

the SLACKERS

12.13.98
The Haunt
Ithaca NY
In the van on
West Green St.

an interview with victor ruggiero & dave hillyard!

VR: This is like my racing jacket
**Interview with the Slackers
take one. Please introduce
yourself**

DH: I'm Dave Hillyard, I play
saxophone
VR: My name's Vic,
I play keyboard, or organ.

**Talk about your first job in
music**

DH: My first gig?

Or your first job playing ska

DH: My first gig was 1985 I think, I
had barely been playing
saxophone. My friend at the time
Dave Douglas whose father was an
accountant, His dad had an end of
the tax year party.. (Vic laughs) and
the band was called "The Saints"
and we were a mod/ska band and
we fought viciously over the songs
we were going to play, and...

VR: (Interrupting disbelief) Really?

DH: Yeah, we played the end of the
tax year accounting party for Dave
Douglas' dad. (both laugh)

What about you Vic?

VR: Um geez man...

DH: First gig

VR: First Gig...I played Dexy's
"Come on Eileen" at a talent show.
I was like eleven

DH: Yeah? What were you playing?

VR: Bass. Upright. I got the gig
because I was the upright player
DH: You knew both strings.

VR: Yup (nods in agreement)

DH: Fair enough. (We all laugh)

**The Slackers started in
NYC, Brooklyn to be more
specific, and now where are
you based?**

VR: New York City

**You're still NYC based, but
the record label has
changed.**

DH: Well our record label is based
out of Los Angeles, but we still live
in New York and its... Guys live in
Brooklyn and Vic lives in New
Rochelle right now.

VR: It's like a suburb.

Are you on the road a lot?

VR: A fair amount. We've been on
the road for the past year pretty
steadily, actually maybe a little over
a year.

DH: Yeah, its been a year and a

couple months now. We did four
US tours and one European tour
within that time, so...

VR: Before that we used to do
kinda like 2 week deals, go up &
down the East coast, go to like
Florida. Make a trip to Chicago or
a couple gigs in Ohio, something.
The past year, it's definitely been
a heavier schedule.

**In support of your latest 2
records, 1997's Redlight
and now the Question. I
have a question, or more of
an observation perhaps of
Slackers' cover art. It
always features Chris
Qualiana [aka The Wix].
Was that concept a fully
conscious decision, or did
it just happen the whole
time? And if so, do you
expect it to continue?**

DH: Actually the first one... I think
Chris was helping us hook up
with a photographer, and we had
a totally different album cover in
mind. She brought it in and we
hated it, basically it was not much
liked. We were arguing over it
and someone said those pictures
were taken as kind of a joke,
right? Turns out half as a joke of
her and muck...

VR: Well that was when we had
shown the band the pictures at
the photo session and everybody
was like aw man, we said no,
don't use those pictures. And I
protested, no this is cool. It was a
picture of a black girl, just looking
kind of real lonesome. It was sup-
posed to be better late than
never. Just very dreary kind of
like whatever, and everybody
thought they didn't know if that
works. Then the photographer
said let me just snap a couple of
pictures, Chris was hesitant at
first but then agreed. It was total-
ly accidental. The same thing
happened with Redlight, we were
supposed to have another girl in
the window...

DH: but the Wix was in town...
VR: So we were like hey, we're

doing this thing, do you want to
come down? And so now its
developed into a theme, the last
one, on the cover of The
Question, that one was planned.
(Dave laughs)

**Albums are like children.
How did the name of your
band, The Slackers come
about? Is it the '90s lingo
'being slackers' or is it a
reference to slack reggae,
You play slower tempo ska
music.**

VR: We named the band kind of
accidentally. It was initially going
to be called The Silencers, then it
was going to be The Suspects,
the this, the that, anything that
sounded ominous and began with
an 'S' because I was into the letter
'S' that week. And somebody had
written it on our rehearsal studio
wall. It's this big building every-
body used to write graffiti on all
the walls and shit. Somebody
wrote "Luis is a slacker" Luis
Zualaga is our drummer. Later,
we're sitting there going through
all these names & someone read
the wall and said, "Well, Luis is
slacker, so that means the rest of
you must be. So you're the
Slackers." It stuck.

