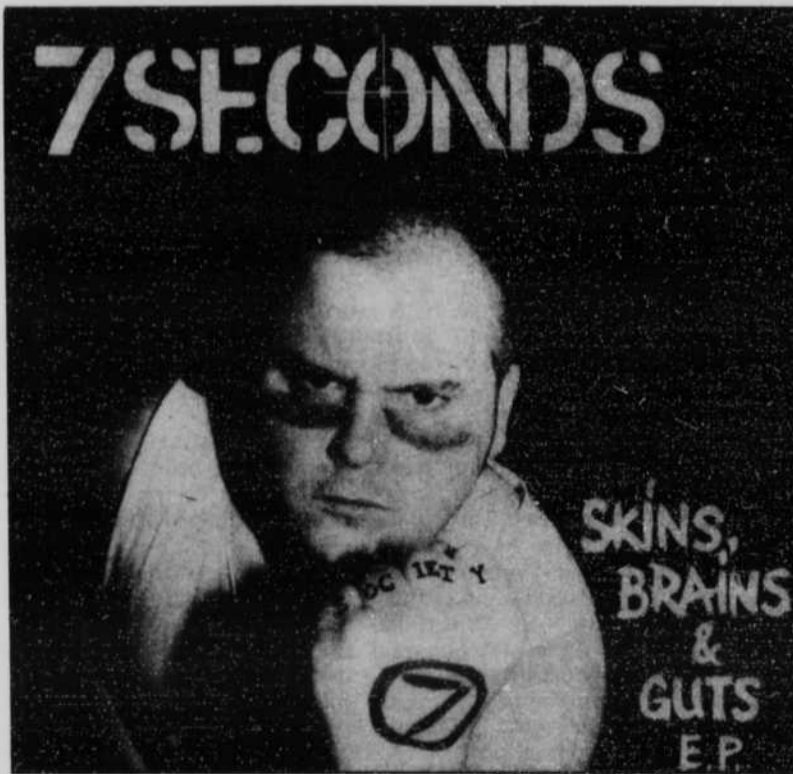
Spiritual revelations are hinted at but no focus is found or followed. The members of 7 Seconds are examining their souls but have yet to find any firm answers.

With more time and exploration, perhaps we all will be ready for a soulforce revolution.

the fifth column album review



Courtesy Alternative Tentacles Records



Courtesy Positive Force Records



Courtesy Restless Records

7 Seconds from its beginning as a punk band in 1982, with its 1984 release of "Walk Together, Rock Together" and the earlier "Skins, Brains & Guts" EP. Its latest album, "Soulforce Revolution," further displays their evolution musically and visually.