

Route 58 to 80 and Across the Bridge:

The Musical Journey of Tony Maimone

by Mark Kirby

What is obscured, and perhaps threatened, by the influx of new people in our neighborhood is the close-knit Williamsburg scene. Like small town America, you intersect people every day. You might not *know* them, but you know them.

Tony Maimone is one of these people. You see him on the street, walking or riding his bike, almost ever day. But more than intersecting streets, he intersects the lives of many of those in Williamsburg's music scene. Our neighborhood is a hot bed of bands. The lofts and basements of the apartment buildings make for nice practice spaces. The storefronts, reminders of Williamsburg's industrial heyday, make for great rehearsal and recording studios. These studios help make the local music scene. They offer an alternative, in terms of space, price, and vibe, to studios in Manhattan. Tony's Studio G is of these. While it's moderately priced, with topnotch equipment, and right next to the subway stop, what sets it apart is Tony's vast experience, musical ear, and ready, Midwestern smile.

He is no stranger to being on the forefront of a burgeoning music scene. As a longtime member of the avant-punk, wonder group, Pere Ubu, he is a veteran of the heady days of the 70s Ohio underground music explosion, which spawned such bands as Devo, and Rocket from the Tombs, among others. Tony is a living participant and witness to one of the great moments of American independent rock. Pere Ubu was one of those bands that inspires not just imitation and mindless fan-boy worship, but the pursuit of the weird, the original, and the unique. There was a time, long ago now, when this was what rock was about.

Right here in Williamsburg we have the beginnings of a similar scene. With a concentration of creative musicians, and spaces to nurture and expose these players, there exists a vital music movement. And Tony Maimone is smack dab in the middle of things.

When I was first introduced to Tony, almost two years ago, it sent me time tripping through my musical past. Like a veritable six degrees of separation coming back around. Even before we actually met, we had a twenty-year association. While attending Oberlin College, some friends and I saw the band Devo, playing on a flatbed truck in the parking lot of the Akron shopping mall. This was part of the Saturday afternoon music series there.

"This band is from Akron?"

My friend said, "Akron, maybe Cleveland, I'm not sure."

"They have bands, weird bands, in Cleveland?"

"There's a whole scene in Cleveland."

So we went to his dorm room, and he played these records by Pere Ubu, Devo, and the CLE Magazine compilation record. It was mind blowing, life changing. A year later, I was visiting Bard College and squatting in an empty dorm room. From across the hall came the smell of

ganja, hash oil, and the sound of Pere Ubu, but not something I recognized. I stuck my head in. "Is this Pere Ubu?"

"Yeah, it's from the newest record, 'Dub Housing.' I was about to smoke some Jamaican hash oil, care to join me? My name's Doug." I did. For the rest of the day, we listened to that, and other Ubu records, "The Modern Dance," and "Data Panic in the Year Zero," in addition to all kinds of bizarre and powerful music. This turned into a 16-year musical association with Doug, including our band Spongehead which rehearsed here in Williamsburg, where Doug and Dave (the other band member) have lived since 1987. I moved over here because of them. This was a great band, but didn't make tons of money (the price you pay for artistic integrity and bad luck).

Tony looked at me with embarrassment and humble appreciation when I said, "Man, I worshiped you! For years! Me and my friends did bongos and studied your music! Pere Ubu! You guys were gods, man! You're the reason I've never made any money playing music!"

How and when did you start playing music?

It was when I lived in Florida. I'm from Cleveland, originally, but there was nothing happening in Cleveland in the late sixties, early seventies. So right out of high school, we went to Florida; me and a buddy of mine knew some people down there, so we went there on a lark. I had a guitar, \$300, a bottle of whiskey, and a suitcase of clothes. I started working on this construction project. I always had a guitar around, but the guitar never spoke to me. I'd mess around with it, but never played in any bands. The neighborhood I grew up in didn't have any players, so I was always secluded, as far as music was concerned. The musical spark never really hit, but when I was in Florida, someone left a bass at my house. I plugged it into the stereo and started to play along with blues records. And rock stuff, like early Stones.

In high school you never played at all?

No. I listened a lot. I saw the Beatles when they came to Cleveland in 1966, and I wanted to be a part of [the music scene], but it seemed like an unattainable dream. A pipe dream. But when I started playing bass, things seemed to open up for me. I said, "I can do *this*." I moved back to Cleveland a few years later, and I moved into this building that had all these musicians playing in it. One of the people was Peter Laughner, who started Rocket from the Tombs [a seminal Cleveland band] and Pere Ubu. Scott Krause, the drummer of Pere Ubu, lived downstairs, the other guitar player [Tom Hermann] lived in the front building, the synthesizer player [Allen Ravenstine] was the landlord, and there were all these other amazing musicians and artists, too. The building was called the Plaza, on Prospect Avenue.

