

Mysterious Teenage

As the Beatles and Rolling Stones invaded American shores in the early sixties, an odd musical scenario was unfolding over the Pittsburgh airwaves. Disc jockeys on low-watt AM stations were blasting a strange combination of mystery music that took the form of undiluted rockabilly, exotic doo-wop, booze-fueled rhythm and blues, wailing and weird guitar and sax instrumentals and more often than not, a full-on combination of any and all of the above. Often issued on tiny labels that eluded the national spotlight, these records -- chosen strictly for their uniqueness -- were often played nowhere else. Hence groups like New Orleans' Saxons, Detroit's Aqua-Nites and South Bend, Indiana's Delcos toiled in obscurity even in their hometowns, while ruling the record hops in the Smokey City.

This strange phenomenon could all be attributed to pioneering pied-piper Mad Mike Metrovich. In a career that would make most current crate diggers' heads spin, Metrovich went to the ends of the earth in search of the eccentric sounds that he loved. Beginning in 1960, his record hops ruled Pittsburgh's teenage population with a vengeance, recalls eyewitness Howard Kozy: "It was wild Mau-Mau music, kids fighting, doing splits, somersaults, drinking wine and shouting -- this kind of stuff was out of vogue everywhere by the early sixties. Everywhere except Pittsburgh."

By the time Mike hit the airwaves in '64, he was a self-made, bona-fide legend. Going up against the British Invasion with off-kilter discs like the Vels' ethereal "Mysterious Teenage" might seem suicidal, but Mike's reputation as a tastemaker was based on formulas that still

resonate with DJs today. Like the earliest Sound System spinners in Jamaica, he recognized his records as calling cards, scratching off or "covering up" labels, renaming songs, shifting speeds and generally doing everything in his power to keep the records he championed shrouded in mystery. There was a method to His Madness: the only place you could hear these sounds were at Mad Mike dances or on his radio show, and the mystique created a heightened appreciation -- and fiendish desire -- for the music.

"Listen in," Mike was fond of saying, "Because you may never hear it again." Thankfully, there were exceptions and fifty of them now reside on three indispensable volumes -- with more forthcoming -- thanks to the Mad Mike maniacs at Norton Records. You've heard "The Goo Goo Muck" by the Cramps? Now dig the ultra-rare original by Ronnie Cook and the Gaylads. Mike's "Monsters," as he referred to them, ran from Eddie "Guitar Slim" Jones' 1952 blues pounder "Certainly All" to the Sonics' newly-minted proto-punk masterpiece "Psycho."

Every bit as impressive as the music is Mike's story, passionately told by friends, followers, fellow DJs and foremost Metrovich historian Miriam Linna.

"I suppose I spread the disease of records!" he tells her. "My record collection took some strange directions. I didn't limit myself to any one kind of music. I was always after unusual records, and well, I had good ears."

Besides Seattle's aforementioned Sonics, who Mike booked for their only live appearance outside of the West Coast, Mike earned the respect of

Memphis's Sam the Sham, who wouldn't begin a local concert without him taking a bow. Niles, Michigan's Tommy James attributes the beginning of his career to the Mad One. When Mike rescued "Hanky Panky" from obscurity and, musical mad scientist that he was, sped it up to 48 RPM with a pitch control fashioned from a model railroad transformer, the song was such a hit that it's now burned into our collective memory, three RPMs faster than originally recorded.

"Outside of Pittsburgh, I'm a nobody," recalled James, whose band had splintered shortly after the recording session. "Within their city limits, I'm a rock star with a number one record. It was Mad Mike who made it happen. Pounding the record -- he didn't just play it -- he *pounded* it."

"Mike was never a guy who sought publicity," recalled his friend Jay "Jaybird" Kuchca. "He just loved the records and he loved finding records to play that no one else would ever consider playing. What he instilled in us was to go out there and just go through everything, play both sides, and find these things, things that some one had spent a lot of time and emotion recording; that had been forgotten or never even really heard."