

LOST CAUSE – Charlie Lenk

It's hard to write about the Samoanz without devoting equal ink to their counterparts the Lost Cause. In many ways the bands led parallel existences: both debuted in spring 1980, both added and dropped members each semester, and both became in their separate ways the closest to musical institutions Bard had in the very early 80s. Both drew their own large and very loyal fan base with little overlap with little overlap between the two – no small feat for a student body numbering 800 at the time.

Best of all both were great party bands, roll-in-the-beer-on-the-floor great, although people will probably remember the Lost Cause as being stronger in that department if for no other reason than the Cause's tradition of having the beer flow freely at their shows. They're the only act I remember to place a keg onstage and invite the audience to drink from it throughout their set.

The Cause carried on for a glorious two-year run propelled by its spontaneity and fireball energy. Most of that energy came from one Ivan Stoler (82), frontman and lyricist – I can't bring myself to call him a singer, and if I recall correctly Ivan never did either. Its audience was one that rarely minded sloppy musicianship or having abuse hurled at it, Cause trademarks for its first year. Cause fans came to be, in turn, entertained, outraged, and bawdily, lustily participatory. Ivan and company obligingly gave them all they wanted and sometimes a bit more.

The Lost Cause was first proposed by Stoler and Steve Bennish, who jointly decided in fall 1979 their unique political and social philosophies needed a musical forum. Early originals *Mind Fuck* and *Take the Third World and Shove It* provided the core of the set, and the help of guitarists Mark Cortman and Sandor Black and drummer Doug Reeder they put a few ramshackle shows together for the spring.

It was an unlikely bunch from which to make a band. Cortman was a folkie with a repertoire consisting mostly of Grateful Dead and protest songs; Bennish and Stoler were strong rock&rollers (Sex Pistols, NY Dolls, Dead Boys etc.) with lifestyles to match, while Reeder was a drugged-looking hippie with too much jazz training to get the strong, simple beat songs demanded. Clean-cut Wilton boy Black was a drummer of eight years standing who only wanted to play his new Stratocaster. But when Bennish and Stoler defined their music as "wreck rock," the others went along with it and the Cause quickly established that when they played it wasn't just a show but a full-out circus. Their set had only seven songs so they played it twice, including covers *Love Stinks* (J. Geils) and *Desire Me* (Greg Kihn). What they lacked in skill or cohesiveness they made up in enthusiasm, their first shows proving them true successors to Virus.

By fall of 1980 Cortman had dropped out and been replaced by Cliff Pemsler, who'd put his own band Male Model on hold until he graduated. Cliff and Ivan aligned instantly, bonded by their love of pop and chaos, and the shows grew even more entertaining with the boys vying for who could be most outrageous. The band was plagued not just by stubborn sloppiness but also poor equipment: Bennish was still playing the same two-strings-removed guitar he'd started out with instead of a real bass, while new addition Roger Rosenthal's organ lacked a decent-size amp, ensuring his contributions were largely lost.

This lineup played four gigs: the two co-headlining with the Samoanz, another at the Inn Keepers Pub (breaking the Pub's embargo of Bard bands since a pogo-happy Twilites show two years before), and the infamous road show at Simons Rock which was shut down mid-set when someone in the tagalong Bard crowd let off a stink bomb. The expanded set included new tunes *I Wanna Be Like Johnny Quest*, *Moving to Rhodesia*, and crowd-pleaser *Only You, Anita Bryant*: tunes that proved Ivan was increasingly capable of writing articulate lyrics, and if the music wasn't always as pop-pretty as Pemsler tried to make it the shows were nonetheless roaringly strong, playful performances. Of course, there were numerous fuckups (mostly originating with the rhythm section), and Ivan was more obnoxious than ever: but that was the Lost Cause with Cliffy.

The semester ended and Pemsler graduated, to be replaced in turn by Michael O'Brien (82). O'Brien was at that time a relative newcomer to the Bard band scene, having only the Units to his credit. O'Brien's work with the Units, a cover band playing Beatles/Doors etc. songs that won the October 1981 Battle of the Bands, proved one thing: previously visible or not, he had a major talent for playing rock and roll. From his first gig with the Lost Cause, O'Brien gently nudged them towards a semblance of the professionalism and discipline the band had legendarily lacked.

During the spring of 81 this lineup played five times, the last an abysmal set sans Stoler (down with mono). These gigs showed a more mature sextet no longer careless about, or even proud of, being the worst band on campus. O'Brien and Black teamed together for a stronger guitar/backup vocal presence than ever previously heard on a Cause stage; Rosenthal got a new amp and played solid organ lines that could at last be heard; Bennish and Reeder had real moments of rock and roll exactitude and could even get some people dancing; and Ivan could concentrate on his vocal, uh, technique. Better yet, the Stoler/O'Brien songwriting alliance smoked, turning out *I Don't Wanna Look Like You*, the jazz-tinged *Acid Casualty* and the lamentably unperformed *Milkman*. When the Samoanz were breaking up, the Cause was gearing up to play their best ever.

That came next semester after Bennish quit and Reeder left school to be replaced respectively by ex-Samoanz Marc Dale and Stu Wood. Rosenthal exited as well, leaving the Cause with a leaner Stones-like sound. This last edition of the band (fall 81/spring 82) displayed a less rigidly-defined lead-and-backup structure than before: all the musicians were finally competent enough to play without having to be continually instructed and teamwork became the order of the day. The Cause played three shows during the fall of 81, showcasing excellent new material (*Better To Look Than Receive*, about avoiding hassles with pickups, was probably the best-received) and winning a dedicated, if often bizarre, following.

Gigs in the spring semester were even more sporadic owing to Stoler's and O'Brien's impending graduation and unfortunately particulars of their last show are lost to memory. What I do remember is Ivan screaming into the mike: "No dancing! This is a Lost Cause show, goddamit! I don't want to see anyone goddam DANCING out there!" The longer the band played, and the more freely the beer flowed, the harder it was to pay him any mind on that point.