

The Flying Lizards: A Pop Band Arranged According to the Laws of Chance

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The Flying Lizards first LP on 8-track - circa 1980

*"I blame the TV
I blame top twenty for my jealousy
But you can still make money
By singing sweet songs of love"
- The Flying Lizards "Her Story"*

Who/what were/was are/is The Flying Lizards?

Known to most of the world as an early 80's "New Wave" band who a scored a still icon-status hit with a hysterically reduced cover version of Barry Gooding Jr.'s **"Money (That's What I Want)"** - The Flying Lizards wasn't actually a band at all. It's not practical to judge The Flying Lizards solely in terms of their status as a rock band, or one of their albums as a finished or commercial product marketed by a record company. The Flying Lizards were above all a way of doing things, in the studio and in the mass consumer market. Plus you probably shouldn't use the word "practical" when thinking about the Lizards... hmmm... wait, maybe you should.

The name "The Flying Lizards" was an alias, a costume taped and stitched together at the eleventh hour by its creator(s) to front a mischievous dis-information machine, an alias that was necessary to push important nonsense and irritant factors through to the commercial world waiting on the other side. The information that spilled out of this machine... spelled out how to translate highbrow art through lowbrow pranks (via pop musik) and also the vice versa, for mere pennies on the dollar. These coded instructions (transferred subliminally through 'songs') spelled out a pragmatically illogical way of thinking about the business of entertainment and commerce of pop product, and how to make all four do somersaults in unison. At one point, this Flying Lizards machine even translated instructions on how to make a mega-popular hit song in a single afternoon for a mere 20 dollars(!)

The Flying Lizards crashed disco and punk value systems with true screwball style.

Upon even closer scrutiny, if you spend a little time studying and de-coding the non-information on the cryptic sleeves of the Flying Lizards albums, you might catch a hint... a codifier, that might lead you to the pragmatically abstract and diligent brain of David Cunningham, the mad scientist and master organizer of The Flying Lizards machine, operating it's weird, warped conduits, tubes and filters (don't let him know you saw him though... he'll probably just try and hide).

Irish-born, 20-something (at the time), English art and music student David Cunningham was the cultural scientist behind the late 70's early 80's music project The Flying Lizards. And with the Lizards, David and friends haunted the halls of Dada and Fluxus philosophies, while also

rummaging through the garbage of rock stars past and present (Marcel Duchamp and Donna Summer seemed to be one and the same to Cunningham) - then turned both into something so irrelevant and insignificant and imperfect that it was brilliant. Oops... I promised myself I wouldn't use the word "brilliant" in this essay about The Flying Lizards. Well, brilliant or not, David Cunningham and the Lizards accomplished something that hadn't been done up to that point 25 years ago (perhaps by accident?)... and that "something" is something that almost everybody in the music underground is trying to do today.

The Flying Lizards were a pop band arranged according to the laws of chance.

Julian Marshall, the piano player on "Money" told *Melody Maker* in 1979; "David played me the original version to refresh my memory, put one mike in the piano and another one by the metronome on the floor. We did it twice, the second time with various things - Chopin sheet music, a glass ashtray, rubber toys, a cassette recorder, a telephone directory - thrown into the piano to get a kind of banjo effect. David said 'That's fine,' and I was slightly amazed: it sounded fairly wrong. But the next time I heard it, at Utopia, where he was cutting it, it sounded fantastic."

Cunningham himself told *Record Mirror* in 1978; "Then I took the tape to Brixton and put the other bits on there, using a borrowed drum kit. The knock on the record is a snare drum and tambourine being played together, I was hitting the snare drum with a stick. I in a different room to the tape recorder so I just got a very long mike cable and took the mike out to a very echoey room right next to the toilets and overdubbed it. There isn't any bass drum on the record, it's just bass guitar being hit with a stick. Then we put the guitar solo and backing vocal on and put it back onto the Vox, and that was the master tape really."

All that was needed was vocals. Deborah Evans (sometimes known as Deborah Lizard), a friend that David met at Maidstone College of Art, had originally collaborated with him on a wicked piano/guitar/metronome/valium version of Eddie Cochran's "**Summertime Blues**" (technically the first Lizards single released by Virgin) - so she certainly could fit the bill again. Then, with Deborah's blunt, spoken-word vocals topping-off the warped creation, the completed tape of "Money" was delivered to Virgin. Photographer Richard Rayner-Canham was hit on by David to snap another inexplicable but eye-catching photo for the sleeve, and the single was released. Total cost to produce The Flying Lizards' "Money"? Rumor has it somewhere around twenty bucks (would it have been funnier if the song had a different subject matter - say... rainbows?) It zoomed up the pop charts on both sides of the Atlantic, got oodles of radio play, and was heard (and remembered) by millions... even to this day. The D.I.Y. aesthetic was never done with such swift and ruthless efficiency.

The recording "process" employed by David Cunningham and comrades as The Flying Lizards seemed to be one based on chance, experimentation and circumstance... done often at the speed of thought and with whatever materials might be at hand. The goal of these quick and fast pop product recording sessions seemed to be to capture the elusive primal pulse of inspiration... that hard to reach, but always within sight, raw nerve and burst of nonsense, and whatever else that ends up equaling aural "freedom." This just might have been David and his co-horts' goal... or maybe it was just brainy nonsense and studied fun. At least, that was the inspired impression I got - when I fell in love with The Flying Lizards records as a weird art kid in the early 1980's. Boy, was I oddly dissatisfied years later, when I read in interviews that David Cunningham considers himself somewhat of a "perfectionist." The end result certainly spoke for itself, and still does... even more so in retrospect.

