

MAKING THE MARSHALL STACK SWEAR Ron Asheton

Jan 15, 2009



The legendary Stooges axeman, 1948-2009: he didn't just play the guitar.

BY TIM "NAPALM" STEGALL

The first thing you noticed, after seeing the perfect picture of teenage delinquency in quartet form on the cover (and how much the band depicted resembles a prehistoric Ramones, if you're of a certain age), was the sound: Corrosive, brittle, brassy, seemingly untamed. It was the sound of an electric guitar being punished more than played. And the noise got particularly nasty once Mr. Guitar Flogger stepped on his wah-wah pedal. Because unlike whenever Jimi Hendrix stepped on a wah, this guitar didn't talk. It snarled and spat and attacked like a cobra.

As the six string engine that drove The Stooges, Ron Asheton didn't play guitar. He played the amp. And the fuzztone. And the wah-wah pedal. In the process, he didn't just give singer Iggy Pop a sonic playground in which he could run riot and push the boundaries of then-acceptable rock stagecraft. ("Ron provided the ammo," says *Rolling Stone* Senior Writer David Fricke. "Iggy pulled the trigger.") Ron Asheton also changed the way rock 'n' roll was played and energized a few generations to pick up guitars themselves, creating several subgenres in the process.

Ron Asheton was found dead in the wee hours of January 6, 2009, in the Ann Arbor home he and brother Scott (The Stooges' drummer) and sister Kathy (muse to a few late Sixties Detroit rockers and lyrical inspiration for The Stooges' classic "TV Eye") grew up in after the family relocated from the guitarist's native Washington, DC. Asheton's personal assistant hadn't heard from him in several days and called Ann Arbor Police, who broke into the home around midnight. Asheton was found dead on his living room couch. He had apparently been dead for many days. *The Ann Arbor News* reported police as stating "the cause of death is undetermined but investigators do not suspect foul play." At press time, no autopsy nor toxicology results were available. Asheton was 60.

The grief expressed and tributes were immediate:

"He wrote the riff to 'I Wanna Be Your Dog,'" ex-Damned guitarist Brian James told veteran UK rock journalist Kris Needs. "That's enough for me."

"Ron Asheton will certainly go down as a fantastic figurehead and innovator," said former Captain Beefheart and Jeff Buckley guitarist Gary Lucas. "That was The Stooges' sound, really, Ron's guitar. That was the hallmark of the music, from the first statement of principles on that first record.... The songwriting, too: Those are just classic riffs, indelible riffs. They'll never die. The first two (Stooges) records are like primers of very effective but deceptively simple rock songwriting that verges on the anthemic. Besides being a great guitarist and a pioneer, he's a great songwriter. It defines an era, a transition into the punk era. (The way he played,) it felt like all the pain and joy of the universe in your face."

"For me as a guitar player, the first thing I pick up on is tone," Social Distortion's Mike Ness remarked to *The Los Angeles Times*. "He had this primitive, high-energy sound. It was pre-metal, but still a metallic sound. It's just so awesome. That was definitely what caught my ears....Everything he played -- it wasn't like it was a rehearsed solo. It was always very spontaneous, I feel, very organic."

As for The Stooges themselves, Iggy Pop issued a simple, two-sentence statement: "*I am in shock. He was my best friend.*"

"Ron had a purity of intent in his playing that no one else could have, because it was HIS," says Fricke, who's written more than a few words on The Stooges over the years. "One of the things that's outstanding about him is that he never played guitar in any other way, certainly not on record or onstage. He discovered a quality in noise and movement, in how a chord and a riff could have such titanic life. And then he stuck with it, to the point that he didn't really play much with any other people or in any other style. So many of the things that he ended up doing - like Destroy All Monsters and New Race, and later the band that he had with J. Mascis - ultimately, everything he played was Stooges music, music that he invented with Iggy and Scott and Dave Alexander."

Singer/guitarist Mark Arm of Seattle's Mudhoney (who have more than a little Stoogeness to them) concurs: "I remember stumbling across those first two Stooges records in 1980, and they were totally unavailable (in the US). Found 'em on Canadian import in a small town in Oregon - they weren't even available in Seattle! And it's a weird thing to say" - Arm pauses to laugh - "but they definitely changed the course of my life. I was an English major, and I thought I was going to be a writer....Like a lot of Sixties things, you'd discover there'd be a bunch of other things like it. And I kept looking for other bands like The Stooges, and THERE JUST WEREN'T ANY. It was just a totally, completely unique thing."