DH: That's how it happened, cool.
VR: Yeah cool. I think it was actu-
ally a *Back to The Future* refer-
ence, you know, McFly! You're a
slacker! Chances are that's where
it came from.

DH: Names are kind of like, when
you're born with your name, you
don't even think about it after
awhile, it's just your name.

VR: I like when people tell me that
they have names like, my name's
Audrey, after Audrey Hepburn.
You know or my name's such &
such after the character in this
movie, a lot of girls tell me that
'My mom named me after such &
such. You know...

DH: My uncle's middle name is
Donluxmoney, my dad was very
into Donald Duck when he was

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born.

VR: (explosive laughter) What?!

DH: That's his middle name
though, he's a lucky guy.

**On the way here you men-
tioned the Upstate NY vibe.
If you could elaborate on
those thoughts, or if you
don't care to then don't.**

DH: My experiences with Upstate, I
have relatives that live up in
Potsdam, so me & my cousins
would get shuttled back and forth
from California and Upstate New
York a lot during the summer. We'd
end up spending a couple weeks
up there. It's interesting, you know
its weird because there's like
college towns up here, then there's
all the industrial towns with 50%
unemployment, and then there's
the guys living out in the woods.
It's very bizarre and yet its part of
New York State but it really has
nothing to do with New York City.
VR: Yeah, definitely gothic. Gothic
is the word.

DH: A lot of Norman Bates shit you
know...

VR: Not gothic in the sense of
Peter Murphy. (laughs) Maybe
around Poe.

**Silent Dave, you got any
questions?**

Silent Dave: Nope.

**I won't ask about individual
songs. From your position
as musicians writing
songs, not necessarily ska
but any songs, what are
your thoughts on vulgarity?**

**We help with a ska TV
show cable axs, and got a
phone call a not too long
ago from this caribbean
sounding guy concerned
because the word fuck
was said in a context of
anger. He called to voice
his discontent, because
vulgarity is not what these
musics are about. I under-
stand where he's coming
from, but today in 90s
American culture, that's
part of language, everyday
language for some people.**

**So consequently, in much
American ska music, that's
bound to happen some-
where. As far as The
Slackers go, you play a
more roots-respecting
style. What's your take as**

**ska players? Even in the
oldies, Prince Buster & his
contemporaries swore, or
used the cultural slang of
their day.**

DH: Prince Buster had a whole
X-rated album

VR: Lloydie & The Lowbites...

Definitely slack.

DH: I don't know though, I think
when we write lyrics we just try to
keep them into something we're
feeling. If I had an idea that had
a curse word in it, I wouldn't have
a problem with writing it in a song
but I guess I've never really... (to
Vic) We don't have any curses do
we? We're G-rated almost. Well,
you know what I mean though
Like actual word wise...

VR: Yeah, I don't know

DH: There's subtext. Definitely.

VR: Would The Beatles have put
curse words in their songs? Did
they?

DH: I don't think so

VR: If it fits in, that's okay. I mean
definitely Sic & Mad [Vic's
punkrock side project] has fuckin'
cursewords all over the place.

DH: I curse a lot in normal
speech.

VR: Actually, the old Slackers
material had curse words in it, a
couple.

DH: In "Sooner or Later" do you
curse in that?

VR: Only when I sing "I'm gonna
cut your fuckin' head off!" (laughs)
but that's not in the proper lyrics.
That only happens when certain
people are around. (more laughs)
Yeah, no we don't have any
curse words, I don't think in any
of the Slackers tunes.

**But it's not something that
you're totally conscious of,
it's just what happens. As
it also kinda does in daily
speech.**

VR: Yeah, its like I had to actually
think through and see if there
were tunes that had any.

DH: I don't think we're really
opposed to the idea, but we
don't... I don't know. A lot of
music today is very superficial to
me in terms of lyrics. If the mes-
sage is "I'm a badass" or "Fuck
you, I'm gonna fuckin' kill you",
people do it cause it establishes
some sort of an image. I just
haven't really needed to establish
that sort of an image in anything
I've written, so...