Whether it's the creator or the audience doing the thinking... sometimes ART barfs right out of your brain and onto the canvas... (or the recording studio). The Flying Lizards *seemed* to do this often and with great relish. But stylish art posturing was never the Lizards style, Cunningham and comrades were way too silly about their seriousness and serious about their silliness to nod to art creeps. After all, when taking laps around the pool like a pro, you tend to simultaneously traverse the shallow and deep ends.

Since the persona(s) of The Flying Lizards held such little information during their existence (especially in The States)... journalists and fans throughout history have kind of filled in the blanks themselves. Some people thought they were a new wave band lead by a Japanese lady who "...sang poorly." I once read a review that talked about how "crazy" The Flying Lizards were because, since the band didn't have a vocalist "...they had the non-English speaking Russian cleaning lady from downstairs read all the lyrics from their songs during the recording of their first album." Even some Americans thought the Lizards penned The Waitresses song "I Know What Boy's Like" (the comparison is certainly understandable). I've even heard one or two hopeful souls claim The Flying Lizards were a secret Frank Zappa side project... an alias for him (again... no, but Zappa was indeed a big fan). One statement people tend to all nod their heads in agreement

on is that The Flying Lizards were "some kind of art rock band."

But perhaps I'm just perpetuating more wacky myth here... so let's clear things up.

Rising to popularity during the middle/end/beginning of the simultaneous "English Punk" and "New Wave" implosions, the Lizards were incorrectly aligned with the latter genre by coincidence only (a fact hammered to death by 'Money' appearing on a million and counting '80's New Wave compilation CDs and film soundtracks). Speaking to Mick Sinclair for *ZigZag* magazine in 1983, David Cunningham said; "There's a kind of punk element to the Flying Lizards in terms of my possible misunderstanding of the original ideas about punk. This was that you could simply do what you felt like doing. Not in the case of expressing yourself necessarily, but if you felt like going into the studio and making a loud noise, you could go into the studio and make a loud noise. Then you could bring some aspects of discipline to that later perhaps and order it into a record. That's how I tend to work. Have a particularly nasty sound to start with, then one slowly rationalizes that into just bursts of a nasty sound, and cleaned up with something nice to make a tune out of it. I've always been convinced the Flying Lizards were punk in terms of outlook."

OK, go back (once again) 25 years or so, to the mid 1970's. Think, appropriately, Art College:

A young David Cunningham from Northern Ireland entered Maidstone College of Art in Kent, England. Excelling in art and reading during his youth David spoke of his art background leading up to Maidstone in *Melody Maker* in 1979: "My Art master had this totally disrespectful attitude towards art," said Cunningham, "Any sense you had of 'This is my personal bit of art and it's precious' was immediately destroyed; it made you much more willing to take risks. One piece I did early on with a friend was a milk bottle which we covered in paper mache and painted blue," he recalls, "It was sort of a phallic symbol. We thought it was such a disgusting looking thing that we threw it out of the first floor art room window and it smashed on the ground below." Because of the fervor it created among the other staff, "both of us realized quite independently that the act of throwing it out of the window was more important than the act of making it."

At Maidstone, Cunningham continued, amongst other things, this form of studied destruction. Notorious at school for his irreverent attitude towards the art object, David excelled at the "process" of creating his own work, and then destroying it and having that destruction (or some area between those two points) be the work itself. Eventually specializing in film and video sound work while at Maidstone, this got David interested in experimental music.

Graduating from Maidstone in the late 70's, David moved to London and worked in art galleries, as a messenger, Chinese restaurant waiter - the usual occupations of a young artist. Still with no intentions of becoming a full-time musician, David nevertheless turned to music, or recorded sound, to express his ideas. Cunningham found himself constantly messing around with tape recorders, electronic equipment and loops on his free time... gallery worker/messenger/waiter by day... sound scientist by night. Many of these experiments ended up on, or being recorded for, his self-produced album "**Grey Scale**" (1977 Piano Records, Piano 001), released independently in 1977 on his own label, Piano. The album was originally intended as a kind of informal sketchbook or work in progress of musical ideas, which were intended to have had more than one volume at the time.

The cacophonous and inharmonious music on "Grey Scale" is maddeningly soothing, or soothingly maddening, depending on what mood you're in. The sleeve notes read: "Error system: the players play a repeated phrase. As soon as one player makes a mistake, that mistake is made the basis of his repetition unless it is modified by a further mistake. Thus each player proceeds at his own rate to change the sound in an uncontrollable manner..."

Using violin, piano, "violin piano", percussion, glockenspiel, tape recorders, water and other instruments, the sound of these "error system" pieces (which make up most of side one) are rooted in John Cage's theories of music affected by chance, but these results sound more hypnotically repetitive and rhythmic than much of Cage's sometimes soporific musical work. Intentional or not... there is a lot of humor in this music. I always thought the musical pieces on "Grey Scale" sounded like the soundtrack music they might use in a screwball comedy film during a scene where a bunch of assembly line robots started going haywire and destroying everything.