The basic facts: Born in DC in 1948, moved to Ann Arbor with his family sometime before his teens. Originally aimed for a military career, but poor eyesight put paid to that. With the British Invasion washing over him and every other American youth, a shift in priorities kicked in. In 1965, Asheton and classmate Dave Alexander went to London to check out the scene. Ron brought back, among all the heady sites and sounds, a particularly

telling talisman: A piece of Pete Townshend's shattered Rickenbacker, snatched from a typical destructive end to a Who gig they'd witnessed. Which sealed the deal: Asheton was going to become a rock 'n' roll musician.

"In the early days, we were teenage friends," says guitarist Wayne Kramer, of That Other Great Detroit Band, the MC5. "He played in another band - he was the bass player in The Chosen Few when I met him," Asheton playing bass because (as he informed *Guitar World* magazine 40 years later) "Dave already had a guitar. Down the road apiece, we switched off." That piece came after Asheton and Alexander reconnected with high school acquaintance Jim Osterberg, a record store clerk who had gone from being a clean-cut honors student to a shaggy-haired drummer with local white blues outfit The Prime Movers, and started to be known locally as "Iggy." After roping Ron into The Prime Movers' bass slot for a brief spell, the trio created a psychotic splinter faction with younger Asheton brother Scott on drums and Ron and Dave making the crucial instrument swap. Hence, The Psychedelic Stooges, a more-performance-art-than-rock prank that grew into a primal force all their own. Mostly due to the guitar philosophy Ron was developing with his buddy Wayne Kramer.

"It was something we worked on a lot, that we talked about a lot," Kramer says. "I turned him onto all the free jazz I was discovering myself, with Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp and Sun Ra. And we would smoke reefer and listen to these records and talk about what these musicians were doing, and then we would talk about how maybe there was a new way to play the electric guitar that had more to do with the SOUND than with the NOTES. We didn't talk about scales and chords and harmony. We talked about what kind of sounds you could get out of a certain guitar and a certain amp if you adjusted the amplifier a certain way. I think we kinda pioneered the school of guitar playing that said, 'I don't just play the guitar. I play the amp, too.'"

Fricke: "There was a certain reductionism in what he did. But I think people overemphasize the simplicity of it. There's so much going on in terms of the harmonics and the actual tone of the distortion that he got. For all of (Stooges producer) John Cale's complaining about how to control that band in the studio when they made the first Stooges record, if you listen to the tone of Ron's guitar - particularly the way he uses wah-wah - THERE WAS NO ONE MAKING THAT SOUND ON RECORD. ANYWHERE."

Absolutely. Not to take away from what Kramer and his fellow Fivester Fred "Sonic" Smith accomplished in their own harnessing of overdriven tube amp scree and caustic fuzz mongering, Ron Asheton figured out how to make a Marshall double stack swear. And as The Stooges discovered How To Write A Song *in the studio* as they recorded their debut album, then polished their essence to a fine art on the monstrous follow-up *Funhouse*, the curse words he coaxed from his Marshall connected deeply with the handful of delinquent souls who bought those records. "If you were a weirdo or a nerd or a deviant or an outsider," Kramer chuckles, "then you identified with Ron's approach to the guitar."

When hard drugs began creeping into The Stooges (much to hardcore beer-and-weed man Ron's dismay), the band fell apart for a time. But not before a brief period that saw fellow ex-Chosen Few member James Williamson come in on second guitar. When David Bowie took Iggy into his patronage, Williamson became part of the package, sealing a new songwriting partnership. Upon moving to England to begin what would become *Raw Power*, the pair could not find an English rhythm section of suitable strength. A call was placed to the Ashetons, Ron finding upon arrival he was moved to bass and would not be required in any songwriting or ideas. Asheton remained bitter about this for life, refusing to play any *Raw Power* material when The Stooges got back together in 21st century.

"Well," chuckles Mike Watt (Stooges' bassist in their latterday reformation), when asked for his take on the Williamson-Asheton era, "Ronnie wasn't so pissed off that he didn't play his ass off on the bass!"

"He was a GREAT bass player!" says Kramer.

