

Since returning from the ten year retreat that followed the break-up of his foul-mouthed hardcore trio Harry Pussy, **Bill Orcutt** has distilled his former group's rude vitality into crudely potent blues for acoustic guitar. By David Keenan. Photography by James Chiang and Paul Schiek

"I'm just a guy who is trying to find his own way of playing the blues," guitarist Bill Orcutt shrugs. "This music that he loves." This isn't what you'd expect to hear from the leader of one of the most rudely iconoclastic post-hardcore groups of the 1990s, Miami's Harry Pussy; but the way Orcutt tells it, that's all he's ever played. "It was one of the first things I wanted to play on the guitar," he explains. "It may be the only thing I wanted to play on guitar. I mean, Harry Pussy did a Lightnin' Hopkins track. I always thought we were playing blues music, in some sense. I don't know that I can really play anything other than the blues."

Harry Pussy's hyper-kinetic and hermetically personal take on high energy rock 'n' roll somewhat occluded its connection to black Southern folk music by factoring in wildcard influences like free jazz, Death Metal and Yoko Ono. But the series of solo recordings Orcutt has cut over the past two years for his own Palilalia imprint and Editions Mego also serve to expose the roots based exoskeleton beneath the surface of Harry Pussy's earlier explorations of extreme forms of expression. Though they imploded in 1998, their legendarily raucous and confrontational performance style saw them enshrined as avatars of excess for later generations ready to embrace Noise as a formula for resuscitating rock. After the split, Orcutt himself disappeared from music altogether until 2009, when he returned with a solo 7", *High Waisted/Big Ass Nails*, followed by an LP, *A New Way To Pay Old Debts*. Both seemed like extensions and inversions of his previous work. Most strikingly, he had transposed the convulsive rhythms, knotty note clusters and speed-of-thought dexterity of his electric guitar playing to a four-string acoustic without sacrificing any of his aggressive dynamism,

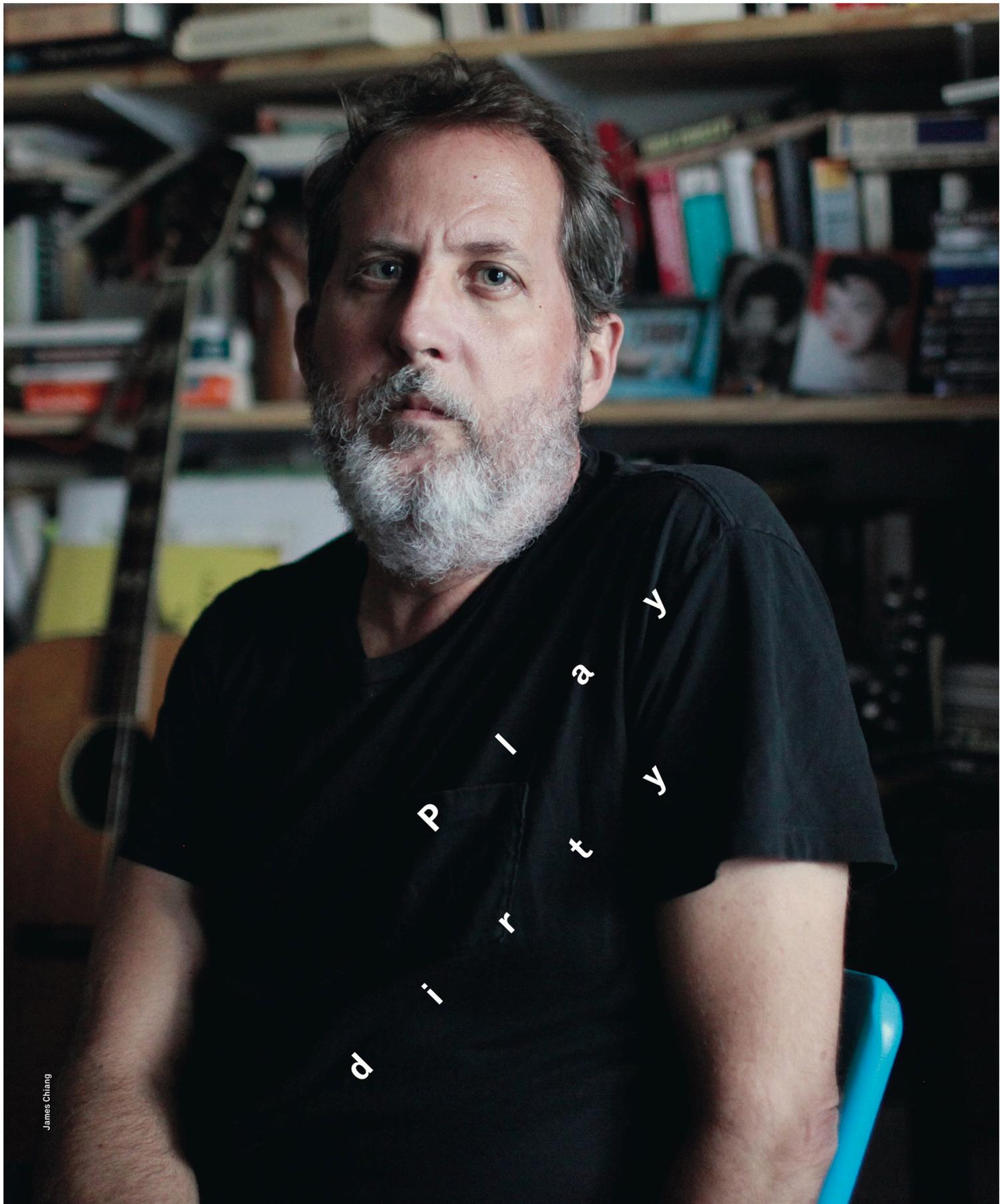
while simultaneously underlining the obsessively technical nature of his instrumental concepts. It felt like a slap in the face to those critics and fans alike who had written Harry Pussy off – or perversely hailed them – as some kind of punk-primitive Noise project. But then, dubbing anything 'Noise' invariably encourages sloppy listening.