On most of side two, Cunningham experiments with primitive sampling techniques in what would become his somewhat-trademark style; a kind of loose, free-flowing way of shaping tape loops where the samples flutter around the pulse of the music, sometimes hitting the tempo and sometimes not. Parts of these tape loop experiments sound similar to some of Pauline Oliveros' work. Track number 7, "Water Systemised" sounds like a garage version of Oliveros' "Alien Bog," if there could be such a thing.

Why discuss "Grey Scale" in relation to The Flying Lizards? Its sound and the D.I.Y. way in which it was produced are a key ingredient in what would soon become the early sound and

"aesthetic" of The Flying Lizards. Since the Lizards seemed to be a "process" and not really a band per se... "Grey Scale" was simply part of the trip.

At the same time that David was playing around with the tape loops and "error system" music that ended up on "Grey Scale", he also "accidentally" recorded a deconstructed version of the Eddie Cochran rock anthem "**Summertime Blues**" with Deborah Evans.

The first time I heard the Lizards' cover of "Summertime Blues" (1978 Virgin VS230) I remarked that Deborah's vocal stylings sounded like that of a kidnap victim being forced to sing at gunpoint over the telephone by her captors in order to prove her still living status to her rich loved ones, the weird fear and apprehension in (and mere presence of) her vocal cords canceling out any need for harmony or key (or singing).

"Originally, I wanted to do a big Ike and Tina Turner version of 'Summertime Blues', but that proved impossible," Cunningham explained to *Rolling Stone* in 1980, "I wasn't a producer, and even though Deborah wanted to do it like Joni Mitchell, she's just not a singer. So we used her normal speaking voice." (Deborah later went on to release some 'spoken/sung word vocal' solo material on her own, sans-Lizards)

The Flying Lizards' "Summertime Blues" really sounds like Cunningham's "Pop Culture Blues" to me. The ironic, studied deconstruction of the hallowed Eddie Cochran anthem seemed to want to comment on (and probably rip the rug out from under) the mechanics of classic rock and roll, but also pay it's own warped homage to the new industrialized, commercialized and suburban society that spawned it. Deborah's deadpan, disembodied recitation of the famous lyrics over David's drum/guitar/piano/metronome interpretation sounds like a high school anthem intended for the captain of the football team that was hijacked at the last minute by that brainy, mis-fit girl who sat in the back of art class - in an act of square peg defiance.

Instead of releasing it with "Grey Scale" Cunningham carted this rock monstrosity around to nearly 20 record companies who were in no way interested... until someone at Virgin eventually decided to give it a go because of it's confident bizarreness. Recorded for almost nothing and coming from an unknown (non-existent?) group, Virgin realized they could get it cheaply and then recoup their initial investment with just a few sales. Using the name The Flying Lizards for "the band" and a Richard Rayner-Canham photograph of Deborah splashing herself with a glass of milk on the cover, Virgin released the first Lizards product in November of 1978. It ended up selling tens of thousands of copies and reached 170 on the English charts. With "Summertime Blues" - The Flying Lizards had slipped through the back exit and into the popular cultural arena.

David claims he chose the name "The Flying Lizards" at the time as a kind of alias that would allow him to play with possibilities inside the pop rock world, a pop rock "band" world, possibilities that would have been more difficult within his formal experimental work. The shifting personnel within what were The Flying Lizards only allowed Cunningham more options within those possibilities. "The name's just an unlikely one I made up. I wanted it to sound cute, since I reckon 'cute' is 'in' in the Eighties." Cunningham flippantly told *Rolling Stone* in May in 1980.

The success of the "Summertime Blues" impressed Virgin and left them wanting more. So for his next project, David chose the Berry Gordy Jr. composition "**Money (That's What I Want),"** originally taken to the American top 30 in 1960 by Barret Strong and later covered by many artists, most notably by another popular British foursome. And hence The Lizards' version of "Money (That's What I Want)" was born ('Money' 1979 UK Virgin VS276, 1979 US Virgin 7603).

"Money," as a post-structuralist act of appropriation, ironically out-smarted it's de-ducers by eventually becoming a rock and roll classic of it's own kind. It's hard to put your finger on why, but the actual sound of the song makes for an infectious and instantly likable (laughable?) groove that is easy to plug into, probably because of, rather than despite, it's strategic lunacy. Sounding like something that could have been composed on the spot by Luigo Russolo and Tristan Tzara in Zürich in the 1910's... it still fit snugly between Kraftwerk's "We Are The Robots" and Lipps, Inc.'s "Funkytown" at any local discotheque. In the late 70's and early 80s, even kids from American roller rinks who didn't know the Beatles from Duchamp could dance to the song's wickedly funky beat... which they did in record numbers. And speaking of the U.S. - it made an early 80's America (giddy with their first tastes of New Wave and blood-thirsty for more) want to wear a garbage bag and 3-D glasses, spray their hair green and dance like a robot in front of a Warhol print... which they also did in record numbers. This song is a classic of my generation, and tends to float freely between bimbo top ten appreciation and artsy in-the-know posturing... but is successful perhaps because it has the three ingredients for a perfect pop song that span all rock generations and subcultures: any way you slice it, it hits the bull's eye on sound, subject matter and attitude - a pop masterpiece.

