

End of print; Bible  
of music + style +  
animals

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Helmet John

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Effspring Girls

against CCYS

AUGUST 94  
\$3.50 USA \$3.95 CAN.







# helmet

BY AMY TALKINGTON

**SUB BASEMENT THREE.** Maybe 50 feet underground. Helmet rehearse. New songs. "Wilma's Rainbow," some hanger-on requests in a dead moment. Upon the spontaneous grant of his wish, he reclines on his back and gently writhes to the pummeling melody. A kind of melody previously unsung by Page Hamilton. The kind of melody that makes you smile.

Page stands, legs spread, rocking intently. His neck grows thick and reddens as he sings. Irving Stone's biographical novel of Michelangelo The Agony and The Ecstasy and Strunk and White's Elements of Style both sit, dusty, on a shelf. These may or may not be his books but, regardless, Page is both a great romantic and an agile student of style.

A shoe is placed elegantly on a bass cabinet. A plastic ET doll stands nearby and a Smurf pinata dangles from the low ceiling. Rolled-up guitar cords hang like little sculptures on tacks sticking out of the wall. Sweet. I'm amazed at Helmet's care until I find out that they share this space with Sonic Youth. I'd imagine these are the artsy touches of Kim Gordon.

**WALKING.** Page, Henry Bogdan, John Stanier, Rob Echeverria and I head East on Houston Street towards Tompkins Square Park. Although you might assume that Helmet is a Lower East Side or East Village band, none of the band members live here. Page used to, but after several years, he had to get out.

**page:**

"I've lived in five different neighborhoods — the Upper West Side, the Dominican part of Harlem, the East Village, the Lower East Side and now I'm living on 16th Street which is a no man's land. Every New York neighborhood is similar in that the level of noise is louder than any other city. When I lived up at 141st Street in the Dominican neighborhood, I had a whole Marshall stack in my bedroom. I wrote some of Helmet's first songs like "Rumble" at completely full volume... and nobody cared!"

**NEW YORK CITY, 1989:** Helmet began. Page, a graduate student in jazz guitar, and Peter Mengede (Helmet's original guitarist) found both John (drums) and Henry (bass) through the Village Voice want ads. When Peter departed the band last year, Helmet quickly secured Rob in his place and have since written and recorded their new album Betty.

People often comment on how Helmet's music is, aesthetically, like New York City. Dense and claustrophobic. Urgent, but structured. Loud.

**PAGE:**

"The first place I lived in New York City was the Clinton Arms Hotel on the Upper West Side. That place was disgusting, but at the time it didn't really bother me because I was studying jazz and living four blocks from where John Coltrane used to live."

John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Jimi Hendrix and Béla Bartók are among the greats duti-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER MORELLO

^ PAGE HAMILTON. 34 years old. Anomaly. Hearty sports fan and hesitant intellectual. Vegetarian. Musician and writer.



ROB ECHEVERRIA. Queens native. Guitarist, self-taught. Inspired by Kiss and Black Sabbath. Fast eater. Previously played with New York hardcore bands Straight Ahead and Rest In Pieces.



JOHN STANIER. Schooled drummer. Band youngster. Formerly a page designer for Rockpool.. Proud owner of a pocket computer and neon beeper.

fully worshipped by Page Hamilton.

**GARRY HAGBERG** (Professor of Philosophy at Bard College. Page's first music teacher at the University of Oregon, 15 years ago.):

"When I first listened to Helmet, I instantly recognized those early influences. We used to study the way that Bartók used small motifs and tiny musical fragments to generate compositions. If you listen to what Page is doing now you can actually discern the influence because he, too, is working with motific development ...with a kind of popular music influence."

**PAGE:**

"There are some great bands around today, but unfortunately there's only a small handful. I greatly admire the Jesus Lizard. Their music moves me. It's powerful and passionate. Another band that moves me is Morphine and that's a completely different groove. Every time I see them, I have a grin from ear to ear. I like stuff that throws me rhythmically without sounding like it was intellectually conceived."

Page fiercely and accurately thumps and hums a Jesus Lizard song to exhibit their brilliance. Often, Page hums a rhythm or tune to make his point. To Page, words can't really describe music.