"It's a really interesting topic to me," Orcutt admits. "When you wrote that review about Harry Pussy when the Load record came out [2008's *You'll Never Play This Town Again*, reviewed in *The Wire* 298] and you mentioned technique, I really picked up on that, because nobody talked about technique, at least using that word, when Harry Pussy was playing. People would say we couldn't play. They wouldn't even dignify it with the term technique. But technique was something I was totally thinking about in Harry Pussy. When Harry Pussy started I had been playing guitar for 15 years. I was coming out of stuff like James 'Blood' Ulmer, Fred Frith's *Massacre*, things like that. So, I mean, I already knew the stuff that people consider technique."

Indeed, Orcutt's latest solo album, *How The Thing Sings*, may well be the most explicit realisation of the sound he has been chasing across the space of his discography. Clocking in at just over a minute, "No True Vine" opens the record in classic Harry Pussy style. The riff snaps back on itself again and again – Orcutt describes his rhythmic style as "hiccupping" – while handfuls of barbed notes bounce and scream around a tonal centre, as if unable to escape its gravitational hold. The track's relationship to blues lies in its reconciliation of 'simple' formula – its simultaneous reduction of musical possibilities, its obsession with restatement – and its corresponding opening up to endless personal inflection.

"I see it as a continuation of what I was doing in Harry Pussy," Orcutt insists. "Harry Pussy had a lot of rules. For instance there were no chords. Notes might sound simultaneously between the two guitars but you could never play, you know, a barre chord or something. That was completely out. Plus I had developed this kind of stuttering rhythm thing. I remember when we got Dan Hosker in on guitar. The first song we did together was "Chuck!" and I actually wrote both guitar parts and then taught it to him and it took an entire evening, like six hours to teach him it, to work out whatever the riff is, and the track is like 60 seconds long or something. It took him a long time to learn the idiom, whatever you want to call it, the technique. But for me that was all I was thinking about. I was happy to let Adris [Hoyos] handle all the other stuff."

Adris Hoyos was Orcutt's wife and co-conspirator throughout the existence of Harry Pussy, and a key part of their sound. She had never played drums before Orcutt convinced her to sit in with him when he lost the drummer from his first group, Watt. Over the five years that they played together they moved from tentative experiments in free rock to a trio set-up – first with guitarist Mark Feehan and then Dan Hosker – that was capable of playing at such sustained velocity, modal ferocity and compositional complexity that they blurred the line between hardcore punk, ecstatic free jazz and the music of The Magic Band. Onstage, Adris became the group's focus, wisecracking between tracks and making explosive use of a double kick-drum pedal, screaming vocals and expressive body sounds that perfectly interlocked with the dense fields of energy generated by the twin guitars, even as the intense physicality required to maintain their breakneck speed regularly reduced her to collapse.



