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"Don Boing: Beneath the Music"

by Richard Romano

This month, Loss Leader Music Ltd. will release "Any Kind of Pain: The Don Boing Anthology," a six-disc collection of alternative takes, lost recordings, and the greatest hit of the seminal folk-rock singer/guitarist/songwriter/plumber, whose albeit brief career renaissance in the late 1980s came about completely in spite of his exploring new musical technologies. In a music career that has spanned nearly 30 years—give or take a few—Don Boing has seen it all: the dizzying highs, the crushing lows, the humdrum middles. He's had to fight to make the music he wanted to make, and in the process has been caught in battles with bandmates, embroiled in lawsuits, crippled by contractual disputes, and menaced by otters.

Donald Quincy Ezekiel Boing—pronounced like the aircraft manufacturer, not the silly noise—was born in London in 1940, and again three years later in Los Angeles. Music critics have for years been unable to explain this,

but one thing remains clear: Boing was born to play and sing music. Or something. In fact, it is believed that he was even heard humming while still in utero, but such a story may in fact be apocryphal, if not downright silly.

Boing first started playing guitar at the tender age of 33. In interviews, he has said that it was Dylan's *Self Portrait* album that first made him want to write songs. He also credits first hearing Paul McCartney & Wings as further cementing his desire to make music. "McCartney has influenced so many musicians," Boing once said. "I suppose it's no surprise that I wasn't any different. The way his bass guitar works with the drums to form a basic rhythm underneath Denny Laine's guitar playing—brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. That's why McCartney was hailed as a genius."

In 1973, he quit his career as a successful plumber and moved to Greenwich Village where he began playing acoustic guitar in subway stations. After only 20 minutes, he was beat up and his guitar stolen. The "Anthology" opens with a home recording he made shortly after the incident. "Bleeding From the Ears" has the raw, pained vocal that would become Boing's hallmark.

He played this recording to Burton Splunge, the owner of Loss Leader Records, whom he met one afternoon while

unclogging Splunge's sink. Loss Leader, many years from becoming the industry juggernaut it is today, was at that time a small, independent record label whose biggest act was Arthur Hoover and the Vacu-Tones, a four-piece band in which each member played some configuration of vacuum cleaner. Although the Vacu-Tones had a small cult following (they had the number one selling album among the deaf), Splunge had no illusions that they were destined for mainstream commercial success, and he saw in Boing the opportunity to hit it big, or at the very least keep the electric company from turning his power off.

So in 1974, Boing's debut album—"In Love with Leeches"—was released to almost complete disinterest. In retrospect, Splunge believes that it was simply a question of timing. "1974 was not a year for angst-ridden folk music," Splunge writes in the liner notes to "The Don Boing Anthology." "It was really a time for angst-ridden art rock. Had 'In Love with Leeches' come out three years earlier, this Anthology would probably be twice as long as it is now. So consider yourself lucky."

One song from "In Love with Leeches"—the up-tempo folk-rock track "Eating Lumber"—made a slight impression on the underground music scene. The song's comparisons to Big Star led Alex Chilton to remark, "What? You're kidding,

right?" Actually, it turned out that everybody was, and the song soon sank without a trace. It appears on "The Don Boing Anthology" in three different versions, the original all-acoustic demo, the full-band version, and a version that Boing sang with his mouth stuffed with spaghetti.

It was at that point that Splunge had a brainstorm. Going over the sales figures for both "In Love with Leeches" and "That Which Sucks Merely Blows from the Opposite Direction," the most recent Vacu-Tones release, as well as what it cost to put out two separate records by different artists, he hit upon the idea of merging the raw folk sound of Boing with the "quasi-techno" sound of Hoover's Vacu-Tones. The only roadblock was Arthur Hoover himself, but since he was actually only a department store mannequin, he was easily deposed as leader of the group. (Hoover ended up in San Francisco and went on to record several albums for Ralph Records in the late '70s.)

Discs 1 and 2 of "The Don Boing Anthology" highlight Boing's work with the Vacu-Tones, including the first fruits of that collaboration, 1974's "Coat Me With an Ointment," perhaps the best melding of Boing's stark vocal and gentle acoustic guitar with the high-pitched whine of industrial vacuum cleaners. It was reminiscent of the drone experiments of the Velvet Underground, and Lou Reed himself

was heard to remark, after having heard it, "What the hell was that?"

