

Stretch Links

*A leaky faucet — a French horn
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Just need a wrench and some string
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"Mr. Fix-It," by the Stretch Links

BY CHRIS NORRIS

AS SOMEONE who considers it his business to hip his friends, family, and a hundred thousand or so others to happening local bands, I can't help but be bummed about the following. Make that grief-stricken.

Somehow, sometime within the past three years, I, my col-

leagues at other papers, and the entire music-loving city of San Francisco let one of the purest, oddest, most luminary of local bands slip away virtually unnoticed. This hapless duo recorded two album-length collections of utter gems (one of which, I'm ashamed to hear, was submitted to our own Demo Tape o' The Week), did *one* performance at the Albion (the ukulele-playing member was intimidated, apparently), and then disappeared almost without a trace.

Almost.

A few months ago, my friend Rob visits a garage sale being held by one Robert Caruso and one Nib Geebles. Years earlier in New York, Geebles (inventor of the Nib Geebles Triple Action Tarot Deck) had acquainted Rob with a tape of Caruso's curiously named band. So Rob, remembering how much he liked that tape, asks Caruso if he has any more. From a dusty trunk Caruso pulls out two: the first an unlabeled cassette, the second a modestly packaged tape whose cover features a black-and-white photo of what looks like a sinister ventriloquist's-dummy. Across the bottom

reads the title, *The Dunk Tank Sessions*.

They were the first known recordings of Robert "Wonkles" Caruso and his partner Rich "Heinous" Rynes — a.k.a. the Stretch Links.

On these two unrecognized, uncelebrated tapes (now in my possession) are roughly 25 cuts — songs, spoken dialogues, and musical narratives — the best of which border on genius. With little more than a ukulele, a guitar, and two mercurial voices, Wonkles and Heinous take the listener on a frantic romp through haunted carnivals, doomed trucking runs, and psychopath-strewn hard-luck stories. The judicious use of sound effects (the trucker sea-shanty "Long Load Louie" is sung entirely over a CB), eerie melodies (the whistled chorus of "Mr. Fix-It" somehow sounds like a magic show), and spot-on impersonations of everyone from a crooning hillbilly to a pompous British uncle all manage to create a mood something like a 1930s radio show, but one that's populated with paranoid schizophrenics, dim-witted losers, and victims of industrial accidents. If Dan Clowes' *8-Ball* had a

sound track, *The Dunk Tank Sessions* — titled for one song's tale of a luckless carnival dunk tank girl — would surely be it.

And these are the normal songs.

On their untitled debut — known by their fans (me and Rob) as "First Links" — the Stretch Links are even weirder. Still in the process of crafting their largely improvisational tunes and dialogues into sad or creepy little vignettes, they either take the most readily available non sequiturs and turn them into jittery dance tunes (one song's irresistible chorus: "Laun-der all my slacks — if you will / Laun-der all my slacks — if you will) or they free-associate their way through bizarre tales of Middle American despair:

When I first saw Wanda she was crying in a Laundromat. She had put her favorite wool sweater in one of the dryers and I volunteered to get it out for her. But in what the owner described as the most gruesome and uncanny laundering mishap he'd ever seen, I lost three fingers on my left hand. She rushed me to the hospital

and we were married six weeks later. Doo-wah doo-wah doo-wah. Doo-wah doo-wah doo-wah. Doo-wah, doo-wah, doo-wah....

from "First Links," title unknown

Half-filled with meandering tunes about moving to Albatross, selling lawn chairs, and other themes that would grate on anyone but total devotees, "First Links" nonetheless shows an undeniable brilliance. Here, as on *The Dunk Tank Sessions*, the duo performs one cover — the pop standard "You Belong to Me" — beautifully sung in Tin Pan Alley-ish harmonies and accompanied by a lone ukelele. This cover, as well as *Dunk Tank's* "Slow Boat to China," help support the claim that "Heinous" Rynes and "Wonkles" Caruso are, if not a local George and Ira Gershwin, then at the very least a Gene and Dean Ween.

In fact, the Stretch Links *are* in some ways a sort

of lower-tech acoustic Ween. Unknowing proponents of the "pathetic æsthetic" a good two years before Ween got large, the

Links were up to their knock-knees in extemporaneous dialogue, genre-parodies, and making their voices sound funny, only without an arsenal of outdated four-track effects. And yet, Ween went on to a major-label signing and national attention.

The Stretch Links...?

Well, I've heard Heinous moved out to New York with some woman a while back. And Wonkles still lives here in town. Getting by, I suppose. Maybe playing a little guitar. I hear there's even a *third* Stretch Links record floating out there somewhere. If anyone finds it, let me know: (415) 255-3100.

And Wonkles, if you read this, come back. Call up Heinous and get him back here. This

time, we promise to listen. ●