James Chiang

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“I had always wanted to play with a non-musician,” Orcutt explains. “I don’t like musicians. Musicians only have ideas about music. Everything is very literal. It’s hard to get a wider view – they have very specific ideas about the notes and it’s very easy to get lost in the details. Working with a non-musician you can have broader conversations. Once I got to know Adris and we started going out, it seemed like she would be the perfect person to be in a band with. She was very shy when you first met her, but then she also had this really wild side. People often thought that whatever she did on the drums was somehow this pure expression of herself, and this goes back to the concept of technique. Actually, her drumming got so much better as we went along. If you listen to our first 7” [1993’s “Shred Master”], she was really just sort of tapping away randomly. But over the course of the five years she developed this whole technique. It was intense, really – I’m flailing for words trying to describe it. She had all this stuff that she could do and there was no name for it, these different licks she had, she had developed it from playing with me, even though still at the end of five years she couldn’t do a press roll or any kind of basic snare thing.”

By the time of Harry Pussy’s second LP, *Ride A Dove*, released by Siltbreeze in 1996, Orcutt’s monomaniacal pursuit of the sound in his head had turned the group into the equivalent of a high-pressure experimental thinktank, even as he became increasingly frustrated at falling short of his goal. “I remember I went through a really hard time when we were doing *Ride A Dove*,” he says. “What I wanted to do was the kind of music that eventually wound up on the Load compilation, but there was just no way to get there. At the same time my relationship with Adris was ending. It was just not a good place to be and what came out of that was *Ride A Dove*. Then Mark left and Dan came into the band and it was like the cloud lifted or something and I was able to figure stuff out. Basically, also I was smoking so much pot, it was amazing that I could function at all. But I decided to cut back from my, you know, 40 bong hits a day. And my brain cleared enough to be able to figure some stuff out. In retrospect it all seems rather simple, but trying to build up songs with all of the elements being completely abstract was really difficult. Eventually what I did was, I had Adris construct the song entirely on the drums and then we just wrapped the guitars around the drums. It seems obvious now but there was a summer where I spent trying to figure out how to construct this music that I had in my head, and I was so stoned and everything was so abstract and those crazy guitars were burning my brain, it was just a sad, sad time. I mean, I’m an obsessive person, obviously, and it was just one of those cases where obsession is not good. I needed to step back from it. Ideally I would have preferred to have a total Beefheart situation where I lock everybody in the house and practise all day till we get it. I couldn’t do that, but I felt like the later releases that were collected on the Load compilation were close enough that I could declare it a success.”

Without the centrifugal influence of Hoyos’s drumming and vocals, confesses Orcutt, structuring his solo guitar work has been a whole new challenge. But he has been looking further abroad for inspiration: to the music of Cecil Taylor, the essays

of Gertrude Stein – “Stein says repetition doesn’t exist,” he says, “it’s only insistence, just insisting on the same thing over and over again” – and, most startlingly, ‘tic’ videos on YouTube. “I find myself drawn to this weird sort of repetition as a person, so I’m always looking for examples of it out there that I can sort of use as a model for how to put my own stuff together,” he explains. “I see it in Cecil Taylor, where he worries a certain phrase again and again. Then I discovered these videos on YouTube, tic videos, made by people who don’t have Tourette’s per se but who have these involuntary physical and verbal tics, and they actually document their symptoms and put the videos up on YouTube. It’s often stuff that is very abstract and almost kind of beautiful. It might just be that they move their hand in a certain way, this repeated motion. It’s fascinating to me that it exists, and that people can film themselves at home and show this kind of weird personal behaviour to others. In a way, I thought, that’s kind of what I do myself.”

Orcutt’s label Palilalia takes its name from a particular condition that involves repeating your own speech. His study of tics has allowed him to rethink rhythm and time signatures without abstracting them from the physical, while his recent incorporation of inchoate vocals, sometimes singing quietly or moaning alongside the music, works to reconcile his interest in blues – think of the haunted gospel accompaniment on Blind Willie Johnson’s “Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground” or the early Guitar Roberts sides – with the spontaneous sounds of the body. The 14 minute “A Line From Ol’ Man River” closing *How The Thing Sings* best illustrates his urgent, intuitive style. He isolates a simple phrase from the spiritual named in the title, and through its endless ringing recombination he elevates it to the status of a single primal phonetic. If anything, it feels closest to the way Albert Ayler would take fragments of folk melody and reconstitute them again and again until they gave up their ghosts. On “A Line From Ol’ Man River”, Orcutt plays like someone caught under the spell of language. Which goes some way to explain what he got up to during his ‘lost’ years.