**PAGE:**

"Helmet's music is not intellectually conceived but it is rehearsed in a disciplined way. Once we've gotten down the overall structure of a song, I'll have an idea for a little stutter or hiccup. We'll sort of make a drill out of it because that's the hardest part of an arrangement. But the basic grooves come to me when I'm away from the guitar or right when I first sit down, so that's not intellectually conceived, meaning I'm not sitting at the guitar trying to think of a cool riff."

It's a beautiful Saturday afternoon, and Tompkins Square Park is crowded. East Villagers take their dogs for walks. Old men play chess at stone tables. Neighborhood kids play basketball freeform on cement courts. Screaming. Hungry people, young and old, line up behind the Hare Krishna truck for a free plate of food. Birds chirp for the rare lushness of the blossoming trees. The new Mayor has the streets renovated — a grumbling truck crawls by, tearing up 7th Street along the way. Snazzy rollerbladers with Walkmans zip by. Salsa musicians jam. Congas. We find a spot on a bench.

Interscope, Helmet's record label, gave Page a new set of golf clubs for Christmas last year. He's looking forward to playing in different cities while they tour this year.



# helmet

## PAGE:

"I grew up in a small town where there wasn't much else to do but play sports. I played tackle football, basketball and baseball, and I ran track. Later, I learned how to water-ski and snow ski and play tennis and golf. Living in New York only feeds the sports fire because we've got all these great pro teams. I'm totally excited about the Rangers, and I've never played hockey in my life! I think it's a healthy distraction. There are other things that musicians do. Drugs are very in vogue — that's a complete waste of energy. I've tried all that shit; it doesn't stimulate any creativity in me — it makes me want to sit around in my room and listen to Pink Floyd and feel sorry for myself."

Rob doesn't talk much, but he does admit he was a package sorter at the United Parcel Service in Queens when Helmet found him. John pulls out his pocket computer wizard to quiz Rob on zip codes. Rob isn't very good at zip codes, but John continues to fiddle with the little computer throughout the afternoon. Henry says nothing. He is busy with my video camera, artfully recording our conversation.

A woman walks by. She has bandages wrapped around parts of her face and a large piece of scrap material covering her head and neck. What you can see of her face is distorted, perhaps burned. John freaks, "Did you see that? What's wrong with her?" Page says he has seen her around for years, that she's gotten better, she used to cover all but her eyes. This was once his neighborhood.

Clearly, Page is the voice of Helmet. He writes almost all their music — every song except Henry's "Silver Hawaiian" and "Rollo." And Page writes all the lyrics.

You heard about, "be your own man"  
You talk a lot and loud  
illustrate the obvious boy  
You're mentally endowed  
— First verse, "Wilma's Rainbow" on Betty

## PAGE:

"It seems like a lot of my lyrics bash political correctness, but it's not that so much as bashing people's inability to have any conviction for something they themselves worked towards and discovered. ...assuming responsibility for oneself. As my grandfather would say," [Page imitates his grandfathers crackly Southern voice] 'Everybody's just sitting on a hill and howling. 'Bring it to me! Give it to me! I deserve it!' He's 90 years old. My grandfather was a cowboy and then he later became a grocery man. He came across from Oklahoma in a covered wagon as a kid. He tried to go to California but they weren't letting anyone in at the time, so they went up to Oregon which is where they still are. I don't know if you ever read Grapes of Wrath, but that's essentially my family. I'm very romantic about that kind of time... actually, I'm very romantic about every period of time except the time that I live in."

He laughs.

## GARRY:

"Helmet combines extreme rage with a very developed sense of musical structure and a very precise rhythmic performance. There's an exactitude along with this tremendous emotional power which is really distinct and unusual. I remember when Page walked into my studio the first time. Instantly, I thought to myself, here is a guy who is really gonna take this seriously, here's this guy who's not kidding at all. Though he's obviously a much more worldly and mature person, Page has all the electrifying enthusiasm and contagious energy that he had when he was 18. He has always been very dedicated to the idea of developing a musical identity in his musical imagination and then making that identity real or eternal. You can very clearly see his identity and features in Helmet's music."

Bike riding in New York City. Working heavy machinery. Playing ice hockey. A helmet is a protective head covering of leather, metal or plastic. Metonymically, Helmet is a German man's name. Helmut Kohl. Helmut Newton. Page's grandfather, Milton, speaks German fluently. You'd say, then, that he speaks three languages — English, German and Music.

HENRY BOGDAN. Songwriter. Bass player. Sweet but silent videographer. Some day, he'd like to own a restaurant.