

# The independent ethic lives on

It wouldn't be too melodramatic to call Mark Robinson a legend in the world of independent music. Or maybe an icon would be more accurate as so many people have looked up to him not only musically, but also for the work he has done with his legendary record label Teenbeat. Teenbeat demonstrated his love of the also-legendary Factory Records with the cumbersome catalogue numbers (although I don't think there was a Teenbeat cat...), and bringing together an eclectic blend of music that he passionately cared about.

Unrest formed back in the mid-80's, but nobody really seemed to notice until their seminal *Imperial f.f.r.* album appeared in 1992. Suddenly they were thrust into the limelight, and Robinson and his band found themselves with a whole new audience. The next logical step was to jump to a slightly more major label (namely 4AD) for what turned out to be the band's final album, *Perfect Teeth*. Unrest were no more, but Robinson and bassist Bridget Cross went on to form Air Miami whose *Me Me Me* album carried on the vibe that Unrest had begun to ride, and they will hopefully continue to do so.

Mark Robinson made a rare solo appearance at Halifax On Music (accompanied on drum machine by Evelyn of Blast Off Country Style!) to promote his new solo album. The album appears under the pseudonym of Olympic Death Squad, something that became rather dubious after the bombing in Atlanta (it could have been worse if he had played his proposed concerts there under that name...). His performance was one of the many highlights of the festival, and he managed to put a few minutes aside afterwards to talk to *The Brunswickan*.

**The band you are always most associated with is Unrest. Was it hard to bring that band to an end after such a long and distinguished career?**

I think that it was finally a relief - I loved being in Unrest, and I think that we did some good stuff, but we were pretty much having fun. Initially, Unrest never really toured that much, but then for the last three years, it was basically constant touring with all kinds of interviews. At that time, we were dealing with a major label, which had a lot to do with it - it was really a pain in the butt. I was also wondering if Unrest was going to be the only band I was ever going to be in - everybody else I knew could say that they were in this band and that band and a rockabilly band. I wanted to be able to say that too. And I still haven't really done that yet - I've been in Air Miami and I've done the solo thing, but I'd love to play drums for some band and experience more musical things. When you are doing a band full-time like Unrest, you don't really have the time or the energy to do more exciting things.

**You didn't really gain the recognition you deserved for Unrest until much later in your career - was that frustrating?**

Not really - the number of fans we got from the first record was more than we ever expected, so we were always more popular than we anticipated. And then when *Imperial* came out, we became even more popular. When you can play a show 800 miles from where you live and 300 people come to see you, you think "wow, this is really neat." I think that was enough for us - we didn't really expect anything more. It's kind of funny, people ask me about the album before *Imperial* all the time, and at the time, nobody seemed to care.

**Was Air Miami just a logical progression**

**from Unrest?**

The original idea was that me and Bridget were going to write songs together because that never really happened in Unrest. It was supposed to be a much more cohesive band with four people in the beginning, which it was. Then we got rid of the drummer and the bass player. We also wanted to play a lot of local shows in Washington, and not really be that famous - if fame happened then that was fine. But it didn't happen that way at all as it turned out, Bridget and I are the only real people in Air Miami, and we toured and put out a record on a fairly large scale.

**You have a solo album out at the moment - is it your first one after all these years?**

Well, I did the Unrest *Imperial* record, and that was about 50% me, but this is the first solo album. I did a solo 7", but that was mostly Unrest even though I had my hand in it. This time, I played everything myself.

**How strange was it to be working by yourself this time?**

I worked on my four-track at home quite a lot, but it wasn't that weird. It felt a little like making a demo tape. Even when I'm doing things for Air Miami, I might write a song and then Bridget will come in and add her own vocals and guitar parts, making it a bit better. So it was kind of different doing it this way because I didn't have anyone to bounce ideas off of - I didn't even have a producer. I just went in, recorded it in two days and got out of there.

**Does it have the same kind of low key feel to it that last night's live show had?**

It's very similar, but it is a little more fleshed out with drum machines, some bass and other stuff. It still has that demo feel though.

