

The Hartford Courant

# CALENDAR

## Rockin' Robyn



Robyn Hitchcock  
and the Egyptians

perform at

Toad's Place

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Chris Carroll photo

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ON THE COVER

# Cult rocker grows up, but only a little

By ROGER CATLIN  
Courant Rock Critic

A cult attraction ever since he formed the Soft Boys more than 15 years ago, Robyn Hitchcock has grown in renown over the past decade as a solo artist, with albums of often bizarre, surreal imagery matched to catchy guitar rock.

When his new "Perspex Island" album came out last fall, the single "So You Think You're in Love" topped the alternative rock charts for a month.

Still, Hitchcock remains baffled by the whole alternative classification.

"There's no actual style for it," he sneers over the phone from Virginia, where he is preparing for his first U.S. tour in 2½ years with his band the Egyptians (which stops at Toad's Place in New Haven Tuesday).

"It's not like blues or country," he goes on. "You don't say, 'Well, I was wandering up through the woods one day and I heard an old man playing an alternative song.'"

"As a generic term, it's completely meaningless. But on the other hand, it does give an enormous variety of people some kind of banner, it's like all of the people who don't fit in the party."

Hitchcock has become a celebrity figure

for these misfits, with bizarrely garbled tunes of dreamlike imagery from albums such as "Queen Elvis," "Glove of Frogs" and "Gotta Let This Hen Out!"

Still, when it is suggested (as nearly all the reviews have), that the new record is relatively more straightforward for him, he brings up the notion of perception, and throws in the odd metaphor, as if to prove he still harbors his fantastic imagination.

"A record is whatever you think it is. You know, a baboon looks at the 'Mona Lisa' and thinks it's garbage, then it's garbage. Subjectivity is all. You can't tell people how to react to a record."

"Having said that, I'm definitely trying to be coherent," he says. "When I left school at 17, I had a mental age of 500, and an emotional age of about 3. And basically I didn't want to be a human being at all. I found the whole concept disgusting. So I buried my head in other people's clouds. And this was reflected in the stuff that I was doing. And while I don't apologize for my old records, I just didn't want to do another one."

"I just wanted to develop both sides. It was like a stereo where one channel has 50 watts and the other channel has 6 watts. I was totally imbalanced."

"It's the same realization you come to when you drive your car off a track into the mud and the mud gets deeper and you can't go forward and you can't go backward."

He revises this comparatively mundane metaphor for getting stuck in a rut.

"It's not like you're even driving off track. It's like you're following a road and it just peters out like Mulholland Drive does in Los Angeles, where it goes from a highway to a farm track. It wasn't like I was in a rut; I wasn't really on a road at all."

So what does an artist do, back up? Forge a

new road?

"That's a good question. Actually, what you do is you have to carry on. You can't take yourself off the road any more than you can disappear from life and hover above the world. Everyone would like to do that: Fly up like a bird and watch the world turn and when they're ready to live again, come back down. But you can't do that."

But in charting a new course, he hasn't, like Dylan and Bowie before him, thrown out all his old songs. "Some of the older ones I really like," Hitchcock says. "Things like 'Uncorrected Personality Traits' were very clever. I'm very proud of myself for having written them."

But some of the "more triumphantly childish songs" he won't do, he adds. "But I still play 'Acid Bird.' And 'Dead Wife' sometimes. But the new songs translate very well to the band. We're having a good time playing songs like 'Oceanside,'" the opening rocker to the new album.

"I'm not born again, you know. I haven't changed my brainwave pattern. I'm not like Bob Dylan after his motorcycle crash, or after he became a Christian. I'm not pretending to be un-me."

"I guess," he says finally, "I've grown up a fraction."

Hitchcock, whose "entire body of work — both as a leader of the Soft Boys and as a solo performer — remains one of the great undiscovered treasures of modern pop music," says Ira Robbins latest Trouser Press Record Guide, has always forged his own course, away from rock convention.

"Maybe I was embarrassed, but when I was young I hated sloppy love songs," he says. "I used to listen to the Velvet Underground. I wanted to be as mean and destructive as possible. I wanted to obliterate clichés in the music. Which in the mid-70s was sort of dirty, self-important, wasted, people in blue dungarees, singing about 'when could they get home, man, so they could get it together' — people groveling in fallout, that's what I thought of it."



■ Hitchcock

While punk music in England offered a sharp reaction to such warbling, Hitchcock and his Soft Boys (two of whom — bassist Andy Metcalfe and drummer Morris Windsor — are in his Egyptians), were never part of that movement.

"We were a bit more elegant. But we were still essentially malicious and still terribly male, and in a way still quite British," he says. "Capt. Sensible [of the Damned] told me, you could be anything you wanted in punk. But that wasn't true. We were interested in harmonies and guitar solos and things that weren't allowed to happen."

Besides, he adds, punks had their set of conventions and conformities just as the hippies they rebelled against. "The whole thing was like Stalinist Russia!" Hitchcock says.

Even so, he allows that his musical phrases, especially those for his new album "Perspex Island," are borrowed heavily from the Beatles, to pick the most obvious reference.

"Oh yeah, certainly. As time goes by, we get less and less original. I'm resigning myself to a certain amount of given clichés in music, which, if you're writing in certain genres, you use. Just as Chaucer would use certain phrases."

"That was the good thing about the Velvet Underground — Lou Reed would mix up trite phrases with things that never normally went into a pop song. There's certain elements that are very traditional in our music, although I think this album has exorcised the Beatles for us. To be honest, we've been trying to sound more like the Byrds. But I guess it doesn't come through. Likewise I listen to a lot of Bryan Ferry and hope to be like that. Like a mud pie wanting to be rainbow I suppose."

*Robyn Hitchcock and the Egyptians perform Tuesday at Toad's Place, 300 York St., New Haven. Doors open at 8 p.m.; music starts at 9:30 p.m. with a set by Matthew Sweet. Tickets are \$12.50 in advance; \$14 at the door. For information, call 562-5694.*