With Cunningham's contract running out with Virgin after "Money," he nevertheless

re-negotiated a new contract drawn up to his terms (he had pull now - he could make them 'Money'), and set out to make an album. True to the fluid, situationalist process approach of The Flying Lizards to making pop music, David chose from a satellite mix of talent and friends that formed a temporary "mass" to the "band" for the first full album. The participants this time around? Steve Beresford and David Toop (then of General Strike), Deborah Evans, musician and rock journalist Vivien Goldman, Julian Marshall, drummer Dave Solomon, Charles Hayward (of This Heat), Bruce Smith (of The Pop Group), George Oban (of Aswad) and David Cunningham. Their involvement is scattered all over the place, with no lead singer, no official lead guitarist... just whomever could fill whatever spot or come up with whatever idea... with Cunningham acting as ringleader (of sorts). Total time to record? Roughly three weeks.

Speaking about his involvement in the first Flying Lizards album, David Toop told *Melody Maker* in 1980; "My main goal is in the interest of writing collectively in the studio - doing stuff which has the virtues of the best pop music but has the flexibility and unpredictability of improvisation, using a shifting set of people as opposed to hierarchical writing set-ups and the eternal marriages of 'group'."

The results of this way of working lead to a landmark pop album of sorts. The Dada/Fluxus inspired, warped grooves on The Flying Lizards' **"The Flying Lizards" LP** (1979 US Virgin Records, Inc. VA13137, 1980 UK Virgin Records/Polygram Records Ltd. VA2150) turned the record into an instant sleeper that ultimately made it onto a certain generation's list of "favorite albums of all time" because of its catchy humor and accessibly abstract qualities (a friend of mine even has it on 8-track). I can't think of anyone who ever owned this record that doesn't love it... and even today, many point to specific parts of the album as "ground breaking." Arty and erratic, but somehow symmetrical, this album has everything from irreverent and humorous soundscapes, to chilly, everything-but-the-kitchen-sink ballads. The postmodern subjects of the album are often presented in a quirky and robotic sound that was appropriate for (and slightly ahead of) its time. Yet for the Lizards, even when the sound of the music is stop/start herky-jerky and Devo-esque, its mid tempo sound is heavily reverb-ed, spacious and soothing (dub beats and low-key techno are the major structural groundwork here).

Side one confidently starts off with an obnoxious version of Bertold Brecht and Kurt Weill's **"Mandelay Song"**. Any radio friendly listeners scared off by this frantic-sounding decoy probably shouldn't stick around anyway. Using machine gun-speed piano, clattering snare drum, screeching parrot-operatic vocals by Deborah Evans and a horn section that sounds like it's played by suffering asthmatics - the end result almost sounds like a reverent homage (with the Lizards it's always hard to tell) of a song that is so inappropriate in the first place that it ends up doing a conceptual double flip. A perfect way to start the record. Is this a rock record? Is it on the right speed?

This question is answered (sort of) by the next two numbers; **"Her Story"** (lyrics and vocals by Goldman) and **"TV"** (lyrics and vocals by Evans - 'verys' recited by Marshall). Both are harmonious, irresistible tunes with deliciously smooth/raw female vocals. Mixed together with a delicate cacophony created by found-object drums, panning samples, smatterings of click-y computer data read-out cards and post-feminist/beat poet lyrics, today they might be called "fabulous" and "perfect" by people who like Stereolab and Portishead.

"TV" was released as a single before the album even hit the stores and was the first single released by The Lizards that wasn't a cover version. Speaking of The Lizards much discussed "reliance" on cover versions, David told *Melody Maker* in 1981; "'TV' was our own composition, but there's something about cover versions. You can take them a bit further than the originals. It's useful to focus in on the irritation factor when you're doing a single. 'TV' is the only track that was written by us and is still irritating. I think singles are irritating by nature really though. They repeat so much, like the snare drum on 'Money'. That's my theory of pop singles which is why I selected the things I did to release." The long album versions of "Summertime Blues" and "Money" round off side one and begin side two, and both of these songs kind of "frame" the album.

Snuggled in the center of side two are three genre-less, ambient-dub-techno-ish soundscapes; **"The Flood"**, **"Trouble"** and the dreamy, distant, heartbeat-pulse of **"Events During the Flood."** These three pieces mix Eno qualities with pulsing, ping-pong throbs, floating poly rhythms, peppers of samples, tom toms, wailing/whispering vocals that sound like they were recorded in a far-off canyon, and a hundred other layers that slowly reveal themselves over repeated listens. Composed by Cunningham and Hayward, with final mixing and arrangement (and vocals?) by Cunningham - the results are an excellent and effective triptych, and give the homemade electronic tinkering heard so often by today's renegade musicians a real run for their originality.

Speaking about the track "Trouble" on the first Lizards LP, David told *Melody Maker* in 1980; "I

tend to find things and react to them on the spot. 'Trouble' is the best track for looking at some of the ways I actually work. It took an hour to record and mix. I already had a rhythm box track from a song which wasn't used, put it through a graphic equalizer and played with the knobs to get that rising and falling effect. Then I put on two stylophones treated with echo and glockenspiel ...but each time I played, I just listened to the original backing track and not to the other overdubs - an artificial constraint. Then I treated the whole mix with flanging, quite heavily."

