

# RALPH GEAN: Psycho-billy is alive in Denver in the 1990s

by Howard A. DeWitt

Jello Biafara, formerly of the Dead Kennedys, appears an unlikely source to have uncovered one of the most original musical talents of the 1990s. One night as Biafara was making the rounds of Denver's night spots, a twentyish young girl burst into the street waving her cigarette holder and screaming.



"Jello, come into the club, you have never seen anything like this." Biafara wasn't sure. Just then another young man of

twenty with orange hair and a tattoo that read "Courtney," hollered to a friend across the street: "Hey man you got to see the guy in the gorilla suit." Now Jello was intrigued.

Biafara had grown up in the San Francisco punk scene and thought he was used to just about anything. As he walked into the club, he found a Generation X crowd hanging on every song. On stage a gray haired performer who was wearing a gorilla suit as he mesmerized the crowd with his signature song "Homicidal Me." As Biafara listened he realized that he was witnessing something fresh and unique – especially for Denver.

"When I heard Ralph Gean sing "The Asshole Song," Biafara later remarked, "I knew that I had to get involved in his musical career." Quietly, behind the scenes, Biafara helped to arrange a recording contract. There was no need to worry about material because Gean had more songs in his head than anyone could imagine. With his stylish cowboy hat, a raconteur look and a level of **energy** that men half his age had trouble matching,, Gean was ready for another round of show business. In Denver, no one realized that he been something of a regional hit in Texas during the early 1960s. So is Gean wanted to call it a comeback, Jello simply chuckled at his incredulity.

Just who *is* Ralph Gean? Born in 1942, Gean recorded his first record at age three. As a teenager, he formed his own band and eventually became a huge draw in the Houston and Dallas, Texas areas. He was such a well thought of act in the mid-1960s that such recording stars as Glen Campbell, B.J. Thomas, Roy Head and Roy Orbison used him as an opening act. He also sat in and played with some of these monster talents.

First of all, Gean was a composer with a unique direction and a penchant for the absurd. Television has always been a big influence on his songwriting. He parodied a popular 1960s TV series in his absurd, "Hey Dr. Casey," and has recently paid tribute to Xena in "Goddess of Love."

In the early 1960s, with his swirled pompadour and drop-dead good looks, Gean seemed destined for stardom. In 1962, his first single, "Weeping Willow Tree" backed with "Experimental Love," was released on Charlie Booth's Lori label in Houston, Texas. Featuring Mickey Gilley on piano. "Weeping Willow Tree" was a local radio favorite and Ralph Gean performed to increasingly larger audiences in and around Houston and Dallas.

Real success, however, was slow in coming. Gean's second single, this time on the Gallant label, didn't come out for two years. "One Night in San Antonio" backed with the ubiquitous "Hey Dr. Casey," featuring backing by the Jades, once again resulted in strong local airplay. In the Houston clubs, Gean performed in a orange satin shirt with girls flocking around the bandstand. Gallant Records quickly turned out a promotional package featuring

Ralph Gean lounging in front of his record releases. It looked like Gean was on his way to becoming a local star.

Major Bill Smith, a well known Fort Worth producer, took a long look at Ralph Gean but failed to sign him. The Major found Gean too weird for his tastes. But other touring artists loved his tunes. Sonny and the Sunliners (AKA the Sunglows), a popular Houston group, recorded Gean's "One Night in San Antonio," but the end of the first phase of Gean's musical journey was approaching. When the Beatles invaded America in 1964, Gean's fledgling musical career came to a sudden halt. He had recorded another single for Gallant, "Electricity" backed with "I'm Counting On You," but the label refused to release it. Once again Ralph's musical dreams were thwarted.

Along the way, he married his first wife who insisted that he become a family man. Gean became a Mormon and began a home life away from show business. He got involved with Rulon Allred's Mormon sect that practiced polygamy. The local newspaper had a field day covering the sect and Gean was banned from the church. By now, he now had a number of wives, no singing career and few prospects of employment. It was at this time that he began performing in the gorilla suit so no one would recognize him.

Desperately in need of money, Gean did the only thing that he could think to do. He hit the downtown streets of Salt Lake City with his guitar and a tin cup. At night he slept in a place he called "Skid Row Manor" and appeared to be just another forgotten musician. Strangely enough, even in the middle of his Salt Lake City odyssey, Gean received some mention in the local press.

His luck changed when he met Donna Mae Donohoo, another musician, and they began in play local clubs. From 1983 to 1986 Ralph Gean performed around Salt Lake City in a string of bands with names like Big Bang and the Boulders, Kickin' Country, Heritage Review, Satsuma, Electricity, Banderos, John Doe and the Nobodys, and the Dream Steam. To help him maintain his sanity on the Holiday Inn circuit, Ralph performed what he viewed as an alternate form of rockabilly. His problem has always been that he was ahead of his time. It took ten years for the Rev. Horton Heat and the Psychobillies to catch up with Ralph Gean.

In 1987 Gean was so well established on the club circuit that he made enough money to move to Denver. Three years later, Gean walked into Denver's Wax Trax Records and handed owner Shannon Dickey a tape of some of his songs. From that point, it took six years before his first CD, *A Star Is Born* was released by Boyd Rice on the Hierarchy label.

From 1963's "Hey Doctor Casey" to the 1987 version of "Hard To Be A Killer," Ralph Gean plays with a rockabilly style mixed with an old age psychobilly consciousness. Perhaps the best song on the CD is "Goddess of Love," which Ralph recorded at the old Sun Studios in Memphis with James Lott on lead guitar. For great humor, "The Bobbit Song (Lorena Lorena)" recorded in 1994 lets everyone know that Ralph Gean is a unique talent.

Today, the Denver club scene is alive with Ralph Gean shows where a local newspaper called him "one of the most fascinating characters in Denver." You can't help but love the guy; he has a great act. He is looking forward to a Boyd Rice compilation CD featuring two of his unreleased songs, a 1973 "acid version" of "Hey, Dr. Casey" and "Hit the Road Ralph," set to the tune of a Ray Charles hit. In 1999, there should be a new Ralph Genes CD (if the world's ready) with sixteen all new tracks.

The next time you look into a club and see a guy singing in a gorilla suit, don't hesitate to walk in. Ralph Gean will show you a good time. But, what's he doing for an encore.

Bill Clinton beware.

(Editor's note: Howard A. DeWitt is a tenured Professor of History at Ohlone College, Fremont, CA. At least that's the rumor.)

