

Reed John-Paul Forever

Steve Antczak

A resident of Atlanta, Georgia, Steve Antczak used to sing for a punk garage band called Officer Friendly. He's also worked on Twisted Issues, a video billed as 'a psycho-punk splatter comedy' which deals with zombie skatepunks in Gainesville, Florida. (It's available through Film Threat magazine.)

Born in Salem, Massachusetts, Steve was three years old to the day when man first set foot on the Moon. Neil Armstrong's first words on touching down were actually 'Happy Birthday, Steve', but they were overlaid by static on the time-delayed telecast by a vindictive Spiro T. Agnew. 'Reed John-Paul Forever', which Steve claims is vaguely inspired by the chameleon career of David Bowie, is his fifth sale and his third book appearance (the first was a piece in Newer York). We called him up to quiz him about these notes at an incredibly inconvenient time, but even so he was decent enough to chat. Punks (and ex-punks) are nice people.

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he latest Reed John-Paul humper, 'My Black Hole', pounded the air like it pounded Henri's blood. Sent him spinning and whirling, jumping and looping all over the floor. He was gone, the music wired to his body, remote controlled randomness, death-defying fury. To look at him you might say, *There's Reed John-Paul himself, look at him demon dance, watch a living legend.* Henri was Reed John-Paul, as far as the eye could tell. The reality could tell a different story. Henri was a Reed John-Paul effigy. A kid with no identity of his own, a culture clone, a wannabe, a nowhere else to run dead end of the road loser with one last shred of glory. Of the thousands of screaming Reed John-Paul fans, he was one of the few who took it as far as it could be taken. He could be Reed John-Paul like no one else, except Reed John-Paul.

The humper ground itself out in an ashtray of shrieks and shattering glass, and Henri kept on, convulsing to the tune still raging in his head, until the Furious George track put his fire out. Not his smoke, FG. Henri stood

there, momen-tarily dazed with FG effigies taking up swaying ranks around him, liquid human parts flowing to words sung by a drown-ing man.

He beat the floor, swaggering that Reed John swagger - left hip thrown way out there, right hand held out for alms - and made his way through the mish-mash of painted faces and unnatural hair to the table in the corner where his posse posed.

‘You were gone, out there,’ Tom Tom, his muscle, told him.

‘Raging fuckin’ gone,’ Haze, his cowgirl at night, riding high on the hog, whispered wetly in his ear. Her tongue flicked in for a sec, then traced around the cartilage, and she kissed him fast on the cheek.

Henri took a whiff. The air was heavy with toxins from a hundred different kinds of burning weed and alcoholic atmosphere. It was good to be here, where the energy flowed into you instead of out, where the things that mattered happened on the floor and in glasses or rolled in paper, and sometimes secretly in the bathrooms. Outside nothing mattered except getting *in*. In was belonging and creating small legends, Out was boredom, getting old and dying nobody.

He noticed a Betty leaning towards him against a railing around the Pit. Below he knew the skins and punks were moshing and banging heads together in a war of fevered, manic fuzz that sent their bodies flying at one another until they dropped. Once in the Pit, the only way out was head first.

The Betty smiled at Henri. She looked like a norm, the hottest I-wanna-be-your-dog norm he’d ever seen. Her lips seemed to direct pleasure through the air at him. Henri felt a howl building inside.

Haze punched his arm. ‘Hey, heel,’ she said. ‘You said I was along for the ride. Is the ride over?’

He looked at her. ‘Not yet.’ Her painted white face frowned, red eyebrows formed a V beneath blue dreadlocks.

‘Hey, Henri. . .’ It was Tom Tom, pointing with his chin.

Henri looked. The Betty was approaching the table, legs netted in black, waist circled by a loose black skirt, chest bare down to the nipples. Her eyes stayed focused on Henri, ignoring the others.

Henri suppressed a grin. Probably some glamgirl out slumming for a

little effigy meat. The glams did that every once in a while, got one of the effs, adopted him, took him around for show and tell, until she grew tired, or sick, of him sucking it all up like a leech. Not Henri's smoke. Haze need not worry.

'I'm Anna,' the woman said to Henri.

'Who fuckin' cares, bitch,' Haze spat. She was ready for a knock down. Henri put a hand gently yet firmly on her leg. *Chill*. Haze didn't move, but stayed tense.

'Call me . . . Reed,' Henri said. Anna's eyes caught the light and glittered. The spiked pink hair, raccoon's mask painted blue around his eyes, black lips that formed Henri's perfected off-kilter grin ... all Reed John-Paul.

