

# FLESH TONES

## B i g . H e a r t e d H a r d R o c k e r s C o o k u p i n g LABORATORY OF SOUND

I've always been more impressed with things that move me to tears or laughter rather than wowed me with style or speed," reveals Fleshtones bass player Ken Fox. "Big heart first" has been an unofficial motto of the band since their raucous birth into rock and roll twenty years ago in the heyday of downtown New York music. And, while the band has made enough albums — around ten, though the bandmembers dispute the tally, what with bootlegs, European issues and reissues and all — to keep their fans well fed on their rattletrap, garage-bred brand of musical fun, it is the live Fleshtones that makes everybody the happiest.

With the release of their latest album *Laboratory of Sound*, the group has achieved something even they were dubious could be realized on disc and they credit producer Steve Albini (Nirvana, Urge Overkill, Faith) with the following feat: keeping the sound pure.

The payoff has been immediate. In the first week following its release, *Laboratory of Sound* has climbed higher on the college charts than their last effort *Beautiful Light* ever reached and at press time it was still climbing. As they sit squeezed on a couch, the four Fleshtones, Zarembo, Fox, Keith Streng lead guitarist and co-founder of the band with Zarembo and drummer Bill Mihlitz speak in neatly dovetailed interruptions. When I transcribe the tape later, I note, that they complete each others sentences and continue each other's thoughts.

The transcript reads like an interview with a many-headed beast felled by quadra-medal charisma. Those guys feed off each other, it's chemistry that is the source of The Fleshtones' longevity. "We've always been a hard rocking band, always, always, always," says Peter Zarembo, the band's lead singer, "but our albums haven't always reflected our live attack."

According to Fox, "What we have going in the studio and what we create on stage are two different beasts. One is, hopefully, completely spontaneous and in the other you have a little more time to think about what you are doing, but not in this case." Nineteen tracks were laid down for *Laboratory of Sound*, at Albini's studio in Chicago in a mere twelve days and, if Albini had not been on the phone so

much," ribs Streng good-naturedly, "we could have sat down and wrote another ten."

"Or," adds Mihlitz, "if you guys had spent less time with Steve in his kitchen cooking, we could have recorded fly." But what Albini really brought to the sessions was the ability to get down on tape exactly what comes out of the group. "He's a scientist and he goes way beyond, technically, what most engineers know. He was probably a science student who started listening to The Stooges at an early age," says Streng. "Yeah," continues Zarembo, "he could probably build a recording studio out of the stuff you have lying around the house."

"He told me, Fox chimes in, "that, when he was a kid and everyone was playing with Legos, he was building bombs out of old car batteries." *Laboratory of Sound* may be a combustible byproduct of Albini's technophilia and the Fleshtones chemistry, but it's anything but a bomb. From its lead track and single, "Let's Go" to the sort-of-purring soft-sound bossanova "Sands of Our Lives" to the ballady "The Sweetest Thing," *Laboratory* showcases The Fleshtones at their half-serious best.

Wearing their musical affections on their sleeves, the shack and jive through thirteen three-minute tunes with a rough-edged energy that transcends the limits of vinyl tape and whatever CDs are made of. "What's different," according to Zarembo, "is that, in the past the band has wanted to make records that sound like all the records in our collections, but Steve forced us to sound like ourselves." Pressed to define this sound, they are reluctant and almost wince.

They cite their sources in the British invasion and nod emphatically when I suggest their nearest relative they might be The Kinks. Mihlitz posits that their other hooked muse be disco (when they all wince) but then Fox contributes what may be the defining comment apropos The Fleshtones and their new album. "I don't really think in terms of what we sound like or who we sound like. To me, The Fleshtones is whatever happens when the four of us get in a room together and play."



photo Bob Berg