The album's closing track, "**The Window**", is many people's favorite song on the record. A kind of surreal feminist ballad written and sung by British music journalist Vivien Goldman, it has chilly lyrics about a girl sitting in her room while her possibly un-dead ex-boyfriend sits outside the window watching her. Does he want to kill her? Will she find the strength to fight? Did she remember to lock the door tight? Should she just remain motionless? Is it all just in her head? "*Sometimes I think he's a vampire/He's making holes to drain blood...*" Vivien alternatively whispers and sings falsetto with remarkable aplomb. It probably should sound scary but it's somehow heart warming... bizarrely unique. Perhaps "The Window" could have been the theme song to Roman Polanski's film *Repulsion* (the melody and lyrics echoing inside Catherine Deneuve's head as she sits in her flat, arms reaching out for her from the walls and ceiling). Vivien's haunting vocal style, over tinkering piano melody and a percussion section that sounds like gently clapping and rustling cinder blocks, closes out the album with a spine-chilling stun. Towards the end of the song, when the music stops momentarily and Vivien's relaxed "doot-doot, doot do-da-da-da-da's" kick in - everyone in the room's got goose bumps.

Speaking about "The Window", David told *Melody Maker* in 1980; "Vivien played me a tape she'd done in her front room of her singing and playing the bass guitar. Because it was badly recorded, it sounded like an African woman in a village hitting a dried gourd and singing along with it. I really liked that tape, so when I had an afternoon of studio time for the album free because I'd forgotten to tell Steve and Dave to turn up, I put her in front of a microphone with a rhythm tape which I'd made and she improvised the melody and structure of 'The Window' right there." (Goldman would work with Beresford again on one of her own singles; "Launderette/Private Armies" - 1981 Virgin 10158, Window Records, 99 Records).

The regular appearance of dub-influenced beats and tempos on the first Lizards album may be due in some part to it's participants, but certainly Cunningham himself was familiar with dub long before that. Having remixed a Jah Lloyd album for Virgin in 1978 (released on the Piano label in 1996 as '**The Secret Dub Life of The Flying Lizards**' - Piano Records, Piano 501) as well as having produced and worked with dub-influenced groups like The Pop Group and others, dub beats were starting to become the spine that much of Cunningham and The Flying Lizards would work their improvisation around.

One of the interesting things about The Flying Lizards album is its warm, "open" sound quality. Some of the pieces' aural qualities almost have the characteristics of early jazz or blues records, where one microphone would be placed in the center of the room and all the players would space themselves evenly around it - letting the air between the microphone and themselves shape and open up the sound. It turns out this was no mistake.

Writing on the Piano label website (www.stalk.net/piano/) about his art installation "The Listening Room" (first exhibited at Chisendale Gallery in London in 1994 - the installation consisted of a microphone, amplifier and noise gate being placed inside an empty gallery space and the resulting feedback being altered by people and air moving within the space over a period of days), David Cunningham notes; "I realized when I did The Listening Room that there's a connection with the first record of mine that most people know about: 'Money' by The Flying Lizards was renowned for its extraordinary drum sound. The drum was in a big reverberant room with concrete wall and my microphone was a bit short so I recorded the drum with the microphone three or four meters away as I remember. You're not hearing the drum on the record, you're hearing the drum in that acoustically very complex space. Later... I became very interested in using what I like to describe as the air moving around in the room by pulling the microphones back from the instruments." David continues; "There's a story I heard, that when Jimi Hendrix was first recording in London he brought all his onstage amplification into the studio, a wall of Marshall cabinets, a tremendous volume. The engineer put a microphone somewhere near the speakers and it just overloaded. So this engineer, being an intelligent and responsive person, didn't ask Hendrix to turn down; he simply moved the microphone to the other side of the studio so that those early records, 'The Wind Cries Mary' and so on, have that beautiful dense sound, the sound of many cubic meters of air moving around in a room. That sound and that engineer's decision has a major influence on a lot of my work."

Another odd characteristic about the album that enhances this "open" quality by default - are

the quiet sounds that secretly inhabit the normally silent spaces between the songs on the LP. These between-track noises, credited to "Additional recordings made in Munich, Maidstone and in transit" on the sleeve, are only noticeable the third or fourth time you listen to the record. In between each musical piece can be heard quiet sounds of streets, backyards, markets, echo-y rooms with footsteps and creaky doors, birds, parks, parties, rooftops... In the end they're just one more strange layer. They actually give the album even more breathing room, more psychic space between the speakers as it were. Taken at face value, it's almost like you're witnessing the whole record performed live in a large concert hall: the ever-so-quiet footsteps, creaking doors, snippets of conversations, outside street roar and distant birds being the awkward, incidental noises heard by an audience that isn't quite sure if it's supposed to applaud or not between the numbers.

Between the albums "The Flying Lizards" and "Fourth Wall", and unbeknownst to many collectors, David recorded a cover version of an old English music hall song; "**The Laughing Policeman**" with Soloman, Toop, Beresford and a woman named Kit Hain on vocals ('The Laughing Policeman' - The Flying Lizards under pseudonym 'The Suspicions' 1980 Arista Records Ltd. ARIST361). Wanting it to be the next Flying Lizards release, David presented it to Virgin as the next single. Virgin didn't like it so David took it to Arista and released it under the group name The Suspicions. It's easy, sort-of, to see why a major label like Virgin might not have been interested (although they did go ahead with 'Summertime Blues' - go figure). "The Laughing Policeman" is a screeching, fast paced cover song loaded with strange samples and topped off with very loud, children's-TV-show-host-on-speed vocals by Hain. If you thought Deborah Evans' singing on "Summertime Blues" and "Money" sounded "bored" - then Hain's vocals on this song are the polar opposite - apocalyptically over-the-top and enthusiastic. Hilarious or migraine inducing? You decide... Coupled with the single's b-side, a drone/ ambient instrumental by Cunningham, this lost EP as a whole unequivocally captures the Lizard's early sound.