'Okay. Reed. Come with me for a walk. For air.'

'There's air in here,' he said.

'Then come with me for glory.'

'Hey, there's glory in here, too,' Tom Tom cut in.

Anna ignored him. 'Come on, Reed, this could be your big chance. Come with me.'

Something in her voice was stronger than Henri's will. Henri's will was a Berlin Wall waiting for a revolution. And Anna was a Molotov cocktail, with her fuse lit and smoking. Maybe she was his smoke after all.

He stood.

'Henri,' Haze said. 'Henri, what the - ?'

'I'll be right back,' he said. Anna took his arm in her hand and led him away.

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Outside it was acid raining. The burning drops forced them to take the tuber, which then took them uptown. Uptown: People didn't die uptown, they were forced to leave before they reached that point. The Immortals lived there . . . the real Reed John-Paul and Furious George.

‘Are you one?’ Henri asked. Immortal, he meant.

She nodded, and that was that.

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The apartment was six rooms, all bigger than any house Henri had ever been in. It was high among the skyscrapers, way above eight-hour workdays and sixteen-hour empty dreams. And it was a shrine to Reed John-Paul.

‘A fanatic,’ Henri said.

‘You.’

He turned to face her. ‘Effigy,’ he said. ‘I want to *be* him, not worship him.’

She laughed. ‘Oh, of course, I see.’ She slipped her shoes off and walked barefoot across the deep blue carpet to the kitchen. ‘Hungry?’

His stomach answered for him, ‘Yes.’

So what would she want? Sex? A performance? He could do Reed like no one else. Except -

‘Reed John-Paul,’ she said from the kitchen. ‘Why?’

‘It just happened,’ Henri said. That’s why. Better than being me. Henri Dupris, loser like the rest. Rather be the best, and that’s Reed John-Paul. Right?’

‘No argument there.’ She brought him a plate with micro-waved noodles and white sauce. ‘Sit at the table, I’ll tell you what’s happening.’

He sat at the table. The noodles were good, soft, and the sauce was kind of fishy. She poured him a glass of white wine, then sat beside him.

‘Reed John-Paul is dead,’ she said.

Henri stopped eating. He shook his head. ‘Sorry. Heard that rumour before, lots of times. Never believe it, and he never lets me down.’

Anna sighed. 'I know. That's how it was planned. There've been five others before you, and they all said the same thing. And I hate myself for it, but it is in the contract.'

Henri had resumed eating to give the illusion of non-concern. 'What contract?' As far as he knew he hadn't signed anything.

'With Prolong. They own the Reed John-Paul contract.'

'The life extension company.'

She nodded. 'Prolong doesn't work on everyone, you know. It worked on me ... I was his wife when we made the deal.'

Henri stopped eating again and set the fork down. 'His wife. Reed John-Paul . . .?'

She nodded again. 'It didn't work on Reed. Prolong just didn't work. In fact, it killed him. He lived the rest of his life in five years ... all that energy, all that time, compressed into five years. It pushed him over the top, his shows became legendary, his music was unmatched . . . But it killed him.'

Henri was shaking his head. 'But. . . I've *seen* him. *Live*. I saw the Dancing with Death tour last season.' The image was a flashover in his mind, Henri and countless others shaking to the raw sound, hanging on the singer's every lyric, each song like a revelation. 'He was *there*. I was in the first row, pressed right up against the barricades. He sang "Don't Even Try to Stop Me" to the girl next to me. She tried to get to him. When the security gorillas nabbed her halfway across the stage, she freaked out so bad she went into a seizure. He wasn't dead.'

'You saw ... an effigy.'

'No.'

'The record company sold the contract to Prolong, because Prolong couldn't allow a failure with their drug to get publicity. They announced Reed was resting, then they had the contests, the Reed John-Paul contests. They needed someone who could move like him, sing like him, *be* like him. They needed me to test him ... in more ways than one.' She paused, smiled. 'The last one was Benny Jargon . . . you knew him.'

Henri knew him. Benny'd been the best of the best, better than Henri,

but Henri didn't mind because Benny was *that* good. Then he just disappeared, no one knew how or why, and Henri became the effigy to watch.

'That was Benny,' Henri said. He remembered that last show, he remembered coming away from it with the odd feeling he *knew* Reed John-Paul. He figured it'd been the sheer intensity of the performance. Everyone left that show bonded to each other through Reed John-Paul, as if they'd formed a new religion and were the first true believers, the disciples. But no ... Benny.

'We need you, now,' Anna said quietly.