VR: The Gadjits actually have a
fair amount of cursewords.

DH: Really?



VR: Yeah, I was kind of surprised. That's when we were going through stuff and we thought oh this sounds like it could actually be a radio-ready tune, except that it says fuck really loud. *(laughter)* We contemplated should we make a version that's got a beep on it, leaves it out, or try an alternate take? It's like "then don't say fuck, say..." Use another phrase or something. I was surprised because we were looking at lyrics and it was like wow, these guys curse a lot, and you don't think of them as a band that would curse so heavily. DH: No, you don't. VR: I dunno. The old Slacker tunes, definitely the more 2Tone stuff had curses in it. That was just our head at the time I think. It's a lot angrier. DH: The Specials had curses & shit *(Vic nods in agreement)* "You're going home in a fuckin' ambulance" VR: Or like they say the word shit a lot on The Specials first record. Like in Too much too young, you know the "try wearing a cap" song.

Talk about the transition the Slackers made from 2Tone influenced stuff to your sound of now. I know if you listen to early Slackers material (Sister, Sister, Raygun Sally), it doesn't sound like roots ska... There's a bit of development, so talk about that progression.

VR: Well basically, it's all Dave's fault. *(pauses)* What happened was we were all perfectly happy playing rock'n'roll music. Then uh, somebody said "Hey why don't we get a saxophone?" and you know, its been downhill ever since. *(laughter)* DH: In essence, he's saying that my enlightened approach to music has influenced the band in that direction. *(cough)* VR: You could see his influence on the Rancid record *(smirks, Dave laughs)* The new one [Ed. note: *Life Won't Wait*] DH: It was a natural transition. VR: What happened was that we had been introduced to ska music by hearing bands such as the Specials, and a lot of 2Tone stuff, and we tried to play that a lot and enjoyed playing that a lot. But later on, once we heard the older stuff, the real 1960s ska beats. Once I saw The Skatalites, and I think this holds true for the rest of the band as well, once we saw them, we stepped back and said wow, this is THE music. And it seemed that just the interest of the band had shifted back. Oh yeah, that other [2Tone] stuff is really cool, and it's cool to play rock n' roll, punk & whatever.



DH: We still have the moment, it never really has gone away. We play it a little differently though. VR: But the thing is though, my own orientation initially was from a punk perspective, you know, whereas the other guys... Luis played in a punk band, but Marcus [Geard, bassist] never did, and TJ [Scanlon, guitar] never did. And Qmaxx 420 never did. DH: I obviously never did either, playing in The Donkey Show and Hepcat, until I played with Rancid VR: So it was like 2 of us, maybe 2.5. Mark Q might have played in a band semi-punk at one point. But it wasn't like the original Specials from that time who were obviously very fluent in the punk genre. So you see, it's kind of hard to teach someone punk rock at 23 years old. Either you've already learned it, or you're not about it. If you played in funk bands, jazz bands or fusion bands while the punk thing was going on, you missed it. *[laughter]* You know what I mean, it's not like "Well now I'm going to teach you how to be a little sloppy at this spot", and so you'll never have a band that sounds like The Specials, because they were a punk band that played ska.

Our band gravitated naturally towards the traditional, or I guess what they call "traditional". I don't call it that. DH: It's not really. VR: It's like... it's ska music you know, it's a real ska. **Who does most of the song writing in your group?** DH: That guy *(pointing to Vic)* VR: I do. I do most of it, me & Dave write a lot together. This past record *The Question* has got songs from our guitar player TJ, our drummer Luis, Marcus the bass player, Glen our new trombone player even. There was a lot more all-around contribution. DH: We all kind of work on the arrangement of the tunes, it's really rare that everything is spelled out. Mark wrote that tune with Marcus, there's a lot. It's kind of like the first one [Better Late Than Never, 1995] where everybody contributed their thing. **How has crowd response for the new record been?** DH: It's only been out a couple weeks but when we played in Boston we were really psyched because everybody knew the words to newer songs. VR: Did they?

