

SPOTLIGHT



WAYNE LEIDENFROST/PNG

Art Bergmann takes a break down by the waterfront in Vancouver. A sonic architect of the city's punk scene, he is back performing, has a new recording out, and is angrier than ever.

MUSIC

Spokesman for the underclass

After lengthy hiatus, furious Art Bergmann writes hard-hitting lyrics about humanity

Art Bergmann

With The Courtney and C.R. Avery

Sept. 6, 9:30 p.m. | Commodore Ballroom

Tickets: \$20 plus charges at Red Cat, Neptoon and Ticketmaster

JASON MOTZ

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Art Bergmann was once the bane of the Canadian music industry. Or perhaps it was the other way around.

Bergmann was a sonic architect in Vancouver's punk scene of the 1980s. From his formative work with The K-Tels, The Young Canadians, Los Popularos and Poisoned, he developed a reputation for writing caustic and vivid portrayals of Vancouver's nocturnal underbelly. Drug addiction, violence, prostitution and AIDS were integral to his world view. These were the people he lived among. He wrote about them without judgment.

He was the Canuck equal to Lou Reed, except Bergmann never had a hit record like *Walk on the Wild Side*. And Bergmann was never going to sate the record industry hunger for the next Bryan Adams or Blue Rodeo.

His career stalled in the late '90s. In poor health and tired of clashing with an indifferent corporate climate in the music biz, Bergmann took to an Alberta farm for a long hiatus. His days as a recording artist appeared to be over.

Somehow, Bergmann is back and in bristling form. An EP called *Songs For The Underclass* came out last month. This weekend, he has gigs in Victoria and Vancouver.

Even he's surprised.

"I don't know how it happened. Just had to be, I guess," Bergmann says. On a mild summer day in Crab Park, Bergmann, 61, is relaxed, if a little tired having spent the previous few days on the road. When he talks about the new songs, he rises above his exhaustion.

"Getting back into (the music industry) now, it's touch and go some days," he says with hard-earned weariness. "Do I really have to do all of this bullshit again? Am I really gonna get in a van and go from town to town?"

The '90s should have been a boon for Bergmann. Instead, he bounced between labels, his albums acclaimed but not commercially successful. In 1995, after *What Fresh Hell Is This?* won a Juno for Best Alternative Rock Album, he was dropped by Sony for poor album sales.

Reflecting on his radio-neglected albums of the '90s, (although *Much Music*, he says, "were pretty helpful there for a while"), Bergmann could be rueful. Instead, he is puzzled. "(Those albums) should have been played," he says, "No reason not to play them. You win a Juno and then get dumped off your label ... it doesn't make sense."

Songs For The Underclass was inspired by Bergmann's voracious reading.

"I was reading some great novels and history, Marxist history, Howard Zinn's *A People's History*, and trying to figure out why we're at where we are at today," he says. "For a while I was an al-Jazeera junkie, cause where else are you gonna get your news, right? Nobody else has got that news. But it just became overwhelming once I

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ART BERGMANN
RECORDING ARTIST

got into the matrix and figured out that people forget that shit an hour later. So what can you do, right? Well, I can write a song.

"So I started writing songs again."

Bergmann is not back on some nostalgia trip. The songs are rooted in the present, scarred by the past, and worried about the future.

The end game? "Let's go beyond the pissy little music industry and just do a political thing," he says.

"I'm gonna go out, free my donkey army, and attack Ottawa," he says. "Make it political. Make it what it is instead of, 'you should buy this because it's cute and hummable.' You should buy it 'cause you can roar it out as you're attacking the banks."

Lest anyone think age could have mellowed the man who wrote *The Junkie Don't Care*, one listen to *Drones of Democracy* will set you straight: Bergmann is furious. His is not the anger of an old man rallying against incomprehensible change, nor is he back to settle old scores. And he's angry that more artists aren't angrier.

Asked if he thinks of himself as the last protest singer in town, he demurs. "No I'm sure there is more, but you'll have to find them."

"Even at the (Calgary) Folk Fest,

there weren't that many people singing about huge f---ing pressing issues, that everyone should be paying attention to."

Bergmann's new EP covers the bases that other songwriters more conscious of their profit-potential would not consider: terrorism, corruption and consumerism. Long-time creative partner Chris Wardman backs him up.

"There's a lot to be angry about, but so few pick it up, especially in punk. ... Art is being political in a market where no one else is."

"From the heights of hypocrisy, come the drones of democracy." These first words on the EP lay out Bergmann's politically conscious strategy. The song lifts musically from Neil Young but the unflinching depiction of the victims of terrorism is pure Bergmann.

"Drones of Democracy, without being polemical, that took me a year to hone it and cut it. I just nailed it, nailed the feeling of a father or mother who has to pick their kid up with a plastic bag," he said. Bergmann is a reminder that rock 'n' roll is not dead, but it has been hijacked by an industry that would rather push Taylor Swift or Pharrell.

"It took awhile to get (*Drones Of Democracy*) sounding good. It

lacked some aggression at first, and we had to work on it for a bit. I thought it was kinda lame at first but Wardman helped me out in that regard. I sent it to him and he played around with it, got it sounding up to snuff."

Bergmann writes with a sensitivity that is belied by the rough edges of his music. The spark of humanity that graced the work of so-called gutter poets like Charles Bukowski, Hubert Selby, and Reed has long been part of Bergmann's DNA. As a songwriter, he acts as an observer and a tour guide through the most hellish parts of the human condition.

"I had to keep playing (the songs), cause they were just the same chord sequences. I kept playing them until I found a new idea or melody. And the lyrics, I had to really work on them because they are all deeply politically conscious, right? It was like going through a thousand years of history in some of them. To get all these ideas in a song was very difficult ... trying to make it new, make something new, a new point or a new way of looking at stuff that's been around forever."

Bergmann's daily news feed provides more palpable, harrowing song fodder than Vancouver's east end ever could. "I think we're heading toward the darkest days humanity has ever seen."

After such a lengthy absence, Bergmann is reinvigorated and prepared to make up for lost time. He says there is no shortage of songs in reserve.

"My head's filled with, I wouldn't say wisdom, but information ... and it's all got to come out."