Off the Beaten Groove

Off the Beaten Groove is a weekly feature devoted to new, independent, avant-garde, punk, or non-mainstream music. Although the column will usually consist of record reviews, an occasional concert review or career retrospective may appear. This week, OTBG returns with a story from America's heartland.

 Turns the Bailing Man, Pere Ubu on Rough Trade Records.

It's hard to believe that America's best avant-garde band hails from Cleveland, but then again, one would expect a burst of industrial sound to produce a group that has been called "the minions of the industrial age." Pere Ubu was formed in 1976 by Peter Laughner (Cleveland's most prominent punk), who named his group after the protagonist in a cycle of plays by' French absurdist playwright Alfred Jarry. Laughner's subsequent death deprived us of one of the country's first punks, but at the same time radically altered the musical direction of his fledgling ensemble. The band became a collective of artists from the beatnik-belonging lyricist David Thomas, and the release of their first album, The Modern Dance, marked the beginning of a new chapter in art music.

The album was fueled by Laughner's music energy and suffused with the harsh, willful sounds of the industrial age. The songs, "Non-Alignment Pact," "Life Stinks," and "Street Waves" established The Modern Dance as an underground dance band whose catalog would soon come to define the entire genre. Unfortunately, it never became more than an underground hit, and was soon relegated to the cutout bins. Ubu's later signing with Rough Trade Records, and the release of their first album, The Modern Dance, marked the beginning of a new chapter in art music.

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