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## Outside Now

By Jeff Zeldman

**T**HAT oiliest of middle class come-latelies, *Charles Dickens's* Mr. Podsnap, defined music as "a respectable performance (without variations), sedately expressive of getting up at eight, shaving close at quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Nothing else to be permitted."

One hundred and twenty years have passed since those words first saw print. Tune in most radio stations and you'll find things haven't changed much. Today's Ms. and Mr. Podsnaps subsist on a music sedately expressive of condos, *Betamax* and paid-up dental insurance.

*Bob Marley* saw things differently. In 1977, Marley heard the *Clash* play in London, and immediately grasped the kinship between his outlawed Rastafarian movement and the newly-disenfranchised blue collar youth who were becoming the terror of bourgeois Britain. "Rejected by society, mistreated with impunity," Marley sang of both rebel groups in his single, "Punky Reggae Party."

Marley knew the best popular music has always issued from oppressed people. That's why *B.B. King* is more important than *Eddie Van Halen*. Why Motown outranks

*Grand Mal and B.M.O. play music that has everything—except the urgency that comes from being outsiders. Their passionate conviction comes second-hand.*

Muzak. Why the *Clash* matter more than *Duran Duran*—or used to. Middle class comfort is a cage in which we nap. It takes an outsider to scream through the bars and wake us.

This urgent note of the outsider was the one thing missing from September 4th tough double bill at the *Nightclub 9:30*. Though headliners *Grand Mal* played with passionate conviction, that conviction came second-hand: Britain by way of L.A. Likewise, while the *Bloody Mannequin Orchestra* wailed insanely, their grinning faces betrayed them as, above all, safe. Sound without fury is no tale at all. Yet, borrowed fury never quite fits the wearer. Its sleeves are too long, its neck too wide. It hangs on the borrower like a nightshirt.

*B.M.O.* is a teenaged suburban quintet, fronted in rotation by everybody but the bass player. A boy resembling Ernie of *My Three Sons*, all nerdy glasses and buck teeth, plays organ clusters and sings. A girl plays guitar and sings.

Sometimes she plays drums. A hairless boy with knit eyebrows plays saxophone and sings. Sometimes he plays guitar. Another boy plays bass. He doesn't sing. The last boy plays drums and plays them well. Sometimes he stops playing them to come downstage and sing. Their fans are young and friendly. Their songs are very short. They're also very strange. Sometimes, they work.

*B.M.O.* makes *Albert Ayler* sound like bubble gum. The band members are determinedly dissonant, they even subvert themselves.

A little theory here. Listeners are incapable of hearing an "outside" note (one extraneous to the tonality of the piece) without comparing it to an assumed inside. Though our notions of harmony are traditionally derived, we create new notions when the occasion demands. Like unrelieved ugliness, unrelieved dischord soon loses its power to shock or discomfort us. Our minds, becoming numb, re-cast it in prior molds. After fifteen minutes, the

gnarliest tone cluster begins to resemble a C Major triad. *John Cage* has learned this. *B.M.O.* hasn't. Despite its intentions, *B.M.O.'s* 9:30 performance was finally as harmless as a *Stray Cats* concert—just not as danceable.

Still, the last set in the wee hours proved entertaining. If harmless, *B.M.O.* can still be daring. Its show-closer consisted of a single unison melody played louder and louder, faster and faster, until, swollen to Mandalic proportions, it burst like rotten fruit. *B.M.O.* merits watching. Their heterodox blend of avant-garde, swing and pogo-beat deserves applause.

*Bloody Mannequin Orchestra* didn't get all the applause it deserved. *Grand Mal* did. An enormous crowd, younger and punkier than the club's usual draw, had come expressly to see the band. *Grand Mal* could therefore do no wrong.

Fortunately, it did no wrong.

*Grand Mal* resemble *Void* at high-speed. Its deliberate rather than frenzied delivery lays bare its devices. You can actually hear what band members are doing. Guitarist *Malcolm Riviera* shifts his bar chords around chromatically, or by minor seconds, just like *Void* guitarist *Bubba*. *Don Diego* executes his meaty bass lines as though he were grinding them to hamburger. Lips pursed with the weight of concentration, drummer *Linda Lesabre* attacks her trap set as if expecting it to scream and walt.

Though the three instrumentalists work as one unit, they remain isolated from one another, each in a private trance. It is up to singer *Joe*

*Aranstamn*, a born performer with the look of a former beach bum and one tough set of vocal pipes, to engage the crowd.

*Aranstamn* is up to the task. He smiles while enacting punk's totemic gestures: finger singling out some soul in the crowd as if to cry, "Hey, you!"; shoulders hunching as if to dodge an overhead blow; body falling forward as he lurches from end to end of 9:30's pentagonal stage. His message is binary: "Binge! Purge! Binge! Purge!" he screams. The crowd seems to scream back in recognition. It is only the echo from the P.A., though. The kids are too busy dancing.

*Grand Mal's* writing is even tougher than its playing. In particular, "Apologies," with its X-like chorus; "Living in the Ice Age," with its intricate drum parts; and the majestic chord structures of "Silent Scream" linger in the mind when the show is over.

Though a strong act, *Grand Mal* remain just that—an act. It is too well accepted, and the D.C. scene is too apolitical, to generate a strong outsider's vision. There are no great seizures here—and no Little Caesars, either. *B.M.O.*, though not as good, is more daring. Yet the same limitation applies. While neither group's music is sedately expressive of shaving close at quarter-past eight (*B.M.O.* members are too young to shave), the probability is that in five to ten years the members of both bands will have become productive members of the American system, their present work "excused" as youthful frolicking.

This is D.C., not L.A. ■