

40 YEARS OF FLESH-TONE,
AN INTERVIEW WITH
PETER ZAREMBA

School of Rock

By KK Kozik
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We are happy to introduce you to Main Street's newest writer, KK Kozik. KK has extensive experience in the world of music and will be bringing us some fantastic music-related profiles starting with this one.

When REM's Peter Buck blurbs a book about your band, writing, "The amazing thing about The Flesh-tones is that every night for the past [40] years they have consistently been the best live band on earth," you might feel entitled to savor your place in history, no? In conversation with The Flesh-tones' front man, Lakeville's Peter Zarembo, what emerges however is more a tale of the vicissitudes of underground garage rock – peaks and valleys and lessons learned the hard way. With the September release of their 40th-anniversary album, *The Band Drinks for Free* (Yeproc Records), The Flesh-tones are still not a household name. This though is the paradox of a career in underground rock: success in the field is ironically epitomized by being the least-known best band in the world!

Who is Peter Zarembo?

Zarembo's introduction to rock and roll was less than glamorous. His first job as a teen in the late 60s was sweeping up after Schaefer Music



Photo: York Wilson

Festival shows in Central Park. Zarembo soon caught the eye of the festival's storied concert promoter Ron Delsener and was promoted to office gofer, delivering paychecks after performances. He recalls Peter Grant, manager of Led Zeppelin, "opening an envelope, smiling very broadly and patting me on the shoulder when he saw the amount."

But, while Zarembo and some of his friends in Maspeth, Queens had become obsessed with music, at no point did Zarembo set his sights on the "limos and piles of cocaine" of rock stardom. He merely wanted to start a band, but right out of the gate was thwarted: he couldn't find anyone to teach him what he wanted to play on guitar.

"I literally said 'teach me to play The Kinks' *You Really Got Me*.' And teachers would say, 'no you can't do that, you have to learn these scales first,' and that is the most boring thing ... Most rock and roll guitarists don't know them, they just know how to play stuff. The easiest way to discourage someone and shut them down was the

attitude that was prevalent then, 'Learn these scales!' So I never got anywhere with the guitar at all," explained Zarembo and continued: "I bought one, it was 1970, but I never learned to play it. I did learn how to play a harmonica because I could teach myself. *Love me Do* was the first thing I taught myself. From there I would hang out with friends and listen to the radio. That really was the only way to learn. There was no one to teach you this stuff. You just played the records and tried to play along – self taught."

"Years later, my friend Brian Spathe came over to my apartment, and he said 'Peter, I want to show you something amazing! I know that ever since you were a little kid you wanted to play guitar and you were discouraged because you couldn't find anyone to show you what you wanted to know. This is what you want to know. It's called bar chords. All rock and roll songs are composed of them and your hands only have to know two positions.' And he put my hands in the two positions and before the night was over

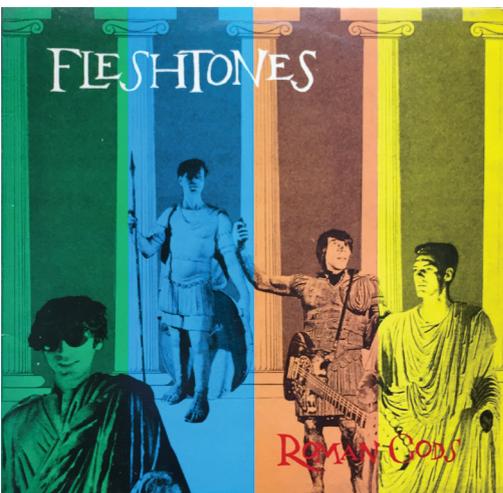
I could play any song I had wanted to play my whole life. It took 20 minutes," said Zarembo.

A compulsion to create music

But Zarembo, fully armed, still faced a problem. The British Invasion music that held his passion had been eclipsed on the radio by 70s rock, and he couldn't stand any of what he was hearing. Zarembo contrasts his predicament to the experience of his 19-year-old son.

"Sergei is an excellent guitarist. But he does not share the same dream about being in a band like I had. A lot of that could be that when I was his age basically nobody was playing the music that I wanted to hear – at all. Sergei can listen to all sorts of music and find songs he really enjoys so he probably doesn't have the compulsion that he needs to create this music himself. It is a Promethean endeavor – is that the right classical reference? Bringing things out of the void? That was

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Above: The cover of "Roman Gods."

really the impulse when we formed a band.”

The start of The Fleshtones

The early Fleshtones consisted of a mercurial lineup of players – they came and went. Like many garage bands, the group’s core were buddies who had friendship but no formal training. Their stock in trade was raw energy, and lack of instrumental virtuosity was a badge of honor. Soon, however, high school was replaced by college. Come 1976, Zaremba was a painting major at Manhattan’s School of Visual Arts.