The highlight of the "Anthology," for Vacu-Tones fans, is the extended excerpt from the long-lost "second" album (it was actually their fifth). Recorded in 1974, it was very much a product of its time, that time being 11:58 p.m. on December 17, 1974. The 45-minute album was written, performed, and recorded in 36 minutes, no mean feat, yet was deemed by Splunge to be "far too wretched to be released." Missing for nearly 25 years, the original tapes surfaced in 1998 when Splunge cleaned out his garage and found them stuffed inside a moosehead.

The centerpiece of the ill-fated album, which appears on Disc 2 of the "Anthology," is what is believed to be Boing's first—and mercifully last—attempt at a rock opera, "A Quack One." The basic plot is convoluted and most of the time is completely incomprehensible, which puts it on the same level as most rock operas. It appears to be about one woman's quest for the perfect duck—whether for food or amorous reasons is never really made clear. What is important about "A Quack One" is that if you listen to the CD version of the song closely and keep an eye on the counter, at 9:34 you can hear in the background the sound of a Xerox 6500 color copier, which had been introduced a

year earlier. Coupled with the repeated refrain "Color my world/I'm so much older/Color my world/How much is toner?" it marks the first appearance in Boing's work of modern technology, which Boing sought to use more of in his recordings.

This caused tension between Boing and the other Vacu-Tones. Where they were content to build on their by-now outdated vacuum cleaner technology, Boing wanted a more contemporary sound. In particular, he wanted to incorporate keyboards into the Vacu-Tones' sound.

"Two years ago, IBM introduced a self-correcting version of its Selectric typewriter," said Boing in a 1975 interview for *Rolling Stone* magazine, "and it just sounds terrific. Redactron recently came out with a cassette-based word processor which, with a little vibrato dropped onto it, sounds fantastic, especially at 75 words per minute. Multi-terminal video editing systems are coming out—my goal is to start building our new sound around these new technologies."

So without consulting the other members of the band—or even Splunge—Boing hired three keyboardists from the Loss Leader steno pool, and began work on a new Vacu-Tones album—without any of the Vacu-Tones invited to play on it.

So in mid-1975, the original Vacu-Tones officially

left the band, and a long legal battle was to ensue.

"We were the original Vacu-Tones, we had been using that name before we ever heard of Don %@\$#%& Boing," said bass Hooverist Melman Sklenko in a 1978 interview in *American Lawyer* magazine. "And we thought that everyone associated the name Vacu-Tones with commercially unviable, tedious, appliance-based industrial noise. So we sued to force Boing to have to keep recording under the name The Vacu-Tones."

"That whole period in the mid-70s when all the Vacu-Tones were suing Boing, what a nightmare that was," Splunge's liner notes explain. "It was a real firefight. I accidentally walked into what I thought was an empty office and was hit by a flying lawsuit. It cost me 10 grand in legal expenses just to walk out of the room."

All the lawsuits, however, eventually petered out into nothingness when it was discovered that none of the attorneys hired by the Vacu-Tones had ever passed the Bar.

To which Splunge quips, "I don't doubt for a minute that they ever passed a bar. I'm sure they strode up to and drank lustily from each and every one of them."

His past behind him and full of new ideas and approaches to music, Boing took the tapes of the album-in-progress and embarked on a solo career, his intention being

to release it as his first post-Vacu-Tones solo album. But it was then that tragedy struck.

Among Boing's many problems in the mid- to late 1970s—such as chronic insomnia and his habit of talking to squirrels—was his increasing drug use. Thus his first solo contract with Loss Leader Records was signed while under the influence of allergy medication, which could account for some of its bizarre clauses, such as Boing's forfeiting any share of the earnings from his albums, being placed on a fixed hourly wage of \$2.50, and agreeing to have his mouth filled in with cement. Even more seriously, one of the terms of his contract was that he not actually record a single note for 10 years.

By the time his contract was up in 1987, a lot had happened in music—disco, punk, new wave, Donny and Marie, even a Boston album. Fortunately, Boing had missed all of it, another clause in his contract requiring him to be exiled to a small tropical island in the South Pacific. While there, he befriended the only other occupant of the island, who ran a copy shop and office supply store. This chance meeting would reflect itself in the music Boing would attempt to make when his contract was up and he was allowed to return to civilization. For, as there were no actual customers on the island, Boing was given free rein

to play with the shop's equipment. In particular, Boing was captivated by first the IBM PC keyboard in 1981 and the Apple Macintosh keyboard, introduced in 1984.