That was right down the street from the Agora Ballroom?

[The Agora Ballroom was a legendary rock club in the Midwest. It was where all the major bands, both over and underground, came to play.]

Yeah. We used to go to the Agora and see people like Bob Marley, Lou Reed, Brian Auger, Rod Stewart, Bruce Springstein, Brian Ferry . . . There was this vast array of music happening, and we were right there in the middle of it.

What happened was Peter would hear me playing and he would bring over a six pack and some records and his guitar and we'd start playing. Then, when he left Pere Ubu, he started a band called Friction, with Anton Fier and myself. We were doing a show once and the guys from Pere Ubu were there. They asked me if I wanted to jam with them, and I said yeah.

The guys from Pere Ubu meaning David Thomas, Allen Ravenstine . . .

David and Thom Hermann were the guys that were at the show. Peter was coming up here [NYC] a lot, playing with Tom Verlaine [of Television] and Richard Hell and writing articles for CREAM Magazine, so he wasn't always around and the guys from Pere Ubu were. So I found myself playing with them. Six months later we cut two singles and made an album. A year and half later, we were over in Europe, playing in front of all these people.

So your earliest musical influences were the bands that were coming through town and the people you were playing with?

Well, one record that I listened to a lot was "On the Corner," that Miles Davis record. Scott Krause played that record and I really dug it. I saw Miles when he came to Cleveland a few times. There were also a lot of great blues players in Cleveland.

What year was this, roughly?

1973, '74.

Friction was happening around this time, too?

Yeah, the early seventies. Shit was really happenin'. There was a guy downstairs from me, who played piano, and he knew Bob Dylan; he was a friend of his, and knew all these Bob Dylan tunes. He was a nuclear physicist, who taught at Cleveland State. He was showing me chords on the piano. I was playing piano, playing bass, strumming on the guitar, and bartending a few nights a week, just to make ends meet. The rest of the time I was playing music, kind of catching up.

But I always listened to music, even when I was delivering papers when I was ten years old. I had a transistor radio and my ear was always glued to it.

It's funny thinking of a ten-year-old in Ohio, with a little radio, becoming this dude behind the wheels of steel at Union Pool Bar, playing phat, hip hop jams, both old and new school. His music, every Wednesday night, makes the scene at Union Pool, giving an otherwise, clean-cut, drinking establishment an edge. It's great to hear a play list that includes old school

heads, like Eric B and Rakim, Special K, Black Sheep, Chubb Rock's classic "Lost in the Storm," as well as new school rappers like Redman, Dr. Dre, L'il Troy, Jay-Z, Mystikal, Mos Def, and Black Star. Then, showing his age and deeper knowledge, he mixed in classics by James Brown, George Clinton, and P-Funk. DJ-ing is another of Tony's creative outlets, and, no doubt, a lot of fun. It's also a way that many of his friends, and creative partners, can get together and kick it.

What kind of music was being played in your home growing up?

My dad and my mom, especially dad, were into classical music, show tunes, no rock and roll at all. He always liked Bach, Chopin, Mozart, Montovani. I was the one that brought the records into the house. I remember my dad freakin' out one time. He had a Magnavox, with two twelve-inch speakers, and I used to crank that baby.

Getting back to Friction, what kind of music was that? Was it straight punk?

It was, but it was well played. We played some Richard Thompson tunes [like] a cover of "Calgary Cross." We did a cover of "Little Johnny Jewel," and "Elevation," that Television tune. We did a cover of Richard Hell's "Blank Generation," and some of Peter's tunes. It was punky, but it was well played.

It seems to me, thinking back to that time, that under the flag of punk, you could do straight punk rock, you could do experimental stuff, and you could do it in the same band. It seemed like anything went.

If you look at a record like "Dub Housing," the second Pere Ubu record, it has rock, but there's a dub influence - me and Scott listened to a lot of that. There's definitely a Roxy music vibe with the guitar player. He was into Phil Manzanera [Roxy's guitar player, a precursor to The Edge's early U2 style]. I agree with you, punk was a license just to ill.

What kind of venues were you playing at around this time?

