

Album reviews



RARE PHOTO From left to right, Ben Massarella, Brian Deck, Tim Rutili and Tim Hurley kill time as Red Red Meat, circa the mid-'90s.

Protein sheiks

A bluesy, woozy classic from Chicago's indie heyday gets the royal treatment. **By John Dugan**

★★★★★

Bunny Gets Paid (Deluxe Edition) (Sub Pop)

In the mid-'90s, Chicago's underground scene was hot as shit, after Smashing Pumpkins and Liz Phair broke through to radio. Still, revolutionary rock label Sub Pop surprised many when it picked up local act Red Red Meat's second album, *Jimmywine Majestic*, in 1994.

On the surface, the Chicago-based quartet had much in common with the grunge rock of the era: It mined beloved collections of '60s and '70s albums for raw riffage and cultivated an attitude equal parts blasé, nihilistic and nostalgic. Guitars, fuzzed and blurred, were the act's forte. But Meat was too quirky for the tag and for alt stardom—and it didn't go in for bare-chested amplifier stabbing. The band also, perhaps unwittingly, built on Chicago's electric blues heritage.

Sub Pop, ever the tastemaker, has done well to select *Bunny Gets Paid* for a timely rediscovery and two-disc reissue with extensive artifacts from the era. Thanks to Fleet Foxes, Grizzly Bear and their ilk, atmospheric folk experimentation is in. Red Red Meat defined that vibe on "Sad Cadillac," a slow, disorienting meditation, with the line "someone

pissed in the hibachi." Fittingly, the first word on the album centerpiece, "Gauze," is *medicated*, and the album continually conjures visions of Keith Richards on a Robitussin binge. *Bunny* is a beautiful mess, precisely rendered.

At times, Tim Rutili's songs dance dangerously close to a version of alt-pop exuberance, as he communicates by primal tones rather than lyrics—his mumbling codes so mysterious they could be backward. But FM-worthy sing-alongs, such as "Chain, Chain, Chain," make it an approachable record, too. The record majestically balances noise, folk, rock, blues and a tune from the 1964 *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* Christmas special. The group even toured with Smashing Pumpkins.

So why didn't *Bunny Gets Paid* send Meat to starry heights? Splitting in 1997, Rutili and other Meat men carried on as Califone, while drummer Brian Deck went on to produce acts like Modest Mouse and Counting Crows. Perhaps the problem was that, outside of Chicago, playing gigs in a seated position often came off as a fuck-you rather than a humble gesture. Today, bands can do gigs on a stool or, hell, even curled up in a beanbag. It might not have hit the buzz bin the first time around, but Red Red Meat was really on to something.

Red Red Meat reunites at the Empty Bottle Tuesday 17 and Wednesday 18. See Listings. Bunny Gets Paid (Deluxe Edition) is out now.

On the record

Red Red Meat

We rang up frontman Tim Rutili to talk about Red Red Meat's revival.

What do you remember most about *Bunny Gets Paid*?

[RRM percussionist] Ben Massarella owned a truck stop on the South Side. I think we started practicing there around *Bunny Gets Paid*. I was reluctant to go there because it was so filthy. We all ended up working there, cleaning trucks—bloody meat trucks. It was horrible!

But that's not where the band name came from?

No, we had it well before that. We kind of grew into the meat thing.

It was your destiny.

That truck stop became home.

This was during a period when the Chicago scene was getting a lot of outside interest. Was that a good thing for the band?

Maybe stupidly, maybe self-destructively, we shut all that stuff out and just made records we wanted to listen to. The business people didn't seem to understand where we were coming from musically. All that seemed like a lot of bullshit at the time.

Yet the album certainly has a classic-rock feel.

We thought we were making a classic-rock record, like Rod Stewart's *Every Picture Tells a Story*. Which was kind of incompetent because of who we were. We're a little less graceful than those classic-rock people. So if we do a rocker, there's gonna be noise and broken glass. If we are gonna play a ballad, the strings are gonna be too dissonant.

The record suddenly sounds very contemporary.

Musicians always come to me to talk about it. Modest Mouse had Brian [Deck, RRM drummer] produce a record because they loved *Bunny Gets Paid* so much. John Klos from the Boas told me he lost his virginity to one of our records—probably when he was way too young to lose his virginity.

Nineties reunions have been getting out of hand of late. Are you afraid of drowning in nostalgia?

It was a good, hopeful time. It was kind of an aggravating time, but my son was born and Brian's daughter was born. For the first time, we were making records that sounded like us. It's always annoying to go backward, but going into those recordings, a lot of it still stands up.—JD