



Jim Scavunos

Mute

As the death knells of our personal lives fade into background noise, it's hard to avoid a gnawing sense of contempt towards one's fellow man. Unfiltered access to everyone's intimate thoughts can be as sedating as it is off-putting; when celebrities figure into the mix, the potential for tragedy ratchets up by orders of magnitude. But fear not, dear reader. Beard Rock is here to offer an antidote: Jim Scavunos.

Wildly intelligent, charming, and unnervingly steadfast, Scavunos is a real man in a world of whiny adolescents, and his observations

do not disappoint. Drummer for Grinderman and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, and vocalist for The Vanity Set, he also produces music as one half of Silver Alert. (The production outfit is so new that if you Google them you'll only find information about an American public notification system of the same name, which broadcasts information about seniors who have gone missing – appropriately so, says Scavunos.) By all outward appearances, keeping a supersonic pace is nothing new; he helped kickstart the [No Wave scene](#) in 1970s New York, as a member of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, and then went on to join an incredible number of bands, including the Cramps and Sonic Youth.

Over the course of two days, the "Infamous Elegant Degenerate" – a title of which he is fond -- spoke with us from London, where he'd just finished a DJ gig. (He also remained gracious and easygoing in the face of an absurd number of technological failures. Whatta man, whatta man, whatta man, whatta mighty good man.)

What are you listening to these days?

Mainly people's demo tapes. There's this band in New York called [The Bootblacks](#), I just did a session with them, and that was fun. They're sort of a rollicking little post-Goth number. There's a fella up in Sheffield named [David J. Roch](#) whom I did a whole album with. It's a really gorgeous album. It's actually a little too good. I think people aren't quite ready for it. His voice is just astounding, and people just can't wrap their heads around how this guy kind of just emerged out of nowhere. He's got one of these incredible voices that can go from a deep baritone to a stratospheric falsetto in a matter of seconds. Right now he's just got a little demo EP called Skin and Bones, but I think his album will come out soon. And then there's this really cool band out of ...I think it's Buttfuck, Oklahoma? I can't remember the name of the town. They're called [Other Lives](#). [Addresses someone in the room with him] What's the name of the town they're from? They're out of some remote town in the Midwest. Oh. Stillwater, Oklahoma. I guess you could call them chamber pop. I don't know what label they're on in the US, but they're on Play It Again, Sam in the UK, and they've got an album coming out and it's really adventurous orchestrations and very haunting melodies. A very, very atmospheric album. It's kind of reminiscent of the more experimental phase of, say, Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys, mixed with sort of a less bubbly version of the kind of chamber pop stuff that's been floating around the last few years. Something a little bit more ominous and sophisticated. The arrangements are quite nice, and the lead singer, Jesse Tabish, has a very nice voice.

What, from your vantage point, did No Wave set out to do, and did it accomplish that?

Well, it wasn't a musical movement, per se. There was a group of bands and individuals who didn't quite fit in with the punk scene. And the individuals who were sort of in that sort of entourage who were making music found it very hard to find like-minded people in the club scene in general. So we sort of found each other. We just sort of gradually grouped together. It wasn't like a movement with a manifesto, or anything like that. We had similar tastes in aggressive music, and music that was kind of extreme. None of us felt that punk rock was extreme enough. Or aggressive enough. It certainly wasn't speaking to all of our needs. So the various individuals in this loose collective of people who were just sort of friends, either doing drugs together, or fucking each other, or playing in bands together—you know, whatever young folk do—they found very different modes of expression. The four bands that they ended up being, principally, were Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, James Chance and the Contortions—which ended up mutating into something called James White and the Blacks, at one point; a band called DNA, and a band called Mars. Mars was the first of the bunch, and probably the most unsuccessful of the bunch—still pretty much unrecognized, even among a lot of people who know something about No Wave. And then there were all these bands that, after No Wave became a sort of known as a movement, sort of identified with it, but they weren't really part of that social circle. So, retroactively, a lot of people have been saying, "This is a No Wave band," or "That's a No Wave band." They may have been around at the same time, and they may have had similar interests, but they weren't really part of our little enclave. So, seeing as it doesn't have a manifesto and it's being sort of broadly attributed to a lot of different bands, I don't really know what to say about No Wave. As far as we saw it, it was kind of anti-music, even though we were making music, it wasn't like a musical thing, especially with Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, it was more about the attitude. That isn't to say it wasn't musically appealing to some demented individuals, it was more about [the fact] that we were all projecting a rather aggressive attitude. Reactionary, even. Reactionary to punk. We just didn't think punk was hard enough.

