

Ron Asheton 1948-2009

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“RON WAS THE Riffmeister and all that was good in this world,” declares Andrew Innes of Primal Scream, just one of countless bands who owe an inestimable debt to **Ron Asheton**’s (pictured, in glasses) monolithic stun guitar onslaughts on the first two Stooges albums.

Asheton, found dead yesterday at his Ann Arbor home from a suspected heart attack, was the most influential punk guitarist of all time, his monosyllabic, piledriver riffs providing blueprints for later appletart-upsetters like the New York Dolls and Sex Pistols. Even former Captain Beefheart and Jeff Buckley guitarist Gary Lucas has paid tribute to “some of the best and most iconic riffs in punk history”.

In his own private world Asheton, whose unusual pantheon of heroes included Adolf Hitler and the [Three Stooges](#), was the most dangerous embodiment of the Stooges’ dum dum boys aesthetic, infamous for his extensive collection of Nazi memorabilia and the [unsavoury swastika armbands](#) later adopted by UK punk-shockers. Ironically, he was the only Stooge who eschewed hard drugs.

Ron was born in Washington DC in 1948, brought to Ann Arbor by his mother after his Marine Corp pilot father Ronald’s death in 1963. Besotted by the Beatles and the Stones, he became obsessed with Pete Townshend after a Who gig during a mid-’60s pilgrimage to London with high school buddy Dave Alexander. He played bass in local bands including the Prime Movers, Chosen Few and Dirty Shames before forming the Psychedelic Stooges with Alexander, Scott and a local kid he’d met called James Osterberg – rechristened Iggy after a stint in a band called The Iguanas.

In early 1968, the Asheton family moved to an Ann Arbor farmhouse, later dubbed the Fun House in tribute to its inhabitants’ nefarious activities. It was here that Ron rehearsed the aggressively simple riffs which would define the Stooges’ unique brand of raw power. He was the driving force behind the Stooges in the early days, street-toughening the innocent Iggy to front the band while the musicians mercilessly revved the Stooges’ primitive engine.

After being adopted as the MC5’s ‘little brother’ band, the Stooges signed to Elektra Records. Released in 1969, the band’s self-titled debut album strove to emulate the direct simplicity of the blues while knocking out mini-anthems like [No Fun](#) and Real Cool Time derived from intra-band wisecracks and slogans.

By 1970, the Stooges had roped in sax player Steve Mackay, recording their second album, *Fun House*, in Los Angeles on acid, then heroin, although Ron steadfastly stuck to pot and beer. The three-pronged attack of Down In The Street, I’m Loose and [TV Eye](#), led by Asheton on psychopathic overdrive, still ranks as one of music’s most incendiary volleys, while the title track sounds like Wilson Pickett’s backing band let loose in an opium den.

But the album bombed and the Stooges commenced a slow disintegration, Ron watching frustrated as everything went hideously south, and in 1972 he underwent further ignominy as he was re-hired as bassist in a new Stooges – a desperate Iggy having hitched his star to guitarist James Williamson and bewitched producer David Bowie – the result being the controversial *Raw Power* album.

But nothing could save the Stooges and the line-up played their last show on February 9, 1974. Iggy joined Bowie on a mutual reinvention session in Berlin, leaving Asheton to muddle through with groups including New Order, New Race and, for seven years from mid-1977, Destroy All Monsters with former MC5 bassist Mike Davis. “We fucked up, man,” Ron told MOJO in 1996. “[The Stooges] could have been the American Stones. But we messed up big time. It was freefall. We didn't stop till we hit the bottom.”

Asheton mourned the demise of the Stooges for 30 years, reappearing as a B-movie actor in the mid-'90s in such masterworks as *Mosquito* and [Frostbiter: Wrath Of The Wendigo](#), before playing in the [Wylde Rattz](#) with Thurston Moore and Mark Arm in late '90s glam-fantasy *Velvet Goldmine*. But he never lost his dream of reforming the original Stooges, which began to materialise in 2003 when the surviving members [Dave Alexander died in 1975, his replacement was US hardcore veteran Mike Watt] appeared on four tracks on Iggy's *Skull Ring* album. That year saw the line-up enter the live arena at the Coachella Festival – so well received that the Stooges were almost instantly reactivated. Older and wiser but still hugely relevant, they showed new generations where their music had come from and made some old men very happy.

Ron Asheton was most delighted of all, disbelievably vindicated as Rolling Stone even placed him at 29 in the [100 Best Guitarists Of All Time](#). With his death, many memories centre around the incredible night at Hammersmith Apollo in 2005 where the group played the whole of *Fun House* for All Tomorrow's Parties. Standing immobile, bludgeoning his trademark gonzo riffs while Iggy rampaged around him, he had finally found happiness again, and there was more in store: an all-new Stooges album in the shape of 2007's *The Weirdness*.

Tributes are flying from acolytes including Killing Joke's Youth: “Ron Asheton's genius was not only being able to realise vast emotional epics with extreme economy and simplicity of notes but also to slay the simplest and most primitive of riffs with a sexual groove that is so subtle yet as direct as a brick in the face. Check No Fun and TV Eye: I've jammed them and those grooves equal the sex in any James Brown classic and are equally hard to nail.”

Ex-Damned guitarist Brian James simply said, “He wrote the riff to I Wanna Be Your Dog. That's enough for me.”

This writer most recalls being blown away by Ron's stack as he ravaged through said song in a London pub venue with [Destroy All Monsters](#) (though rather unsettled by the Nazi dagger collection he gleefully displayed as part of the collection of military regalia transforming his hotel room).

Asheton's old friend [Mike Davis](#) has also movingly paid his respects. “Ron impressed me as possibly the only down to earth character on the Detroit/Ann Arbor scene at the time. He was the only person I knew who actually was not carried away with all the experimentation, yet searched for a way of life that made common sense with a pioneering approach. While everyone was running around blowing out old values with reckless behaviour, Ron quietly was investigating real-time approaches to the way he lived. We became friends simply because we felt comfortable together and independent from the scene-stealers. Ron and I could hang out, drink our beer, and chat up without feeling pressured by anything or anyone.

“Ron was conservative, modest, and had a gleeful smile. He wasn't trying to be anyone else or to be an earth-shaker. He just loved what he was doing, that's all. The Stooges lived in the shadow of the MC5, but as I watched and listened, I saw and heard them beating us! Ron and his boys: humble, independent, unique, doing it

as well as they could, and making it on their own terms. I was thinking to myself, 'Jesus Christ, I like them better than I like us!'

“Even so, I am grateful that Ron was able to heal and mend those rifts that had plagued him from his Stooges days. It is fitting and right that he finally realised his original dream. Right on! I tell myself that Ron did it all. He was his own man. He got to the top of the stairway. He will be mourned, missed, and honoured. And he left a huge legacy, more than we realise. He left a huge impression on me, and I carry that impression constantly. I even find myself doing little imitations of Ron's humour all the time. It makes me smile. Farewell, my brother.”

Kris Needs