

Arts

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The Gospel of Power's Musical Mission

Springwater stalwart Dave Cloud's new recording taps rock's twisted essence

By David Maddox

Dave Cloud & the gospel of power

All My Best (Thee Swan Recording Company)

Playing a record-release show Oct. 29 at Springwater

Strip away layers of fashion and attempts to reformulate the product to prop up sales, and part of rock 'n' roll's foundations stand on something a lot like the music of Dave Cloud: a compulsion to make noise and play with words and an unabashed lustfulness. Cloud and his band the Gospel of Power release a new album this Friday with a show at the Springwater, where they are pretty much the house band.

Cloud grew up listening to rock 'n' roll and as a teenager started to play guitar obsessively. His relationship with the Springwater goes way back—he did some of his first regular playing at a Monday writer's night there 25 years ago. That lasted until he got into punk rock, brought in a bunch of amplifiers, cleared the room and got banned "for life."

During the 1980s, a lot of Cloud's energy went into private tape experiments overdubbing voices, guitars and other instruments, and for the last 10 years or so he has been leading the Gospel of Power. His music is raw, not concerned with conventional notions of production standards. He made his new recording, *All My Best*, in producer Matt Swanson's living room on a four-track machine, with some material coming in on cassettes. The songs include a mix of originals and covers that translate a love of '60s and '70s rock and soul through the lens of punk and experimentation.

What stands out is Cloud's voice, and often his lyrics. He has a really low, strong bass end, and plenty of range above it, with a bit of rasp around the edges. It's an adult voice through and through. For his day job, Cloud reads for blind people and records books on tape, and his voice can have the elocution of a voice-over. He delivers his words dramatically, clearly enjoying the way they sound, mixing the tone of an old-time hipster with a bit of Southern twang.



All Their Best: Dave Cloud and his band, The Gospel of Power, at their longtime home, Springwater.

Most of the songs on Cloud's album have two or three vocal tracks that set different lines and voice tones against each other: real multi-voice arrangements, not just harmony vocals. Two voices chase each other in "Save the Last Dance for Me," one of them rumbling into an almost croaking sound, and in "Booty Shoe II," three voices occupy different points between singing and speaking and cover different words, most of which are riffs on single words or short phrases.

Björk is getting press right now for experimenting on *Medulla* with songs built from voices alone, and Cloud does some of that here. You can also hear him explore the qualities of his voice, settling into a particularly rich note or a slow vibrato (when covering War's "All Day Music") or getting into the effect created by repeating words (echoing "fox, fox" in "Vixen Vixen Fox Fox"). And he just has fun with songs, like "Evil Dracula Man," which gives him a chance to do B-movie vampire voices.

Cloud gets to his lyrics through unfettered free association, which results in an innocent randiness. The album opens with the line "You're such a vixen," which sums up the tone of a lot of the record's songs. This lust isn't just for women. "Motorcycle" tells about his dream of owning a Honda Superhawk bike.

When he talks about a voluptuous girl (yes, "girl," not "woman"), it's sexual fantasy, but one that often goes off into a romantic ideal. After telling the girl she is a vixen, he follows with, "You're such a lady / Hell, it turns me on when I hear you say / 'Hey, Baby, let's get away / Let's go somewhere far from here.'" His randy greeting leads to the idea of running away with her, even being rescued by her, not to something immediately sexual.

This innocence also shows in the covers Cloud does. There are come-on songs like K.C. & The Sunshine Band's "Get Down Tonight" (slowed way down and sung over Casio drones). But Cloud also does Gamble & Huff's "Me and Mrs. Jones," a Philly Soul hit from the '70s that talks about getting together with a woman in a cafe, holding hands while the jukebox "plays our favorite songs." OK, she is married to someone else, but the encounter sounds like adulterous puppy love.

Like any musical genre, rock encompasses the full range of human experience; still, plenty of it boils down to young men singing about girls, motorcycles, cars and money. Rock, or at least one of its strongest motives, resides in the permanent teenage part of the brain, especially the male brain that is filled with sexual desire and an often sentimental notion of romance. It's pretty twisted the way the two get mixed and mixed up. Hearing it from Cloud, who is in his 40s, just goes to show it doesn't really go away after we reach the point where we can no longer deny

adulthood. We have these thoughts. Cloud is unapologetic about saying them out loud.

Musically, the most accessible tracks on his album sound like '60s psychedelia when it first hit with the raw and immediate sound of drums-guitar-and-bass combos. You can imagine a song like "Lavender Clothes" as the lost tape of a live show or an unknown band. A little harder to enjoy are songs that back the voices with an out-of-tune piano. You miss Cloud's first love, the guitars, with what he refers to as their "wonderful torrents of delicious electronic sounds."

Cloud absorbed punk's aesthetic of raggedness (or maybe it's an ethic), but not the rage. You don't find angry songs in the Gospel of Power book. When asked how he comes up with lyrics, Cloud says he thinks about what makes him happy in the realm of fantasy. He figures if these things make him happy, they'll do the same for other people and give them a two-to-three-minute reprieve from their depression. "We need all the peace we can get," he says. His mission as a "musical psychiatrist" and the thrill of people paying attention leads to an insatiable desire to perform, usually at Springwater.

Nashville puts on a pretty refined, buttoned-down face. Yet if you dug into the city's libido, no doubt you'd find Dave Cloud—randy, rough-voiced and middle-aged, loving music for its most basic elements and waiting for more people to notice.

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