He looked at her, met her gaze directly. 'I have a choice?'

'That's the first time I've been asked, but yeah, you have a choice. There are other effigies out there, not as good, but a little surgery can change anything physical. The rest comes with the drug.'

'And then in five years I'll be dead?'

'Probably. There is the chance Prolong will work, too. It hasn't yet. The company figures it has something to do with the kind of mind it takes to be Reed John-Paul. It just rejects the drug.'

'If I say yes . . .'

'You will *be* Reed John-Paul. Oh, a part of you will be there, as a spectator, along for the ride, but you will become my husband.' Her voice nearly cracked, her eyes should have been crying. She'd done this too many times, just to get her husband back for a few years at a time, just to lose him again to the very drug that kept her alive forever.

Henri thought about it. He could go back to Haze and Tom Tom, people he barely knew outside the Vatican West, people he called his friends merely because they were those whom he associated with Inside. Outside he normally didn't think about, but he had to now. Outside he slept in a two-room flat that seemed designed for TV worship and little else. His job when he bothered to show up had him unloading uniform brown boxes on to trucks. He didn't know what was in those boxes, didn't want to know. He was locked out of anything resembling higher education because he just couldn't afford it, his parents couldn't afford it, and the government couldn't afford student loans any more. Dancing the effigy dance would get real old some day. And then what?

And then . . . There was the chance he could live forever. Reed John-Paul forever. And if he died in five years . . .he'd still have had five years of glory. Five years of *being* Reed John-Paul.

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Anna left him alone to think. He wondered what Tom Tom and Haze would say about this. What were they doing now?

Probably grinding at the club, creating small myths . . .

Henri thought of his father. What kind of man was he really? He wanted to hear his father's infamous Pave Your Own Highway speech again. It was almost as if the man had actually believed his own propaganda, even though he was a backroom file clerk for some impersonal corporate Goliath.

And his mother, her smile and gentle eyes, her support for Henri's lifestyle. Have fun, do what you want to do, because some day you'll be eighty and it'll be over.

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Stretched out on a cold metal table, naked. Anna stood beside him, smiling. She touched his chest tenderly with her hand.

'Henri,' she whispered, 'this is it.'

He felt the first needle slip into the crook of his arm and enter the vein. Then another one enter the other arm. Henri was suddenly very frightened, tears rolled down the sides of his face. He'd never been so alone.

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He was a spectator.

Hot lights and humping music and an ocean of arms and heads waved in the darkness he could barely see, an undercurrent roar of voices raised to a fever pitch.

A kaleidoscope of moments:

Earphones suctioned to his head as he laid down the vocal tracks for songs called 'Hours to Live', 'Love is the Last Thing I Need', 'I Don't Know Me Anymore'.

Making love with Anna, enclosed by her hot flesh and strong arms and legs, soft music in the background, and Anna whispering 'Reed, Reed, Reed.'

Flashbulbs (for effect) and a synhtape experience of what it's like to be Reed John-Paul in the flesh! Not including sex with Anna, but with many others. Hounded by the media, chased by manic dogs who call themselves fans, attacked by jealous boyfriends . . .

The spectacle of Reed John-Paul doing the first Martian tour, nearly cracking the dome with ultrasonics and -

Collapse, all systems down, humping still in the air with smoke and lights . . . gone.

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Five years.

Gone. Anna stood beside the bed, smiling, no tears.

'It's over.' Like a song. 'You had fun.'

Henri could barely feel his body. The only thing he could feel was old. Ancient.

'I... remember some . . . ' He tried to lift his head, to see his body, to see what Reed John-Paul looked like, what he *really* looked like. Who had all those people reached out to touch?

'Do you remember me?' Anna asked.

'Yes. We made love.'

'Every single night,' she said. Another face came into view, leaning in from the edge of darkness. The face, painted and young. Reed John-Paul.

'Hey, mate,' he said. 'I'm your successor. I'm *you*. Pretty weird, eh?'

'He caught you when you fell off the stage last night. We knew it was over then. It was a stroke of luck that he happened to be one of the top effigies around. He's taking the injections tonight.'

'Great show,' the effigy said. 'Wouldn't'a missed it for the world.' Then his eyes narrowed and he asked in almost a whisper, 'Was it worth it?' In his eyes Henri could see it wouldn't matter if he said no.

Henri closed his eyes, and the lights came back, the chanting by ten thousand voices of his name, the music that drove his heart, pumped his blood, and housed his soul. The song was over, but the melody lingered.

It had been worth it.

'Reed John-Paul forever,' he said.

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