"We kinda forget is that he continued to (drive The Stooges), even when he WASN'T playing guitar," adds Fricke. "When he played bass in the *Raw Power* period, everything he played on guitar, he played on bass. Which is why the *Raw Power* band has such a ferocious quality of its own. You can talk about the melodies and the riffs that James wrote with Iggy, but still, that music would not have had the movement or the force that it had without Ron's bass playing in lock with his brother on drums. I think ultimately, what Ron stood for was a purity of intent in noise that everybody was influenced by, but nobody could replicate."

Not that this stopped many from trying, especially after The Stooges finally ground to a halt in 1974, the tires worn smooth on the vehicle from years of bad management, commercial neglect, and Iggy's own destructo trip. The part of the punk rock blueprint that wasn't synthesized from the Ramones' reductivist locomotion and the New York Dolls' teengenerate Stones mutation was fueled by the *idea* of Iggy launching his blood-and-peanut-butter-smear torso into the third row as Ron cranked out pure malevolence, standing stock-still in a full-dress SS uniform.

That Ashetonian malevolence was the sound of punk rock. Note The Stooges tunes UK Punk Generation Number One chose to cover: "No Fun," in the Sex Pistols' case; "1970," for The Damned. Sure, Brian James may tell Kris Needs he was "more of a Williamson man," and Sex Pistol Steve Jones may have had his initial crash course in rock guitar from popping speed and playing along to *Raw Power*. But was it "Search And Destroy" they were covering?

Asheton, for his part, stayed active, playing with MC5 drummer Dennis Thompson in The New Order (not the Joy Division spinoff) and then the New Race, a short-term "supergroup" filled out by members of Radio Birdman proving the symbiosis between Detroit 1969 and Australia's punk scene. He also spent several years with visual artist Niagara in Destroy All Monsters (between The New Order and New Race) and later Dark Carnival. He also appeared in a number of low-budget horror films, with *Mosquito* showing up most often on cable. He continued living in the home he grew up in, taking care of "a lot of cats" (as Mike Watt explained), indulging a lifelong yen for firearms and Nazi memorabilia. The latter interest was always a subject of controversy, and an odd contrast to the quiet, humble, unpretentious man he was. Watt believes it stemmed from Asheton's deep interest in history, and fondly recalls visiting Normandy on D-Day's anniversary with Asheton as a tour guide during one of the reunited Stooges' European tours.

Still, what the world wanted was The Stooges. It kept trying, even finding excuses to create pseudo Stooges like The Wylde Ratttz, a one-off band formed to do Stooges numbers and Stooges-like numbers for the soundtrack to Todd Haynes' cinematic glam fantasy *The Velvet Goldmine*. In The Wylde Ratttz, such Stooges scholars as Watt, Thurston Moore, and Mark Arm would find themselves learning the fundamentals of Stoogerock straight from bandmate Asheton, to their continued awe: "There's two songs out there credited to 'Asheton/Arm!'" Arm laughs. "That's a mind-blowing thing, for me!" When Watt and Asheton joined ex-Dinosaur Jr leader J. Mascis on a tour basically centered around performances of Stooges material in the early years of this century, Iggy Pop finally put in a call to the Asheton brothers to bury the hatchet and see if (via the production of a few tracks for Iggy's last solo LP, *Skull Ring*) it would be possible to be The Stooges in a new millennium.

The world certainly rejoiced. With Watt on bass, The Stooges took to stages across the planet, playing in an atmosphere electric with joy and happy disbelief, in contrast to the bad vibes death trip which reportedly stank out most shows played by the Williamson-era Stooges. The show I witnessed at Jones Beach in 2003 certainly felt like a religious pilgrimage, the trains to the show loading up with Stooges t-shirt-clad rockers at every stop, me writing at the time that "it's not often we get to touch the hem of Jesus." It was obvious, after years of seeing Iggy play his early catalog with some solid rock bands, that you just haven't *heard* these songs until they're played by *The Stooges*. Meaning that you need Iggy *and* The Ashetons. Accept no substitutes.

And The Stooges clearly enjoyed playing to overjoyed audiences: "Oh, *bless you! Bless you! Bless you!*" Iggy would gush repeatedly, when in the past he might have let loose several hearty "fuck-you's." That's okay: Iggy had Ron Asheton onstage with him again, stock-still as ever in trademark aviator shades, looking like a

Michigan militia member in his sawn-off camouflage. Ron's guitar said "fuck you" all night, instead of Iggy. Just like on The Stooges' records.