With Virgin happy with the success of "Money" and sales of the first album, David set out in 1980 to record the second official Flying Lizards record. Whereas the first album took several weeks to record, the "**Fourth Wall**" LP (1981 UK Virgin VM-2211) took 15 months to complete. The process of recording "Fourth Wall" certainly sounds like it might have been even more loose than the first, if that's possible. Cunningham did the recording of the album in several stages. First each musician laid down their individual tracks, then Cunningham later welded them together in the studio. David would often record a track with various musicians and then proceed to break down the individual elements and recombine them in new ways, often creating a completely new piece of music. "The idea is to reorientate the function of each instrument to some extent. To have them doing different things from what they might be normally doing." Cunningham told *Melody Maker* 1981.

This time around, David enlisted such avant luminaries as Robert Fripp, Peter Gordon, Michael Nyman, Steve Beresford, Julian Marshall and many others to use and abuse their various instruments, as well as choosing a different female vocalist this time around; prolific New York punk princess (and ex-Snatch co-founder) Patti Palladin was chosen to sing (or sneer) the tunes as well as pen all lyrics. David would later go on to produce Snatch's album ('The Snatch Album' - Pandemonium 1983) as well as produce/collaborate on an album with Palladin and Johnny Thunders ('Copycats' -Jungle 1988).

Whereas the first Lizards album alternated between low tempo pulse and high tempo drone - with chaotic smatterings of Dada silliness and weird pop hooks scattered evenly throughout, "Fourth Wall" and it's texture is all over the map. The first album's muted, open-air feel almost sounded "lo-fi" at points - as opposed to "Fourth Wall"s sounds, which are richly vibrant, colorful and shimmering. They sound, despite their oddness, as though they could have been recorded in an expensive studio. Now if this had been an Abba album, that quality would have been logical - but considering the music that is on "Fourth Wall" ...it makes for a really enjoyable and confusing clash of expected contexts.

Braver in it's experimental qualities than the first LP, "Fourth Wall" plunges head-first into a looking glass world of pop paradox and strata breaking anti-style that could be the soundtrack to anything written by Lewis Carrol or Gilles Deleuze. It's more like a hundred concepts all thrown into a blender and then whipped up into a bittersweet frappe. The album's almost-smooth consistency is betrayed by bits and chunks here and there that catch you by surprise; fragments of one idea present themselves briefly, then perhaps turn up in another unexpected location - like a giant, cross-referenced omelet. The "songs" on the album aren't so much songs (save for a few) as much as they are quick aural scribbles inside a sketchbook - much like Cunningham intended "Grey Scale" to be in 1977. The album seems best experienced with uninterrupted concentration

- it's an aural sculpture garden designed for headphones, bedrooms and private obsession. There are (perhaps) one or two attempts to reinvent the recipe that spelled commercial success for the "Money" single (most notably a version of Curtis Mayfield's classic 'Move On Up'), but they get lost in the colorful musical playground surrounding them. One has to be impressed with Cunningham's fearless attempt to create something unheard with the handful of artists he collided together for this project. His expertise at production is clearly evident here, even with the most difficult and whimsical of materials.

On the album, David occasionally uses sharply edited combos of samples spliced with rhythm, or samples that slowly pan around a tempo sometimes hitting the beat and sometimes not. This slow, disorienting method of loosely looped samples is heard early on "Grey Scale" and also on "The Secret Dub Life of The Flying Lizards" CD. And this technique really comes into form on the "Fourth Wall" album, especially on the tracks "**Glide/Spin**", "**New Voice**" and "**Another Story.**"

Cunningham's notes on his later solo CD "Voiceworks" (1992 Piano Records, Piano 505) may explain one aspect of this process in detail. David writes: "...a tape delay system is made by threading a reel of tape through the record head of one tape recorder and across to the replay head of an adjacent machine. The replayed sound is returned to the input of the first machine and goes through the system, replaying and decaying over and over again, the length of the delay being determined by the physical length of tape between the heads of the two tape recorders."

Beginning with a short sample of wind blowing, then what sounds like a quiet sample of a toast at a gentleman's club, side one of "Fourth Wall" starts out on the lightest-of-light notes; "**Lovers and Other Strangers**" (released as a single) is an airy, kooky summer jaunt that uses traditional instrumentation, toy sounds, odd samples and Patti's little girl-ish, playful vocals (one of many different vocal styles she showcases throughout the record) wrapped around an asymmetrical song structure. This then jumps immediately into the stunning "**Glide/Spin**", a floating synth and processed sample composition where the humming sounds shimmer quickly back and forth between speakers while Patti drolly recites lyrics about frustrated romance, closing the song by repeating the word "you..." a zillion times (very 'TV') while Peter Gordon strangles his saxophone in the background. "**In My Lifetime**" uses high pitched synths and erratic percussion while a sample of the title and other phrases repeats. The minimal "**Cirrus**" processes the sound of a flute (or someone saying the word 'cirrus?') into a complex pattern. The next official "song", "**A-Train**", starts out with ear-splitting pipe organ(?) over a mid tempo bass and drum beat while Patti sneers lyrics about weather, dead men's shoes, politicians and bums. Every musician seems to slowly add their instrument to the slinky "A-Train", until it becomes a complex, snake-hipped lurch. Side one closes with the awesome "New Voice", a long, soothing (and very dense) ambient sound collage that mingles a wavering, rising-sun synth and a meandering bass with processed, wailing voices and zillions of distant sounds that would probably take an afternoon to document; birds, wind, water, flute, a barking dog, the urban roar... it's one of the album's brightest moments.

