

## The Clix Records Story

Buried next to I-75 in Troy, Michigan just south of the Big Beaver Road Exit, they sit, surrounded by strip malls, corporate high rises and recently constructed apartment complexes: a smattering of old farmhouses—some still heated by oil furnaces and kerosene heaters—on a two-block stretch of dirt gravel road accessible only through an abutting parking lot.

Standing in stark opposition to its recently overly-developed surroundings, one has the eerie feeling that this rural enclave won't be here long. But even after the last old homestead has been mercilessly uprooted and the final skyscraper is finished—indeed after even it meets its bitter end—one aspect of Troy's countrified past will remain: its status as the hometown of Clix Records, one of the most elusive, seamless and sought-after imprints in all of early rock 'n' roll.

"It was out in the sticks back then," says Hugh Friar, whose Clix debut "I Can't Stay Mad At You" has made the rounds on bootleg rock 'n' roll compilations for years. Now, along with thirty similarly scintillating tracks that are as unique as they are varied, Friar's cult classic helps make up the Clix Records Story (Pulstar), an aural snapshot that runs the gamut from primitive bluegrass boppers to raunchy garage instrumentals, all spiked with a heavy dose of striking, homemade originality.

From Ray Taylor's bluesy, backwoods "My Hamtramck Baby" clear through Johnny Guitar and his Rhythmaires' "Zaragoza," this CD tells a

fascinating musical story, as does another recent release aimed at fans of early Detroit rock 'n' roll, Jimmy Kirkland's Cool Daddy (Rollercoaster). In execution, the two discs are polar opposites; Kirkland's compilation features an eighteen page booklet with detailed liner notes and stunning photographs while the Clix collection takes a far simpler route: aside from an impressive smattering of label scans inside its fold over booklet, the mysteries of this music remain in the grooves.

Kirkland, who cut the infectious 1958 rocker "I Wonder If You Wonder" at the same session on which he contributed his high-octane lead guitar to Johnny Powers' "Mean Mistreater" (both were released by the local Fox imprint), only released one record under his own name. But the 29 track Cool Daddy—comprised mostly of unreleased acetates, as well as many records that he played on—definitively proves that it should have been otherwise. "I thought I was gonna set the world on fire," he states wryly to Motor City music historian Craig Maki in the hilariously candid liner notes. "But I didn't strike a spark. And that's the way things went—from then on."

That is, unless you count his time spent in Friar's band, the Virginia Vagabonds. After polishing their stage show with a uniquely non-derivative style, Clix founder John Henson caught the Vagabonds in a honky-tonk and invited them to record for his fledgling label. The studio was a bedroom in his house, recalls the 81-year old Friar.

"You know that shaky guitar lead on 'I Can't Stay Mad At You'? Jim Kirkland and Dave Morgan played twin leads on that song, and Jim had a Voice of Music tape recorder he hooked his guitar into to get the sound. Not bragging or anything, but we had quite a following back then

and Jim was a very fine musician. We must have recorded that song three or four times, and would you believe they released the wrong take?"

Nevertheless, serendipity was smiling on Friar that day: Kirkland's echo-drenched solo practically explodes from the speakers—as does his lead on the flip "Empty Arms" and both sides of Friar's follow-up disc—capturing a time when country and rock 'n' roll were colliding head on. Like label mates Ford Nix, Swanee Caldwell and Palford Brady, Friar and his band stood at a musical crossroads, sounding as if they could jump any which way at any given moment.

Then there was Jimmy Lee, whose weirdly ethereal falsetto framed the very first Clix release, "She's Gone" b/w "Baby, Baby, Baby." Forecasting the genre-busting future of the imprint, Lee struck a mood both sophisticated and primal, his earthy vocals backed by modern jazz piano runs, jumping horns, jiving backing vocals and—not to get too uptown—a primal electric guitar.

With just one other foray into rock 'n' roll—the haunting hill-jack blues "You Ain't No Good For Me," which he waxed for Fortune in 1956—Lee returned to his given name of Jimmy Williams for a fruitful career in bluegrass gospel and the ministry, but not before introducing a few of his acquaintances to Henson's bare-bones recording company.

"I knew Jimmy and he got me involved with Clix," says fellow bluegrass picker Ford Nix. "We recorded right in John's living room, had a big old fire goin' and you could hear that thing a' clickin' on the record! But it didn't do much damage to the song. He just had a little tape recorder, but they didn't cut it right; we didn't have the right band with us. We called 'em the Moonshiners, they was just a bunch

of old boys from up here that helped me do that. I even played the guitar on that song 'cause I couldn't find a guitar picker!"

One spin of Nix's phenomenal debut—"Ain't No Sign I Wouldn't If I Could" b/w "Nine Times Out Of Ten"—proves that maybe not having the right band was what made the songs so magical.

"That was a part of it," Nix concedes with a smile.

Like Detroit's aforementioned Fortune label, where at least four Clix artists also recorded—including Friar and Nix—the thread of anything-goes electricity reverberates throughout the imprint's entire discography.

Ray Taylor, for instance, specialized in a kind of blues-tinged bluegrass on tunes like "Clocking My Card" and "I'll Never Let You Worry My Mind Anymore," both of which feature superb banjo playing from Nix. But when it came time to wax his true swansongs, "My Hamtramck Baby" and "Connie Lou," Taylor dispensed with any semblance of a formal string band, stripping the proceedings down to the rawest core: while his teenage son Dolphus bashed away at a primitive drum kit, guitarist Chuck Reeves wrenched gnarled leads from his instrument. Over it all, Taylor strummed powerhouse rhythm in time with his hollering vocals.

Echoing most small-label bluegrass of the time, Curly Dan and Wilma Ann and Gene Stump and Bill Swain recorded some fine original songs for the label, and it's great to hear rockin' country rarities like Swanee Caldwell's double-sided masterpiece "Thrill Happy" and "Mixed Up Heart." Though he'd go on to record for bigger concerns like King (as did label mate Palford Brady), Caldwell's Clix sides were among his finest.

The real mysteries surface with unidentifiable instrumental groups like the blasting, R&B-flavored Stan "D" Rockets and the Flamethrowers, who were rumored to be a group of Hamtramck firefighters stricken with the Link Wray sound. Fans of down-and-dirty guitar instrumentals will also dig the aptly-monikered Johnny Guitar and his Rhythmaires, one of the last groups recorded by Henson.

Clix records rarely got airplay, recalls Nix, with the exception of WEXL in Royal Oak. But like so much Detroit music—including Kirkland's—their undiluted honesty makes them invaluable.

"People need to know about all this," says Nix, "because that was the backbone of our country, the kind of music we played."