**Were you surprised that you were headlining here in Halifax? You are still very much an underground figure with a cult following.**

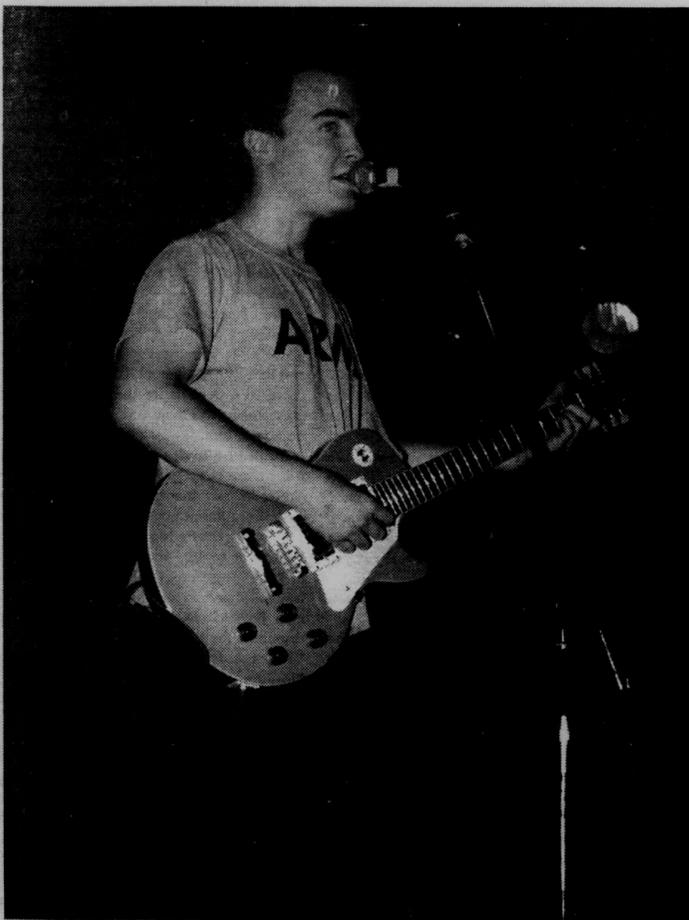
I suppose that most people still haven't heard of me, but people in underground music circles have heard of me or of Unrest - even if they haven't heard the music, they've heard the name. But one of the promoters, Colin McKenzie, is a big fan and he tried to get Unrest to play a few years ago, but we couldn't manage. This year I made it though, and he stuck me at the top of the bill - I sort of expected Thrush Hermit to be headlining because they are the hometown favourites, and I should have been on earlier in the night, but there you are.

**I think that people were expecting 'Hey Hey Halifax' to make a appearance at the show.**

Gee - I can't even remember how to play that one. I have all these song titles, and I have songs and then I match them up. I had that particular title just lying around, so I finally used it. In fact, the original title to the Unrest album *Perfect Teeth* was going to be *Hey Hey Halifax*.

**You are also the 'mastermind' behind Teenbeat Records too, and I see from your latest mail-order catalogue that you have released an awful lot of records.**

We've been around for I guess eleven, nearly twelve years now, and I suppose things just build up after a while. Actually, the catalogue would be a lot bigger if all the stuff we ever put out was still available. I like to put out as much stuff I like that I can - there's some years that we've put out 25 records, including singles and CD's, which is a lot. We've got a really eclectic mix - we have a rockabilly band, some total noise, a couple of punk and psychedelic bands. We like



Mark Robinson's rare solo appearance was a definite highlight at Halifax On Music

to be all over the place while some other labels are rather narrow.

**Along with the likes of Simple Machines and K, Teenbeat is one of those labels which is held up as being the epitome of all things independent - is it still important to you to have that sort of ethic?**

I definitely can't see Teenbeat doing a deal with a major record label. Not only would that be bad for just the image, I don't think that it would work out in terms of money or sales either. I think that the more people you deal with, the less control you have, so it's just more fun to do it by yourself. If anything, we're actually going backwards and getting back to our roots - we used to hand-make all the covers, and we're going back to doing that to makes things look a little more special instead of generic releases.

**You've always been a big supporter of 7" singles and they seem to be coming back into fashion again just now.**

Yeah - in the US, they were pretty much in fashion between, I think, '93 and '95, although it's dropping off a little now. But 7" singles are definitely a viable format and I like them a lot. We've even put out compilation singles with up to ten songs on them, so you can do so many different things with them. And they are where you can really get into cool packaging too - it

gets too hard with CD's since you have jewel-boxes. If you do something different with CD's, they normally don't even end up in the bins. I guess there has to be a line that you draw between coolness and practicality.

**By looking through the Teenbeat catalogue, it seems that you have a real passion for 80's British independent music. Was that a time that influenced you musically?**

Yeah. That's when I really started getting into music. Before that, in the 70's, I was into just Top 40 music like Elton John, Parliament, Kiss and Queen. When I got into high school, the first real underground music that I got into was Washington DC hardcore like Minor Threat, the Factory Records stuff like Joy Division, New Order and Miaow, and King Crimson. I also started playing the guitar then, so that's when I really started to develop.

**How did the deal with Cath Carroll come about? I remember her from her days in Miaow, and I even bought that solo record that almost bankrupt Factory.**

I think the solo album that she did for Teenbeat outsold the Factory one, but I'm not sure which one I like better. I think I may like the Factory one better. Anyway, I had a college radio show

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