The interesting "**Hands 2 Take**" kicks off side two. Released as a single, but almost impossible to imagine on the charts, it uses a driving beat of backward sounds made from drums, hand claps and trumpets while Patti loudly coos lyrics like *"From one dark age to another, scream on shitsu style / Soaring telepolitics and phones that you don't dial"*, leading up to the revelation; *"Sitting down, not standing / is a common dwarf disguise!"* while the beat builds and builds and builds. From that point on, the rest of side two is hard to put into words; lots of unusual instrument combinations, nothing that really resembles rock or pop, David's usual esoteric use of samples (what is that in the middle of '**Steam Away**', a quote from a cooking show?), and lots and lots of little details you'll notice the first or ninety-ninth time you listen.

There are lots of brilliant moments on side two (and the whole LP really) that happen very briefly, but they never stick around for very long, making it difficult for your conscious mind to wrap itself around anything too quickly. Only the weird cover of Curtis Mayfield's "Move On Up" temporarily breaks the kaleidoscope mood. Using a light beat and even lighter, synthetic horn arrangement with Patti's vocal styles, the song's tinny sound never really wraps itself around the intensity of the original, nor is successful in creating a unique identity of its own - perhaps this is intentional (cleverly 'ruining' classic songs would be taken to strange heights on the next Lizards LP).

True to the album's curious design, side two ends with no big bang, no beautiful ballad, nothing really remarkable actually. The erratic permutations of sound that make up the last track, "**Lost and Found**", simply come to a stop, a brief sample of a distant old-time gramophone or radio is heard... then a sample of wind blowing (the reverse of the beginning of the record) - and then the record is over. Time to wake up.

This album often seems like a meticulously produced work-in-progress or sketchbook, if there is such a thing. The "songs" on this album seem to act as strange attractors, each one a magnet

drawing whatever ideas the project's participants might have been tossing around in their heads at the time. The consequences of such an approach? Risk and unpredictability. In the end the listener is left not with a puzzle that needs re-assembling, but a busy and colorful patchwork quilt. It retains a cohesive, unique charm despite it's clashing colors and all-over-the-place style - and produces unexpected patterns every time you fold it.

Fans of the weirder half of the outer fringe of obscure, avant rock would probably enjoy this record if it wasn't so hard to come (it was never released by Virgin in the US). At the time of it's release - it was marketed as a pop product, but really had no category to call it's own; an awkward glitch that probably hurt as much as helped the LP. Removed (mostly) from the sanctimonious formalities of the avant-garde music scene, it was probably saved from being labeled "glib" by the very fact that it was from a "band" that was regarded as mostly gimmick-y up to that point, and therefore allowed that freedom. Yet, dropped into the laps of an unsuspecting pop audience who regarded the "band" in the same way, many probably became confused by the album's puzzling, hook-less nature and became quickly distracted. Henceforth the album was never here nor there, and without an instant sensation to catapult it into the public arena (which definitely happened with the first LP), the album became quickly lost.

The album wasn't received well by most of the press. It was reviewed in the English music weeklies briefly. For every glowing praise it got about it's significantly unique qualities... there was always another flippant dismissal to cancel it out. "Fourth Wall" just kind of came and went. Perhaps not forever though. With the do-it-yourself, post-rock, post-punk, post-indie, post-Cage, post-electronica, post-post-structuralist, post-everything underground music scenes still thriving and per mutating after all this time - the formless, forward-looking music on this album seems to make even more sense today. Cunningham has expressed interest in re-releasing a re-mixed, repackaged version of "Fourth Wall" on his own, under the David Cunningham/Patti Palladin name rather than The Flying Lizards. Until then check those record conventions and eBay.

David took a several year-long sabbatical from The Flying Lizards after "Fourth Wall". Then in 1994, after a year's delay and some re-recording due to contractual snafus, David recorded The Flying Lizards' **"Top Ten" LP** (1984 Statik Records STATLP 20). Hailed by some critics as their "best" album, "Top Ten" put all of Cunningham's avant/experimental inclinations and improvisational habits on hold to make room for ten carefully chosen rock and roll classics that were then meticulously and outrageously deconstructed with admirable control and discipline.

Imagine trying to create HTML code to replicate Jackson Pollock's painting style. Try and stay in that same mindset and you'll probably experience some of the same thought processes Cunningham was going through when he envisioned this LP. This was the last official release from The Flying Lizards, and they certainly went out with a high-concept bang. The cover versions on the first two Lizards' albums took catchy and memorable rock songs and made them catchy and memorable in a completely new ways despite their parody. "Top Ten" takes catchy and memorable songs and removes everything catchy and memorable from them whatsoever... but that's precisely the point (although two of the album's tracks were released as singles). David seemed to listen carefully to each song he covered, decided what it was exactly that made it "special", then mathematically inverted that quality (he appropriately dedicated all the songs on 'Top Ten' to Johann Maelzel, inventor of the metronome). With tongue planted waaaayyyyyy in cheek, the pop music on this LP is "form follows function" taken to its obvious conclusion... it's the bastard child of Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright... it's Donald Judd's chickens coming home to roost... it's modernism's dirty little secret! Today, this album might sound a tad worn, these forms of post-structuralism and deconstruction have worked themselves well into our everyday society at large. Still, despite it's probability in being used as background music on a VH1 documentary about postmodernism, it's nice to see a time-stepping piece of art where the artists were able to put one foot in the past, one foot in the present, but were still just enough ahead of everyone else to reach a decade or so into the future.