"And with the mouse," said Boing in an 1992 interview for *Sheet Metal Worker* magazine, "you can get a great maraca sound, especially with the three-button variety."

"I always wanted to have the latest and the greatest copying, imaging, and desktop publishing equipment," writes Wendell Xavier Glubb, sole proprietor of Desert Island Copies, in the "Anthology"'s notes. "After all, you never know when an ocean liner or cruise ship—maybe even an oil tanker—is going to come by and need copies or maybe even color graphics for a presentation. Personally, I think our strategy of catering to the passing ocean liner market was a sound one. And I continue to stand by it." Nevertheless, Glubb's advertising and marketing strategy of spelling out "Copies 10¢" in the sand with coconuts did not meet with resounding success.

Glubb eagerly began to collaborate with Boing, and confessed to being happy to have someone to talk to and have something to do with his time other than, as he put it, "xeroxing toucans."

Disc 4 of the "Anthology" highlights some of the material that Boing recorded with Glubb on the island. He

got around his contractual no-record clause by simply writing down what he wanted Glubb to play, and having Glubb do the actual playing and recording. Thus it was that Boing's vision was realized while also not recording a single note himself. It was crafty and, as the selections on Disc 4 show, utterly pointless.

The rest of the "desert island tapes" were sadly lost, and in a controversial manner that still rankles Boing today.

"Around 1986 I was looking for the material we had recorded," recalls Boing, "and discovered half the tapes were gone. I confronted Glubb, who said that they had been carried off by a pack of roving tortoises."

It was eventually learned that, short of food during the 1985 monsoon season, Glubb ate the tapes.

In 1987, Boing was clean and sober and glad to finally get off the island. "Glubb ate my tapes!" Boing said in a 1988 interview for *Printing News* magazine. "The greater part of 10 years' work—down his gullet. What I was able to recover was completely unsalvageable." And the less said about that the better.

Boing promptly signed a proper contract with Loss Leader, and decided to try to work with the material he had recorded with the Loss Leader typing pool before his exile.

But, alas, those recordings had also been destroyed.

"I'm to blame for that mess," Splunge confesses in the "Anthology"'s liner notes. "I was in the studio late one night in 1981, and the radio was on. There was this song I really liked at the time—I can't remember what it was called or who it was by, but it had something to do with cars, and it had this cool synth sound. I really loved it, and I couldn't at that time afford to buy the record, so I kept waiting for the radio to play it so I could tape it. Well, it came on, and I discovered to my horror that I didn't have any blank tape. All I could grab in time was what was lying around, which happened to be Don's album. I really only intended to record—what?—a mere three minutes right up front, but the phone rang, it was my divorce attorney, and by the time I got back to the studio, the tape had been completely recorded over."

Splunge never told Boing what really happened, opting instead to blame it on a fire in the studio.

"It was certainly more convincing than roving tortoises," writes Splunge. "But when he reads this and finds out the truth, he's probably going to kill me."

Discouraged that more than 10 years of work had been destroyed, Boing turned to drink, spending all his days and nights in a Nyquil-induced haze. After three days, he

picked himself up, and checked himself into the Betty Ford Clinic.

"Unfortunately," writes Splunge, "he was so out of it at that time he couldn't see straight, and actually moved into the Bethany Ford Automotive Service Center in Peekskill, NY."

Peculiar stares from the mechanics aside, Boing was able to dry out, and found that he had the clearest sinuses he'd ever had. Completely energized, he immediately charged back into the studio and in one marathon session wrote, rehearsed, recorded, turned on the equipment, recorded, accidentally erased, re-recorded, and mixed his first actual album in more than 15 years—"Liquid Sponge." In a complete about face, Boing dispensed completely with the sounds of household appliances and office equipment, relying instead on traditional folk-rock instrumentation, most prominently his guitar. After hearing a test pressing of the album Burton Splunge was heard to remark, "Holy shit—it's listenable."

Working with noted session musicians Boing had found loitering at the bus station, he included them on the hard-rocking "Pelted with Scones," a track that was played heavily on alternative and college radio stations in fall 1988. The lyrics were the most personal he'd ever written:

"I walk down the street and see through my bones/I often find myself pelted with scones/No no, no more muffins for me/I can see there's something forming."