That's pretty bad-ass.

Well, no, not really. It's just that punk was pretty weak-ass. Nowadays you get the cream of the crop, 'cause that's what people kind of remember, but at the time it was loads of people jumping on the punk bandwagon, and a lot of them were just lame. Fortunately we don't really have to walk down that memory lane.

What's the best drummer joke you know?

Oh, I'm not interested in drummer jokes. That's for insecure musicians who need to have commerce in such low entertainment.

What's your earliest recollection of a piece of music that just changed the world for you?

Loads of 'em, but probably She Loves You [by] The Beatles.

What was it about that piece?

I mainly remember Ringo shaking his head up and down and grinning on The Ed Sullivan Show. There was just such a fervent exhilaration to the song, just uncontained enthusiasm, and the band just kind of roared. Maybe it was the way it was recorded, or maybe it was that they were still sort of not as refined as musicians as they later became, but the drums in particular, just smashing away on the whole track -- it's got a lot of energy for something of that era. And of course it was, you know, mindlessly repetitive. Easy for an adolescent brain to grasp. It didn't make me want to play drums, but it made me think, "Wow, that Ringo, he sure looks like he's having a good time. I wonder what that's like."

What *did* make you want to play drums?

The fact is, I'm not sure that I wanted to play drums. I always liked them. But I didn't like them more than any other thing. They seemed like they were simple. Deceptively simple. But I actually started out as a vocalist. I had some friends in high school, they didn't have a singer, and they said, "Oh, let Jim do it. He can't play anything." [Laughs] That's how much they valued the position. They threw me out when I started getting too much attention. And then after that, I thought, well, maybe that drum idea wasn't such a bad thing after all. 'Cause drummers always seemed to be in hard demand, whereas singers, at least at that point in my life, seemed somewhat expendable. Later on I learned the opposite was true. [Laughs]

**A couple years back, you wrote a piece for The Guardian about—am I saying this correctly?
—rebetiko.**

Yep, you're pronouncing it better than I could. [Laughs]

Well, I speak Spanish, so that helps.

That's the thing, I don't speak any Greek. And so I was listening to this kind of music for a long time without actually realizing what the songs were about. Not that my parents or my relatives were especially, shoving it down my throat, but being Greek-American, you just kind of get exposed to things. For all I knew it could have been mainstream, or not. But around the time I joined the Bad Seeds -- there's this big Greek community in Melbourne. And they wear their Greek culture a little bit more proudly on their sleeves than, say, the American Greeks, in that you'll see a little bit more of a sense of history. You can go into record shops there and find old Greek records. And not just rebetiko records; there was a bit of a tango craze there, in the '20s, which is where the song Misirlou came from. It was originally a tango, done by [a Greek fella and his little orchestra](#), and eventually it became a popular instrumental number because of course nobody else in the world spoke Greek. [Laughs] But then I had sort of a renewed interest in it, and I started finding out a little bit about what the lyrics were actually about. And I realized it's full of the kind of subject matter that you find in American blues, rock and folk, but from a peculiarly Greek and Middle Eastern perspective. There's a lot of hashish and heroin, and going to prison for various things, and prostitutes and murders, and basically, anything that might have inspired most of the folk and urban blues songs in the bulk of the early 20th century can also be found in these Greek rebetiko records. I thought it was a really interesting phenomenon, and I had a platform to talk about it a bit, thanks to Alex Kapranos from Franz Ferdinand. [They] were curating an edition of The Guardian. And a lot of people noticed that article for some reason. It gets picked up on quite a bit.

It's making the rounds on Twitter right now.

Is it? Yeah, see I don't really understand that...this age of Twitter, where people want to know everything about musicians. Luckily, you happen to be speaking with the most fascinating musician around today, nothing like the rest of the dullards. [Laughs]

Listen to the Silver Alert remix of Grinderman's "Evil!" featuring Matt Berninger [here....](#)