While Zaremba jokes that what he really got out of art school was the name of the band – after that funny colored crayon – the truth was at that time there was a terrific amount of crossover between rock and roll and art, and Manhattan below 23rd street was the crucible. Andy Warhol’s Factory occupied several locations in and around Union Square. Max’s Kansas City was the hangout of choice for the Warhol entourage, which in addition to artists included Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground. Other habitués ranged from Iggy Pop to painters Brice Marden and Dorothea Rockburne. Debby Harry waitressed there until her own big break with Blondie.

More importantly, though, it was CBGBs, Hilly Kristal’s club on the Bowery, where the real New York underground sound was coalescing. There, acts like Television, Talking Heads (whose David Byrne had recently arrived from the Rhode Island School of Design), and Patti Smith (who at the time was still involved with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe) were starting to make their mark. The music, while artsy, was passionate, and The Fleshtones watched and listened, and started getting opening gigs themselves. Soon they were signed to Marty Thau’s Red Star Records. So began the years of recording and touring.

“Making it”

There were tours where REM or The Gogots opened for The



Fleshtones and tours where The Fleshtones opened for James Brown, Chuck Berry, and The Police. Their first full-length album *Roman Gods* (1982) is widely considered a classic. Their 1984 single *American Beat*, was chosen as the theme song for Bachelor Party, the Tom Hanks film that preceded his big hit *Splash*.

By 1990 The Fleshtones had assumed their final form. Peter Zaremba on guitars and vocals, Keith Streng on guitar, Ken Fox on bass, and Bill Millhizer on drums. The music itself has stayed remarkably consistent. A good Fleshtones song “makes you tap your toe.” It is music Zaremba describes as “basic and so direct I don’t have to think about it, that affects me by its very nature.”

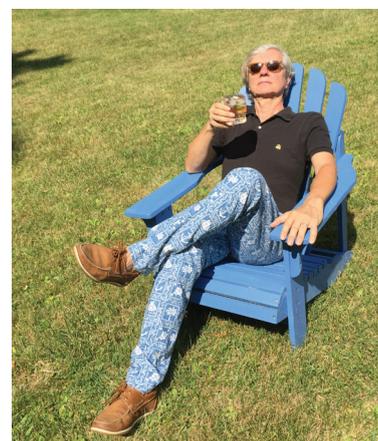
Other opportunities emerged as well. The Fleshtones’ then-label IRS produced an early MTV show entitled *The Cutting Edge*. When the original host, an artist, decamped to Fiji to work on a conceptual art piece, Zaremba was named as MC, and over the three-year life of the show introduced the American public to acts as varied as They Might Be Giants, KD Lang, Dwight Yoakum, and The Red Hot Chili Peppers. Roy Orbison’s appearance on the show was his last on television. He died soon thereafter.

Yet, to hear Zaremba describe it, there were lean years, too. “Disappointment was somewhat of a companion, to tell you the truth.

There were long periods when we had no record label. Our disappointment very often is that we feel that a lot of what we achieved and our historical influence has not been recognized and maybe never will be. When Geoffroy Barbier, maker of the documentary about The Fleshtones, *Pardon us for Living but the Cemetery is Full*, asked me, “What would you have done differently if you had made the movie?” I turned to him and said, “I would have made The Fleshtones more successful.”

As our conversation draws to a close, I ask Zaremba one last question: “There have been books written about The Fleshtones, a documentary done about you, and recently some of your friends in Paris put together a 40th-anniversary tribute video wherein bands from around the world – REM, Hoodoo Gurus, Dream Syndicate, Died Pretty from Australia – all spoke about how you all gave them the inspiration to start bands. You also have a wife, a son studying finance, a mortgage, and a weekend house. Can you connect the dots?”

“Sure,” he replies. “I love music. That’s why I have been in this band. I learned very early on that I didn’t want to be a rock star even though I wanted to make music and I wanted to entertain people and engage them and make them happy. That being said, I’m also a human being. As a human being I love my



Above top: The Fleshtones. Picture by York Wilson. Above: Even rock stars have to relax.

family, I’m proud of my son ... and I love Lakeville. It is very nice after all these years we have a place in Lakeville.”

“Lots of people in music died young ... killed themselves. I’m pretty quirky but I am also a regular guy. I have achieved the American dream and we continue. I like who I play with. I looked forward to the fact that we had a record coming out in September and we are getting better at it. It’s taken us a long time to make records sound the way we want them to sound. The best way to learn is by listening. Basically if you are interested in music, your ears are your educator, your teacher. They always have been ours – we haven’t stopped learning. To paraphrase Cervantes, ‘the road is better than the inn.’” ●