“I kind of stopped playing music,” he explains. “I got interested in different stuff. I was really getting into electronic music at this point, as a listener, and it was interesting to me because it was a total black box. I had no idea how those sounds were being made. It sounded really complicated and it was a total mystery and that appealed to me. In the late 90s, the whole Mego scene was really the last scene that I got way deep into as a collector – Pita’s *Get Out*, etc – so it was pretty weird when years later Peter Rehberg contacted me about doing a record. Back in 97 I would have happily given up a limb to do a record for him. And actually it tied into my growing interest in computers and computer language, and ultimately that was the form it took. I got really into Max/MSP and that totally appealed to me and my interest in programming. I got way deep into that and there’s a really big online community around it. So if you want to geek out and you’re already inclined to be a nerd, that’s a good scene for you! But I never made any electronic music myself. When I moved from Miami to San Francisco, it was the height of the internet boom and I was doing a lot of work by the hour. But I was also writing a lot of software and integrating it into Max, and I had people who were



using it and so I would interact in that way, as a programmer not as a musician.”

Could you get a greater contrast to his daytime programming work than the deeply physical, stripped back approach that Orcutt has taken since returning to music? By the time he made *How The Thing Sings*, he had forsworn pickups and an amplifier altogether in favour of recording his acoustic guitar live and straight to a microphone in his living room. His method goes some way to explaining the provenance of the title. The recording really does sing, with the guitar sounding fuller and more resonant than on his earlier solo recordings, the overtones more complex, the drones even deeper. There’s also a greater variety of attack, with Orcutt making full expressive use of the dynamic potential of the acoustic. “With Harry Pussy the music always had a certain grubbiness to it,” he suggests. “You know what I mean? It had the sweat of manual labour on it. It wasn’t like somebody manipulating a synth or something. It had a real prole vibe. People always preferred this kind of effortless college rock thing. I’ve never had that.” Right from the off, naming his group Harry Pussy and calling their 1993 Siltbreeze debut *In An Emergency You Can Shit On A Puerto Rican Whore*, Orcutt has made great play with this ‘grubby’ quality.

“You know, that actually isn’t the title of that first LP,” he protests. “It’s actually eponymous. We put that

phrase on the cover because it was the punchline of a joke that was told about the toilet at CBGBs, you know, ‘What’s the difference between a Puerto Rican whore and the toilet at CBGBs? In an emergency you can shit on a Puerto Rican whore.’ When Harry Pussy first came out there was all of this uncomplicated punk nostalgia because Grunge was just starting. We were just trying to bring up all of this negative stuff around punk, just to bum people out. It didn’t really work. I don’t think people were as upset about it as we were.”

Why did you want to bum people out? “Why do I always want to bum people out? That’s a good question. I don’t know. There’s just something about me, a strong impulse. Like with the name Harry Pussy. When we did that first single we were calling ourselves Cookies & Beer. Very different, right? Then at some point I random-associated this long list of names and Harry Pussy was on there and Adris was like, that’s the dumbest name I ever heard. It’s so stupid, we gotta go with that one. I made up the whole story that it was actually a nickname that John Lennon gave Yoko Ono. It’s a good one, isn’t it? Thing is, you have to remember, we never thought that 20 years later we would still be talking about it.”

The tendency to caricature or lampoon the more outré manifestations of the culture that embraced them carries over into Orcutt’s solo work. The cover of *How The Thing Sings* features a series of Stevie

Ray Vaughan’s guitar picks; the one-sided live LP recorded in New Zealand called *Way Down South* carries a picture of Muddy Waters, and assorted 7”s have starred Barack Obama, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Mick Jagger and Chuck Berry.

“I just feel like if you’re gonna play the blues you have to somehow address the fact that you’re not Robert Johnson,” Orcutt explains. “If you’re playing any kind of folk music and you’re not a member of that particular group, then it’s problematic. A lot of the 60s blues guys and people today treat it in an uncomplicated way, like, ‘Of course I can play the blues’. They don’t see the separation between themselves and their situation and the origins of the music. So I always try to just complicate it a little or at least indicate visually that there’s a discontinuity between what I’m doing and my position in connection with this music and its origins. I can’t justify it ultimately. My connection to the blues comes from buying the records. I saw Muddy Waters play once. I have no authenticity in connection to the blues. I always made the point when people would ask, ‘What are you playing?’ – you get those kinds of elemental questions, you know, like ‘What the fuck are you up to?’ – and I always said, ‘It’s a rock band, man. It’s guitars, it’s drums, it’s vocals. It’s rock. Deal with it.’” □ Bill Orcutt’s *How The Thing Sings* is out now on Editions Mego. pailaliala.com