This time around, David enlisted vocalist Sally Peterson (now a successful British radio DJ, a career choice that was apparently sparked after a commercial producer heard her voice on 'Sex Machine', and offered her television voice-over work) to fulfill all singing duties. Musically, everything is thundering, processed drum beats and precise electronics. Every foot-tapin' beat replaced with a programmed drum repetition, every primal guitar riff replaced with a binary code, and every inspiring moment replaced with the cold hard steel of a digital studio, chrome furniture, air conditioning and fluorescent lighting. When Kraftwerk used electronics to create an organic new sound, they seemed to be saying "Wow! Look what computers can do!", when the Lizards use electronics to poke fun at a good-time classic, Cunningham seems to be saying "Wow! Look

what computers *have done!*" The use of technology to create this music is sarcastic and obnoxious, never reverent. David's dedication to his homage remains consistent throughout the entire album, each song gets it's own meticulous treatment, but all ten are cut from the same warped template. The shout-out-loud, bring-the-house-down chorus of "**Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin On**" is reduced to Sally's (literally) barely audible spoken whisper. The spontaneous banter between James Brown and his band members during the funk anthem "**Sex Machine**" turns into a sickeningly predictable, robotic tape loop. The sacred, soul-of-a-poet lines to Leonard Cohen's "**Suzanne**" are blasphemously recited with a blunt thud that would probably even annoy Hal from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Any beat or word or moment that happens in the original song more than once - repetition being a prime ingredient in rock and roll - is never played twice. It's digitally sampled, no matter what it's nature or purpose, and then bombastically repeated whenever necessary, with no subtlety or nuance. At first you laugh, then you find yourself slowly pulled into the Lizards' vision of a purely functional world of hard lines, where human emotion is not a right but a privilege, and people probably have wires and circuitry beneath their sunglasses. And to be honest, despite their extreme nature, some pieces even sound enjoyable in their own right ('**Great Balls of Fire**', '**Then He Kissed Me**' and the two singles). Many other artists have done works of this nature, notably The Residents' "Third Reich 'n Roll" and Sonic Youth/Ciccone Youth's "The Whitey Album". But those sound like sloppy studio parties compared to this disciplined and frighteningly thorough journey into grid pattern aesthetics. If you've always loathed the sanctimonious admiration granted the golden years of rock and roll, and are nauseated by the thought of The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame... then this album is soooooo for you.

Except for the aforementioned 1978 Cunningham remix/re-loop/re-sampling of the instrumental Jah Lloyd material that was eventually released on the Piano label with the title "The Secret Dub Life of The Flying Lizards", the Lizards have been defunct ever since "Top Ten". The ever-prolific David Cunningham has always kept busy with his many other art, film, music and production activities and projects (just as he did before and during the Lizards' existence). Take a stroll over to the huge Piano label website (www.stalk.net/piano) for the scoop on a lot of his activities past and present, it's too long a list to mention here.

There are two known videos of The Flying Lizards. One, an actual "real rock video" for "Dizzy Miss Lizzie" shows Sally Peterson hanging upside down (with the camera positioned to make her look right-side-up) and lips synching the song, with additional kooky footage. The other is not a video per se but video footage of a very young David Cunningham and Deborah Evans performing "Money" live on Top of the Pops in England sometime in 1979. Someone, somewhere has a tape of this. [Author's note: this turns out to be incorrect, there actually *were* videos made for 'Money' and 'TV' when they came out as singles, and perhaps a few other videos for singles were made during the Flying Lizards' existence].

Finding The Flying Lizards material can be tricky, if not impossible ("The Secret Dub Life..." CD is of course still available). Vinyl versions of the American pressing of the first Lizards LP and the "Money" single seem to be somewhat easy to come by on the internet. The rest of the Lizards material on vinyl gets harder and harder (if not impossible) to find, depending on what it is. In 1995 Virgin Japan re-released CDs of the first album (Virgin Japan VJCP-17501) and "Fourth Wall" (Virgin Japan VJCP-17502) complete with b-sides and colorful booklets full of photos and (mostly inaccurate) lyrics and information on the group. It appears that the Virgin Japan CD of "Fourth Wall" was discontinued some time during 1999, but the CD pressing of the first album is still available as of this writing. As mentioned before, David has expressed interest in releasing a re-mixed, re-worked, re-packaged version of "Fourth Wall" one day under the David Cunningham/Patti Palladin name rather than The Flying Lizards. There has been also talk of the eventual release of "Money and Other Love Songs: The Flying Lizard Compilation" CD, an archive of the "best" of The Flying Lizards cover material, as well as rare stuff, some b-sides and four never released Lizards deconstructions, including a 1983 Lizards version of "Wipe Out".

That's it... that's everything I can think of to write about the great wrinkle in pop culture history that was The Flying Lizards, and their warped mini-legacy. If you want to know even more... you can check out my website about them at this url: (<http://home.netcom.com/~logan5>) Do you know that I originally wanted to write this article in backwards text so you would have to hold it up to a mirror to read it? For some reason I was inspired to, but the publishers said it would be too hard to print. I just kind of thought it would set the right tone...

- by Mark Allen

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