We were touring around then, '77, '78. Cleveland had a lot of places. We played at the Pirate's Cove every Thursday night for a year. That's how we built up our following. Cliff Bernstein who worked at Phonogram Records (Store), came down and signed us and made a label with us, and the Suicide Commandos, called Blank Records. From there, we (went to) Rough Trade (a UK label).

What about venues in NYC?

We played at CBGB's, of course, and Max's Kansas City.

The only time I've seen Tony play since Ubu has been with the band Tinker. They're an Irish Folk/Gypsy-Trance jam band, whose main players have gone back to Ireland. Having heard a few "songs" by UV Ray during visits to the studio, I couldn't wait to see them. Live jungle, with real players, in real time? How can a human drummer play so machine-like and fast? It was a blizzard out that night, making it a real trek to the club, like Nanook of the North. Luckily, they were playing at the Cooler, a club in Manhattan's meat packing district, now another of the city's trendy neighborhoods, with underground sex clubs and transvestite hookers replaced by high end restaurants and high rents. Like Max's and the old CBGB's, the Cooler is a place that lets cutting-edge musicians and bands spread their wings. They also have a good sound system and pay the bands, which leads to more confident and inspired performances. I got there during the first "song." I say song in quotes because their pieces seem improvised and are beat oriented, as opposed to melody oriented.

It was jungle, live and direct. Two basses, keyboard/sampler, and a wicked drummer. The band provided a sonic assault, the likes of which hard core punk rockers can only dream of. The pieces were built around dueling, low-as-you-can-go basses, playing together and against each other, in a call and response melding. They pushed lots of air over and around the drummer, who did live what on most records is done by computers or drum machines. He played the relentless, sped up jungle and break beats, with mechanical precision and humanistic swing, on a bizarre set-up: a bass drum, an elbow shaped mega snare, with the bottom curved and aimed outward; two piccolo snare drums, one possibly used to trigger off the synthesizer; an electric drum pad connected to a synthesizer of his own; two hi-hat cymbals, one large and heavy and played like a ride, the other clamped shut and played with a stick. He was the center of the music, shifting his hits to different drums, changing the texture.

Remove the beat, and this would fit in the academic setting of a music conservatory like Oberlin College, with its long history of teaching and developing experimental, electronic music. But why do that? This is the real world, and a real club, with people head banging and dancing.

The songs had breaks that either featured a keyboard/sampler freak out, or drum break. They would hit this unison, triplet breaks, coalescing the music – either ending the piece or sending it off on another flight. Awesome. The musicians made the music warm and human, unlike most of this type of music, revealing the souls of four wizards behind the screen.

How did you wind up in Williamsburg and start Studio G?

I thought I could stay in Cleveland. I played with a bunch of different people, on my off time from Pere Ubu, and I thought that would bear fruit.

I moved to New York in 1986. I remember that I was putting shingles on the roof of this house I had just bought in Cleveland. I was driving a cab back then, and the night or week before, a guy had pulled a gun on me, and I had to talk him out of robbing me. I just stood up (on the roof) and threw my hammer down and said, "I'm moving to NY. I've had it." I came up here and started working construction for a friend of mine. And playing with all sorts of people.

I found an apartment in Williamsburg, two bedrooms, for \$248 a month, and decided to live there. Then, around 1994, I moved into what would become studio G. I lived there for a year,

working on the place. My friend Neil helped me so much. I met him outside a club in Boston after a Giants show. I had been on the road with this band called The Giants for two years. So he asked me, "How long you gonna be on the road?" I said, "Man, I feel like I ought to build a studio and get off the road." He looked at me and said, "Let me know when you're ready."

So I got off the road in late '94, and gave him a call. We started on July 10th, I remember. That was when we started prying the old plaster off the walls. I lived there for a year and then my landlady, Florence, gave me her daughter's apartment, because she got married and moved. The studio became operational in the winter of '96. Shawn Hainey, my partner, took it from the level of being a rehearsal place to a full-blown recording studio. Joel Hamilton came on board last year. We've produced a bunch of stuff together.

What local bands have you produced?

Right now there's Alice Lee (guitarist, bassist, keyboard player, and singer). I play with her and Mathias (on drums) — she's got a record coming out. I'm playing with Toulouse, and we have a record coming out. I did a record here with a band called Polka Polka, with Nessa singing. A record that nobody's heard. It's out there, but we don't have anybody to promote it for us. We'll re release it someday. Everybody's too busy, and I can't start a record label, too. I've got the UV Ray project with Uvall on drums, Sebastian Steinberg is the other bass player, Raya is the sampler/keyboard player, and I'm on bass.

