

THE SAMOANZ – Charlie Lenk

The Samoanz had their genesis in a live performance class held by the Music Department during the 79-80 academic year. Four classmates - Chris Cochrane (the guitarist/singer with folkie roots), Nayland Blake (the art major turned lead singer), Doug Henderson (the guitarist – and later saxophonist - with extreme-fringe musical tastes) and Jimmy Rodewald (the mystery man bassist) – came together with a common vision: to mutate 60s psychedelia covers (*Inna-Gadda-Da-Vida*, Hendrix, *Sister Ray*) into barely-recognizable forms worthy of their beloved art-rockers Fred Frith, the Residents and Henry Cow. And, this being the Bard of the time, get academic credit for it!

Along the way though, the Samoanz started writing their own songs which gradually took over the setlist. By the time of their demise a little over a year after their first gig, they had a solid 90-minute set composed mostly of originals such as *Lost My Lucy*, *Well-Adjusted*, and the instant campus classic *Dick Griffith Before He Dicks You*. I still consider their short life-span a damn shame; they would have been a sensation had they gone on to the New York City of the No Wave early 80s.

The first version of the Samoanz was Blake, Cochrane, Henderson and Rodewald with Glen Carter on drums and ex-Virus man-about-campus Art Carlson on sax and vocals. Their set mixed in originals like *Fucking Homos* and *Dick Griffith* with vintage Virus numbers (*Freshman Girls*, *Suds and Doobies*) and stray covers (a nigh-mandatory *Sweet Jane* and the Fugs' *Couldn't Get High*). This lineup played two gigs at Blithewood - their debut in April 1980 and the Spring Formal a month later and both shows displayed a lot of promise despite their common denominator of confusion; only Carlson and Carter had ever played in a band before. To complicate things further, Carter quit before the Formal and was replaced at the last minute by Mark Kirby (later of the Trolls).

Carlson and Kirby left for Albany that summer and come September their spots were filled respectively by Guy Yarden and Jon Greene. Faculty brat Yarden, classically trained on piano, played Farfisa organ and occasional self-taught violin while Greene drummed came from a jazz perspective. This second incarnation of the Samoanz played at least three gigs during its one-semester existence: the October "Battle of the Bands," the Manor Deca-dance in November (both co-headlining with the Lost Cause), and the "Merry Christmas or Else" party with the Caucasians.

Each show made it evident that the Samoanz were probably the best rehearsed and certainly the most inventive campus band at the time; new songs like the reggae *Advertiser* coupled with a finishing-touches revision of older number *Pakistan* and not one but two versions of *White Light/White Heat* (the second a

half-serious C&W take) had audiences in positive rapture. As college dance bands go the Samoanz were unmistakably hot, their Ubu-esque touches somehow serving to make them hotter. They were also multimedia pioneers, incorporating odd-at-the-time video and light shows into their sets.

In January 81 Rodewald went off to South America while Greene exited the band due to the ever-popular “musical differences.” They were replaced by Marc Dale (also later of the Trolls) on bass and ex-Twilite Stu Wood on drums. Wood and Dale came together with the band like clockwork and this last version of the Samoanz was virtually unstoppable, dropping Virus and Velvet songs in favor of new wall-shakers like *She Walks* that showcased the songwriting team finally coming fully into its own. Unfortunately they played so many shows the spring of 81 (three shows in four days one weekend alone) that they played themselves out. In early May most of the Samoanz decided they wanted to try new individual directions and they split before that year’s Formal.

I was a staunch fan and really bummed when they broke up; they were great musicians and hard-working as hell, yeah, but above all a Samoanz show was huge fun. In their last few months they became the most professional and contender-ish band Bard had to offer, which just goes to show how far you can go with a tiny little push from the Bard Music Department and a shitload of talent.