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DH: They knew the words to the newer material, but we've been used to kind of playing a lot of the new record for like the past year or so and no one knowing what the hell we were playing. We kind of got used to that, because we've always had a lot of extra material to play live that hasn't been recorded. It's kind of funny because right now is the first time where we've recorded more than we know how to play. VR: "Walking On" is the only tune... DH: *(interrupts)* There's like 3 or 4 tunes that we've written that haven't come out on anything, and then there's all the stuff that's on the drawing board. I guess we're talking about working on the next album already. **How has the switch to Hellcat Records Label helped you, cause obviously they have helped you get out more. They can do more than a small independent label. Just today..** DH: Hellcat Records *IS* an independent label buddy. **Okay. A common misconception.** DH: Yeah, don't forget that. **I'm on a mailing list somewhere and today I got a X-mas card from Epitaph. Just the cost involved with doing that illustrates some big resources. Hellcat's where they got my name, dammit!** VR: *(laughs)* Well they're all independent labels, even Epitaph. Even though its a big-ass independent label, its not necessarily corporate. They have resources to pull together. **Have you seen a visible difference?** DH: Oh yeah, definitely. Like there's a guy at the phone between 9-5 PST that I can call up, talk to about what's going on. If we have a problem, or if I want to find out how the record is doing, I usually get straight answers. *(Vic snickers)* There are people who can look that information up on a computer and tell me instantly. Regular accounting statements *(laughter)*, I mean there's all sorts of things that happen, know what I mean? It's not a mystery when things are going to occur. It's like every three months, boom! It's as if the efficiency level is a lot higher, but then that's based on the fact that the people aren't business people, they're pretty nice people who like music a lot, so its really easy to deal with them alot and often. Many of our friends are working there. VR: And we've made alot of new friends too. People who are just basically music enthusiasts. They may have mostly punk bands on their roster list of things to do, but they hear our record and they go, oh that's cool, I like that. So you know they keep us in line, put us places and do things like that. It's been very cool for us.

Have you ever been, or are you currently a member of the communist party? *(Both look at each other and laugh)* VR: Speaking for myself, I've never been a member of the communist party. My name is Vic by the way, this is Vic talking. DH: Next question... **Are you on tour with the Skatalites? Is this a tour, two week deal or one time event?** DH: Now we're just doing weekends VR: We just like to play with them like we're playing with them tonight, you know. When we heard them... **How is that, Obviously you're playing with The Skatalites, how do you feel?** DH: It's kinda gonna be weird night, this is the first time without Roland [Alphonso, the late Skatalites saxophone], you know because he passed a couple weeks ago. VR: Yeah, it is going to be weird. It was strange enough seeing them without Tommy [McCook, great Skatalites bandleader] *(Dave nods)* When he was first getting sick it was like, Wow, Tommy's not there. He came back one night when we played with them in New Jersey, remember that gig Dave? DH: It was one time when he was really sick, yet he played great! Phenomenal. VR: He came back with a fuckin' vengeance! We played this gig and man, the band was smokin', just amazing...one of the best nights I've ever seen them. DH: Yeah, they kicked ass man. VR: It's like... DH: *(interrupting)* They really kicked ass that night VR: Yeah, really. Tommy and Roland were totally trying to cut each other every second. It seemed like you know "I might have been sick, but I've been practicing!" *(laughter)* ...and Roland was like you're not gonna get me man, I know you've been practicing! The band was really excited as well, so that was a great night. And now... Both of them are... And they both died really close to each other. Kindred spirits. *(pauses)* Now most of the front lineup of the original Skatalites is gone forever. DH: You never know what's going to happen, it'll be interesting. The rhythm section 2 Lloyds are so powerful. Just fantastic. That's what's going to be interesting to see how the band sounds without Roland. VR: The ska music will live on. **Definitely a legacy. As one Otis Reem song goes, "All ska bands never die" (Vic laughs) It's absolutely true. Alright thanks alot.** VR: Thank you man. **THE END.**

