

# the sound of god yawning

**MY LITTLE PINK EARS** were pressed right up against mom's vacuum cleaner as it sat *hummmmmmming* on the carpet. I was three or four years old, and I don't think I'd ever heard such a beautiful sound before. The closer I got to the machine's whirring motor, the more at peace I felt. I nestled inside a warm, invisible marsupial pouch of white noise, a sonic electric blanket which covered and protected me. Since then I've always found comfort in the monochrome drone of machines: Electric drills, fans, air conditioners, and blenders can all put me in touch with the universe's vibratory OM, the sound of God yawning.

**MY SWEATY TEENAGED EARS** were pressed right up against mom's transistor radio in the kitchen, perplexed by the *hummmmmmming* sound that softly sprayed from the tiny speaker. It was 3AM on New Year's Day—only three hours into the 1980s—and the college-radio DJ had announced that this was the song his Philly-punk listeners had chosen to usher in the new decade. You call this a song? It sounds like a vacuum cleaner with some nervous, jail-punky guy saying the word "Frankie" over and over again.

And then came the screams.

*Frankie picked up the gun...pointed it at the six-month old kid in the crib...*

*AAAGGGHHH!*

*Frankie looked at his wife...shot her....*

*AAAGGGGGGGHHHHHHH!!!!*

*Frankie put the gun to his head...*

*AAAAAAGGGGGHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!*

*Frankie's lyn' in hell...*

*AAAGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!*

It probably didn't help that I was high on acid.

These were the most terrifying screams I'd ever heard, a sinister counterpoint to the drone's seductive lure. I didn't catch the name of the song or the artist, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

About six months later...just a drop in eter-



**ALAN VEGA: the scariest eyes (and vocals) ever.**

## why suicide will live forever

nity's bucket...a friend picked up a bargain-bin LP by a band called Suicide. The album cover featured the word "suicide" imposed over deep, violent, bloody laceration marks...wrist slashes, maybe? When I asked him what the record sounded like, he just laughed and said, "It's PSYCHOTIC. You'll like it."

Although barely a half-hour long, Suicide's debut album from 1977 bears something of the eternal. Although a masterpiece of microdot minimalism,

it is also unbearably vast—just like the eternal hum that extends from inside my head out to the furthest quasars. There are only two members listed on the album—Alan Vega ("Vocal") and Martin Rev ("Instrument"). There are only seven tracks—not "songs"—each with the same primitive hissing, droning, Wurlitzer-organ-sounding beatbox pumping along like a psycho killer's heartbeat. There are no bridges or tempo changes. Each track takes a simple keyboard riff—the most complicated track has a riff of only FIVE NOTES, while most are only two or three notes—and pounds away at it with

by **jim goad**

meat-grinder precision. The riffs go around and around and around with the heartless two-tone persistence of a spiraling hypno-wheel. There are very few lyrics, and they are chanted rather than sung. Even the song titles ("Che," "Girl," etc.) are minimal.

And it's the greatest album ever made. At least I've listened to it more than any other album. When my father was dying of cancer, I used to force myself to listen to it just to face the fear head-on. It's the only music I've ever heard which is so dark and malignant that it might actually be able to give you cancer.

In the album's center, clocking in at ten and a half carcinogenic minutes, is the unsettling track I heard on New Year's Day—"Frankie Teardrop." It still scares me. It's the only song I won't play loud in my apartment because the screams are so real, I'm afraid someone will call the cops. It's my "Freebird," "Stairway to Heaven," and "The End" all wrapped up in one.

Suicide's immediate forefathers were noise-art weirdbones such as John Cage and LaMonte "White Man with a Black Name" Young, the latter of whom formed a "theater of eternal music" called the Dream Syndicate in the early 1960s. LaMonte Young once proposed a project where rotating musicians would play the same note forever. A violinist named John Cale (different guy from John Cage) studied with Young and later joined The Velvet Underground, who did their own noodling with drone potential on songs such as the seventeen-minute "Sister Ray." But that band featured Lou Reed, who's a douche.

If you listen closely enough, you'll realize how much music depends on The Big Drone...on beats endlessly repeated or on notes held for what seems an unjustly long time. It's there in Gregorian chants and Scottish bagpipe music and Indian ragas. It pulses through disco and house music and trance. Donna Summer's "I Feel Love," a song almost as mighty as the best of Suicide, droned its way to #1 in 1977 while "Frankie Teardrop" languished in the shadows.

**ALAN VEGA, THE MAN WITH THE SCARIEST EYES** and voice ever, the man who looks like Poncherello from TV show *CHiPS* if Ponch were an effeminate psychotic speed freak, claims to have coined the musical term "punk" back in 1971 on a flyer for a Suicide show advertising "a punk music mass." Vega and Martin Rev were near-homeless and hungry when they met each other and named their group after a comic book called Satan Suicide. I've heard tales of Suicide playing a twin bill with the New York Dolls at the Mercer Arts Center—both groups performing simultaneously in separate rooms. After a minute or two of ogling crazy Vega swinging a chain around, smashing himself in the face with his mic, and screaming bloody murder, everyone had left the Suicide room to go watch the much-safer Dolls.



**Cover of debut album, 1977.**

ing, their live performances were often greeted with hostility and violence. A 1978 performance in Belgium, captured on the live

track "23 Minutes Over Brussels," erupted in a riot where audience members stole Alan Vega's microphone.

Lost even within a world of misfits, Suicide were eventually adopted by spindly, supermodel-marrying Ric Ocasek of The Cars. A huge fan of the group, Ocasek wound up overproducing Suicide's second album in 1980. He also produced their biggest-selling song, "Dream Baby Dream," before Alan Vega split off for a mostly unsuccessful Scary Elvis solo career. Although well past middle age, Suicide recently reformed and cut a newer, softer, dance-floor-friendly album which I could only bear for about twenty seconds before getting too depressed and playing "Frankie Teardrop" again. Alan Vega is now married and has a kid, but unlike Frankie, it's reasonably certain he won't kill it.

**WE HAVE GARBAGE: Martin Rev (left), Alan Vega (right).**



Mute Records recently re-released the highly disposable second Suicide album (like the first, it's called "Suicide") in a two-CD package with "The First Rehearsal Tapes," featuring fourteen spooky tracks from 1975. You can use the second album as a cocktail coaster, but I insist you buy the package on the strength of *The First Rehearsal Tapes*. Echoey and muddled, ancient and futuristic, they are even more disquieting than the first Suicide album. Rev plays circus music from hell over rattlesnake-tail beats while Vega sounds gacked out of his mind on meth, hissing and threatening, trapped inside a tin can and enduring torments from which I always feel compelled to rescue him.

Most of punk rock, for all its pretense about being "revolutionary," was just an amped-up juvenile-delinquent 50s nostalgia act, hence the leather jackets, "rebel" pose, and two-minute songs. We're in the 21st century now, and guitars are as passé as violins. Today's young'uns don't listen to guitar music, they listen to hip-hop, which usually consists of one vocalist and one guy manning the machines... just like Suicide.

Like the eternal droning hum of the big black universe which kills us all, their sound both comforts and frightens me. And I couldn't stop listening even if I tried.