An important song in the oeuvre of Don Boing, Disc 5 consists entirely of alternate takes of "Pelted with Scones." The first five versions were recorded by Boing at home a capella in the shower. Versions six through 10 show Boing experimenting with different instrumentation, from electric guitar, to flute, to flugelhorn, to accordion, to bagpipes. Versions 11 through 15 show Boing settling on electric guitar and actually learning the chords to it. Version 16 features Boing backed by the London Symphony Orchestra, a take that Boing eventually discarded as sounding "too lush." Version 17 is the version that was released as a single in Zimbabwe, while the remaining 10 tracks are the various live versions he performed over the years, including one "special version" he sang to his cat.

High on the success of "Pelted by Scones" as well the album, Boing hit the road and went on his first concert tour—ever, really. He took with him his backing musicians and, in a bit of self-deprecating humor, christened the road band "Don Boing and the Roving Tortoises."

Splunge describes the tour, for which he was recruited as road manager. "I had the brilliant idea of saving money

by simply playing at bus stations," he writes. "That way, we can take a commercial bus line—which is cheaper than chartering our own—and we can avoid travel expenses to a particular venue. All things considered, it worked out great. Except when we tried to go overseas."

Boing's tour of bus stations around the country was deemed to be a success, and Boing and company were buoyed by the large crowds that would turn up.

"I didn't think we had a big following," admitted Boing in a 1992 interview in *Bus Driver* magazine. "But the crowds that were turning up were phenomenal. I remember one show—it was on a Friday night before Labor Day, the place was packed. Definitely standing room only."

Toward the end of the tour of the 48 contiguous states, Splunge decided to try to send Boing and the Roving Tortoises overseas, and several dates were booked at the Budokan in Japan. But the tour would never get that far, and again tragedy would strike Boing's career.

The first overseas stop was, Splunge later admitted, "a complete miscalculation. Somehow, we never purged our database, and this place was still in it." It turned out that Boing's first overseas concert was on the same virtually deserted island he had only recently left.

"Why we were sent there, I have no idea," said Boing

in a 1994 interview in *Aircraft Machinery News* magazine. We had no fan base there at all. The only one there was Glubb, and he hated rock music and left after the first song. We ended up playing to a family of otters."

The Roving Tortoises' bass player, Bonzy Carmichael, grew increasingly frustrated at having only a small, fur-bearing audience, and stormed off the stage. The rest of the band, too, didn't see the point in continuing. Unfortunately, that set off a riot among the otters, who wanted to see the rest of the set. The otters charged the stage, and a bloody fight ensued. When it was over, Eddy Clankenboomer, the drummer, was dead. The rest of the tour was cancelled, and Boing and Co. returned to the States in defeat.

"If only..." Splunge would lament in a 1990 interview in *Pig Farmer* magazine. "The tour was going great. The domestic leg couldn't have gone any smoother. But, we did one foreign date, the drummer was killed by otters, and it just fell apart. I blame myself, I should have known that a deserted tropical island is no place for a rock band."

Several live recordings from the domestic tour appear on Disc 5 of the "Anthology." Splunge regrets the poor sound quality of most of the live recordings.

"Loss Leader at that time did not have a mobile

recording unit," Splunge writes in the "Anthology"'s notes, "nor were we able to make any soundboard recordings. Basically, we had a guy standing at the back with a Dictaphone. We had to reuse some microcassettes, which is why if you listen to the quiet songs closely—like 'Call Me Moist' or 'Slivers of Yams'—you can actually hear someone dictating a letter."

Boing retired from music after the ill-fated tour and turned to acting. He has appeared on many television programs over the years, primarily crime dramas.

"Basically, whenever a cop show needs someone to play a dead body, they give me a call," says Boing proudly.

The finest testament to his acting ability was his appearance as a dismembered corpse in an episode of "Law and Order."

The final disc of "The Don Boing Anthology" comprises various home recordings Boing made over the years, such as demos of songs that were never recorded, spoken-word poetry, himself typing long letters, and various answering machine messages he has recorded over the years.

"The Don Boing Anthology" was digitally recorded, then immediately erased and re-recorded on Burton Splunge's voice mail.