Three months later, I would meet the man. I'd sat across from Iggy on many previous occasions for print, and always had a wonderful time. But this would be the first time I'd face the guy whose licks had proven elusive to me as a budding 14-year-old punk rock musician. ("Fuck this! This is JAZZ!," I muttered to myself. "Where's my Ramones records?"). And after the core Stooges trio minus Watt played their classics in a stripped down format (Scott playing on buckets and boxes, Ron through a pair of '50s Fender practice amps), they got down to signing the newly released *Skull Ring* for those of us gathered that November midnight at Tower Records on Broadway in NYC. I made a special point of talking to Ron Asheton.

"Ron," I said, shaking his hand and looking him in the eye, "I've waited all my life for this moment. When I was 14, you changed my life. I just wanted to thank you for helping show me there was a whole world out there beyond the small Texas town I grew up in. Thank you so much."

The way he beamed and the genuine joy he expressed at my words, you'd have thought he'd just been told he could have sex with Jayne Mansfield that night.

"Oh, he LOVED that!" says Watt, when I tell him the story. "He loved when young guys told him that. He would tell me, 'I feel like one of those old blues guys! That's how I learned, taking pieces from them. So, it's great to know someone took that from me.'"

"When I was a young guy coming up, going to the Grande Ballroom every weekend," Asheton would tell the *Detroit Free Press* in 2003, "I got to see my heroes play. Jeff Beck, the Who, everyone. I didn't want to be a fanboy, but I'd stand there and wait - 'I just want to say hi, this was great.' I saw them walk by me with blank stares like they were zombies. I said to myself, you know, if I ever make it, I've got at least one minute for everybody who wants to say something. So I talk to people, and that's what's exciting now." He [would tell BLURT](#)'s own Fred Mills in 2005, "It's cool to hear that people like Mike Watt, Thurston Moore and Jack White were inspired by what we did. Call it punk, hard rock, or psychedelic or whatever; it's just good to be remembered. Hopefully as something original and innovative."

A few more Stooges recordings were issued in this life, including 2006 full-length *The Weirdness* and two superb, completely different takes on Junior Kimbrough's "You'd Better Run" cut for a 2004 tribute CD, *Sunday Nights - The Songs Of Junior Kimbrough*. And of course, many ecstatic tours. But now? Who knows what the future will bring the surviving trio. It's hard to imagine them continuing The Stooges without Asheton.

"The Stooges without *Ronnie*?!" snorts an audibly distraught Mike Watt. "You can't! Just as you can't do the Minutemen without D. Boon! It's impossible!" (Watt would issue a [MySpace bulletin](#) stating that he was "thinking of ron asheton, a beautiful man who I learned from much and shared many joys w/and always played my heart out for him. he was a pioneer w/a guitar sound all his own and was very very kind to me... 'you're a good sailor' he would always say. I can't find the words to really put it right here but he was truly a righteous brother, much deep respect. I miss him so so much....I'm plowing on w/gigs to keep some kind of focus.")

"You heard it right on the first record," says David Fricke, "right on 'No Fun.' What does Iggy say just before Ron plays the wah-wah solo? He says, 'C'mon, Ron! C'mon, Ron!' That's right in the thick of the first Stooges record. Iggy put Ron's name right up front, right on the first record. To me, that's got to be one of the highest compliments."

"He had an influence on a generation of musicians, or guitar players," says Wayne Kramer. "The most admirable accomplishment for anyone is that they had contributed to the belief that originality matters. The

Stooges came up in the shadow of the MC5, and found a way to have their own sound and their own expression, and time has proven that their ideas were credible and sustainable. 10,000 bands have come and gone that just followed the trend. The Stooges bucked the trend. And Ron Asheton bucked the trend for guitar players.

"Anyone that tells their story and has their own sound has accomplished a great deal."

"Then I knew the meaning of loneliness. But Bobo's words came back to me from the tomb, the sibilants cracking gently. 'No one is ever really alone. You are a part of everything alive.' The difficulty is to convince someone else he is really part of you, so what the hell? Us parts ought to work together. Reet?" - William S. Burroughs, Queer (1985)

TIM STEGALL (aka Tim Napalm) is a punk rock musician and sometime rock journalist living in Austin, TX. He has written about The Stooges on many occasions and performed their songs in several of his bands. All he wants for Christmas next December is the Reverend Ron Asheton Model Guitar.

[Photo credit, middle: Robert Matheu. Special thanks to Kris Needs for additional research.]