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The musical that was about the Modern Lovers — until it wasn't

BY RANDEE DAWN

Josh Frank is a 27-year-old playwright — his first play, written at age 16, was performed at the Kennedy Center — who is also a big music fan. To be more specific: he's a Boston music fan. From his home base in Austin, he formed the company Theatreless Theatre to produce several of his own plays, and he created the Mind over Money Theater Festival to showcase fringe productions. After obtaining permission from Werner Herzog, he adapted the German director's 1977 film *Stroszek* for the stage. In 2000, Frank became an associate producer for *Love, Janis*, the Off Broadway hit musical about Janis Joplin, and since then he's been working on mixing theater not with film but with music.



Josh Frank (seated) with the cast of *The Man Who Was Too Loud*

Frank's latest project is a trilogy of musicals about Boston alternative-rock bands. He got ink in national magazines last year when he announced his plans for *Teenager of the Year*, a musical based on the music of the Pixies that's set to open Off Broadway next year. He's gotten less press for the play that opens in Austin next Thursday. It's called *The Man Who Was Too Loud*; the original title was, however, *We Are the Modern Lovers*, and the piece is inspired by the Boston proto-punk group who in these parts need no introduction.

As it happens, the name change was partly my fault. When, some time ago, I asked Frank what Jonathan Richman — the Modern Lovers' singer, who has since had a long and fruitful solo career — thought of the play, Josh recalled that he had contacted long-time Richman friend Joe Harvard, a co-founder of Cambridge's famed Fort Apache studio, and that Harvard had put in a good word with the often-elusive musician. Frank and Richman then talked. "He [Richman] basically said, 'Do whatever you want,'" Frank told me. "His only issue was he didn't know if he was going to have time to put anything into it."

Soon after, I spoke with Richman. He remembered Frank and was vaguely aware of the production but wasn't clear on the details. When I read him some of the plot points — the fictionalized scenario, in an early form, was bookended by the kidnapping of Gram Parsons's body at the beginning and a drug overdose at the end — he became a bit wound up and decided he needed to have another talk

with the playwright.

As a result, *We Are the Modern Lovers* got retitled. The play's Web site still describes it as a "Rock-U-Drama" and a "Rock Show in One Act," but the author is more circumspect in his description. "It's a manifesto of sorts," Frank explains. "It's this nice little story about a guy who's dealing with wanting to express himself in this ever-changing world. A kid who had a whole different idea of what music could be." Another call to Richman nets this ringing endorsement: "My understanding is, it's a nice young man doing a nice young production. Whatever he wants to do is fine as long as no one claims it's the Modern Lovers."

What *TMWWTL* is — despite its advanced stage of production — remains a little hazy. The musical homes in on the Lovers' early period, from 1969 to 1973, when Richman's songs were just being given voice (it wasn't until 1976 that their homonymous debut was released). The "story," such as it is, evolves through the re-creation of a Lovers' concert juxtaposed with images projected on a screen behind the band. "It's not a heavy-handed history of Jonathan Richman," Frank points out. "The piece is about a guy who finds music out of loneliness and isolation. I'm not 'doing' Jonathan Richman. I'm just trying to present this wonderful music that not a lot of people have gotten a chance to hear."

Harvard, for one, remains supportive. (One of the characters in the play is called "Joey Harvard.") "Most musicians initially think of a musical as a suspicious creature for presenting rock and roll. But we also bitch about rock and roll not being accorded its appropriate place as an important cultural component. If it's ever going to be more than just car commercials, it has to enter the mainstream — and what better way?"

Meanwhile, Frank pushes on. After *The Man Who Was Too Loud* ends its Austin run next month, he'll press forward with plans to open the Pixies musical. After that, he's still batting around ideas for the final installment of the trilogy. "I'm pretty much drooling at the idea of being able to do a Cars musical. I just have to find a way to justify it."

The Man Who Was Too Loud plays September 11 through October 4 at the Austin Playhouse in Austin, Texas; if you're flying in, call (512) 474-TIXS for tickets and information. For more information about Josh Frank's plays, visit www.teenageroftheyear.com.

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