At the show the other night, it seemed like the music is largely improvised. Are there structures?

It's heavily structured, but in a flowing way. It looks like it's improvised.

There were cues, drop outs, breaks, and break downs to bass, or drums, or keyboard.

It's all supposed to flow that way.

He neglected to mention that he recorded my band, Angel Eyedialism and the Horny Spawn. Having had some grim experiences in past years, it was reassuring going into a studio that not only was well put together, and two doors down from my apartment, but helmed by Tony. A musician who is also a recording engineer, who is not some drunken, punk rocker or burned out metal head, is a rare combination. Musicians hear the way music should sound better than a pure engineer. When I talked to him about recording our band, I talked to him about our music. It's jazzy, psychedelic trip hop, with an incredible singer, Angel, who has a particular vision for the music. Because I play simple beats on a small drum kit, with brushes (to keep volume down, and give the singer some space), I was concerned about my drums cutting through on a record.

"Don't worry, man," Tony said, "Studio G is all about drums and the bass. We put them up in the mix and don't let anything go higher, volume-wise, no matter what, because, obviously, they're the center of the music." Especialy in our band, since bass, drums and vocals are the building blocks, and guitar, keyboard, samples, etc., flesh the music out.

During this time, I got to see, and interview, the Scratch 'n' Sniff DJs (Serena Jost and Cassis), who were performing at a benefit for Tony, whose studio was burglarized. They had recorded at the studio, with their other bands, and lent their support to Tony, by performing for free and on short notice, along with other bands, for the two-night benefit. The outpouring of band support and by Galapagos, who donated performance space on short notice, was a testament to his stature in the music community. There are many recording studios to play in, but it's that personal, personable, Tony touch that makes a difference.

How did you meet Tony?

(Serena): A funny thing. The first time I talked to Tony he was in his bathtub. My friend Doug Scharin was staying at his place, and I didn't know him yet, but Tony picked up the phone, and we had a pretty long conversation while he had his bath.

(Cassis): I recorded part of the first b-blush album at Tony Maimone's Studio G and came to love his kindred spirit.

You're always playing in different bands, and, over the years, you've been constantly active. Is this because you're easily bored, or are you working toward some ultimate Tony Maimone sound?

I don't know. I really like UV Ray, I really like Toulouse.

Who are the members of Toulouse?

John Schumann on guitar, Aidan Orbinski, is another guitar player, and the third one is Ruben Maher. The beats/sample guy is Chris Goff, playing the Roland Groove Box.

I went to the studio where Toulouse was recording. Having worked with him in the studio, and witnessed him on stage, this was yet another side of the man. Cigarettes, coffee, chocolate chip cookies. These guys had been at it a long time that day. Not wanting to disturb, I sat quietly, a fly on the studio wall. The piece they were working on, started with one guitar. It had a sharp but heavily reverbed sound, like an acid rock surf guitar. Then the rhythm came in, mechanical, yet warm, then another guitar, then the bass. The group had a sound that was reminiscent of old Brian Eno records from the seventies. It was analog and instrumental with, for lack of a better term, an experimental, avant garde edge. But the guitars and primitive sounding beat gave the music a rock edge. Visualize the Orb with guitars, less weed, no LSD, and having never listened to Pink Floyd; or David Byrne and Eno listening to MC5 or Iggy instead of Afro-Beat and World Music. That's right, mesmerizing, thick-textured, and intense.

What then would you say is your current musical direction?

I like playing with Alice, too, but UV Ray and Toulouse are the kind of music I really like playing. We have this other hip hop project that I don't have a name for. It's Joel on drums, and Earl spinning records – those two guys do the beats – I play bass, Christian and Stephan play percussion. Then we have Alice, Nessa, and Sonia singing, and Jen Dog and Basil rapping. So it's a big consortium. Starting in April, we'll be taking over Mondays at Black Betty.

What do you listen to when you're at home?

The last thing I listened to, before I came here, was a Fela record, and that "Pimps and Players" collection, with that great Bobby Womack tune, "Across 110th St." Downstairs in the studio, I listen to mainly jungle. I'm upstairs so little that I usually listen to 97.1 FM (the hip hop and R&B station). I like DJ Red Alert's 12 to 1 Old School hour, and I love Bobby Condors and Java on Sundays. And I always check out DJ Flex.

That old hip hop.

It's good stuff, still.

Mark Kirby is a drummer, actor, and writer, who lives right here in Williamsburg. He tends bar at Artland on Monday and Tuesday, and on weekends does the same at Two Boots Grand Central.