

Punk bassist Steve Soto dead at 54

Josh Varlin
10 July 2018

Steve Soto, bassist for Agent Orange and Adolescents, passed away June 27. According to his musical collaborators and the Orange County, California coroner's office, he died in his sleep of natural causes at the age of 54.

During his four-decade musical career, Soto was the bassist and sometime vocalist for several punk bands, including Agent Orange, Adolescents, Legal Weapon, Joyride, Manic Hispanic, 22 Jacks and Punk Rock Karaoke. He also fronted his own band, Steve Soto and the Twisted Hearts.

Soto was born August 23, 1963, and grew up in Southern California. He grew up listening to the Beatles and Johnny Cash, whose famed live album *At San Quentin* (1969) he termed "the first punk rock record that I ever listened to." In the late 1970s he began listening to punk bands like the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, the Clash and the Damned, who were responding to the more ornate music of the bands that preceded them by stripping their music down and speeding it up.

This musical stripping down was also a social reflex, a reaction to the decline of industry and the increasingly straitened circumstances for wide layers of the working class population. Under these conditions, to a certain stratum of musicians and music listeners, the overblown, orchestral sounds of the mid-1970s now seemed inappropriate and even offensive.

When Soto, whose father's family emigrated from Mexico, was in high school, he co-founded Agent Orange, which combined surf rock and punk with an especially nihilistic bent. Soto left the band before they released their first album, but the version of "Bloodstains" on which he played bass is included in the 30th anniversary edition of *Living in Darkness* (originally 1981).

"Bloodstains" exemplifies many of the qualities of Soto's bands and punk rock more generally: lyrics

expressing alienation (often in an unhealthy way), fast-paced music, menacing bass and distorted guitar. On it, Mike Palm, who wrote the song when he was 15, sings, "Well, I know they know the way I think / I know they always will / But someday I'm gonna change my mind / Sometimes I'd rather kill." Despair and nihilism, genuine and exaggerated, were prominent in the music of the Southern California hardcore scene of the early 1980s, which included bands like Black Flag, the Circle Jerks, Fear and the Germs.

Soto is best known for his work with Adolescents, a seminal hardcore punk band of which he was the only constant member. In between numerous break-ups and reunions, Adolescents released eight records, with their ninth record, *Cropduster*, just released July 7. They had just finished a tour of the eastern US and were preparing for a European tour at the time of Soto's death.

After some personnel changes, Adolescents coalesced into a lineup consisting of Soto on bass, Tony Cadena as lead vocalist, Casey Royer on drums and brothers Rikk and Frank Agnew on guitar. Their debut record, the eponymous *Adolescents* (1981), was a formative album in the emerging hardcore punk subgenre. Soto was only 16 at the time.

Adolescents is a blistering album, with 13 songs clocking in under half an hour. Like hardcore as a whole, the album expresses the dissatisfaction and restlessness of a layer of working-class and middle-class youth, which only deepened after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

However, this generally expressed itself in confused and antisocial ways. Hardcore Punk fans (as distinct from the earlier punks of 1975-80 in Los Angeles) often fought each other, as well as hippies and gays. (They in turn were frequently brutalized by the Los Angeles and other local police forces.) Adolescents protested against this, stopping their shows if fights got

beyond the consensual activities of the mosh pit and criticizing senseless violence in their lyrics: “It’s like *Clockwork Orange*, a bit of twenty on one / Breaking heads, well that don’t sound like much fun” (“Rip It Up”).

Another reflection of this alienation was self-destructive behavior, including the widespread use of drugs and alcohol. (Soto struggled with alcoholism for years.) One of Adolescents’ best known and most musically ambitious songs, “Kids of the Black Hole,” deals with this.

At its best, *Adolescents* expressed youthful discontent in a musically innovative way. Soto’s co-written lyrics on tracks such as “Who Is Who” and “Democracy,” as well as his relentless bass playing, were part of this, along with the interplay of the Agnew brothers’ guitar playing.

Adolescents was one of the first Southern California hardcore albums sold widely out of the region, selling over 10,000 copies. However, the band broke up shortly after the record’s release, before they even toured outside of California.

While they reformed and broke up again multiple times over the years, Adolescents’ later material doesn’t reach the heights of their self-titled debut, although some songs dealt more directly with political matters, especially opposition to war, including “Babylon by Bomb,” “Brats in Battalions” and “Wars Aren’t Won, Wars Are Fought.”

Also noteworthy is the song “A Dish Best Served Cold,” from their 2014 album *La Vendetta*. Soto explained in an interview that the song was about the police murder of Kelly Thomas, a young homeless man with schizophrenia who was beaten to death by Fullerton, California police in 2011. “We were coming out to peaceful protests in front of the police department,” Soto said. After the police officers who killed Thomas were acquitted, band members continued their involvement with the issue, including working with Thomas’ father on changing laws protecting police from legal accountability.

Soto’s other projects were more lighthearted. He was active in Manic Hispanic, a supergroup of Hispanic punks who cover punk songs while changing the lyrics to discuss Chicano life, including dealing with immigration authorities. Soto also toured with Punk Rock Karaoke, which features audience members as

lead vocalists.

Politically, to his credit, Soto was not as enamored of the Obama administration as many other punk artists were, telling one interviewer that Barack Obama was “bought and owned by the corporations just like everybody else. It’s pathetic, sad and disheartening to say the least.” This likely attributed to Adolescents putting out anti-war songs during the Obama years, something relatively rare in the punk genre.

In the weeks before Soto’s death, Adolescents’ Twitter account retweeted articles on the separation of immigrant children from their parents and posted statements opposed to war, police violence, the bombing of Syria and the Israeli oppression of Palestinians.

Soto’s impact on music is indicated by the reaction to his death, with the Offspring, Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day, the Vandals, Suicidal Tendencies and Frank Turner lamenting his passing in social media statements.



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