

RI Repository: Taking the Wayback Machine to Six Finger Satellite's improbable history

To kick off a hopefully brighter 2021, here's another edition of **RI Repository**, where we revisit notable releases from RI's past. This year, we examine 1995's *Severe Exposure* from noise rock band Six Finger Satellite.



6FS formed in Providence in the late '80s with a lineup that included singer/keyboardist J. Ryan, John MacLean and Peter Phillips on guitar, and Rick Pelletier on drums. The band was signed to Sub Pop records after, legend has it, they submitted an alt rock-styled demo and the label signed them thinking they would provide something along the same lines.

The band's first album, *The Pigeon Is the Most Popular Bird*, is a scratchy, post-punk affair, and their second, *Machine Cuisine*, is mellower and made extensive use of synths. With *Severe Exposure*, the

band arrived at a satisfying middle ground between the two sounds, an adventurous mix of the herky-jerky new wave of Devo and the punishing guitars of The Jesus Lizard.

“We started out as a guitar band, but were really into bands like Chrome and Public Image Ltd.,” said Pelletier. “A big reason we added the synths was because we didn’t have many choruses in our songs. To us, the synth lines were hooks that the listener could grab ahold of.”

The warbly, distorted synths in “Cock Fight” and the unsettling modulation of “Rabies (Baby’s Got The)” provide a deliberate dissonance that, if anything, heightens the level of chaos. “We were never interested in using the synths as some kind of atmospheric, background noise,” says Pelletier. “We intentionally tried to make them as hard-edged as the guitars.”

Severe Exposure’s unintelligible vocals, jagged guitars and frenetic pace creates a trance throughout. “Dark Companion” has a MC5, frenzied proto punk vibe, and “White Queen to Black Knight” sounds like demonic blues. The whole album has a compelling spirit of confrontation and experimentation.

According to Pelletier, the *Severe Exposure* era marked the band’s most cohesive and well-known lineup, and saw the band firing on all cylinders. “Around that time, we were always playing, pretty much all our spare time was spent either playing or recording at the studio.”

It helped that the atmosphere was so inspiring. “The Fort Thunder scene was great, and Providence had a lot of clubs with touring bands coming through at the time,” said Pelletier. “People felt that creative buzz and tapped into it.”

Their sonic mélange was concocted at The Parlour, the 6FS’s own studio in Pawtucket, (located in the building where Jamstage is now), which the band put together to gain more control over the process. “We had recorded in studios before and inevitably it always came down to time or money, so we took each advance from Sub Pop and put it into getting our own gear.”

According to Pelletier, the band also received invaluable recording and gear advice from legendary indie engineers Bob Weston, who recorded their debut, and Steve Albini.

The song “Parlour Games” got the ultimate ‘90s treatment when the music video, directed by RI filmmaker Guy Benoit, was featured in an episode of “Beavis & Butthead.” 6FS went on to put out two more critically acclaimed records that failed to set the charts on fire. The follow up, *Law of Ruins*, was

produced by James Murphy (later of LCD Soundsystem fame) who had joined the band as a live sound engineer.

After *Law*, John MacLean left the group, partly due to tensions arising from his relationship with Murphy, and Sub Pop dropped them shortly thereafter. They called it quits in 2001, and Pelletier and Ryan reformed the band in 2007.

6FS is now recognized for being ahead of the electro-rock curve. "We knew we weren't going to sell a shit ton of records, and did a lot of what we set out to do," said Pelletier. Ultimately, *Severe Exposure* is now looked at as something of a cult classic, and their catalog is remembered by many as a bold exploration of new sonic territory.

6FS has two releases consisting of demo reissues coming out this year. Stream Severe Exposure on Spotify.