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Music

In this play, modern lovers' labor isn't lost

By **Joe Gross**
AMERICAN-STATESMAN
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"Liminal" is probably not a word that Jonathan Richman would use. It's too slippery, too brainy (according to my dictionary, it means "at a point where one perception or condition blends or crosses over into another"). It's not direct, not straight arrow, not square. And Jonathan Richman is nothing if not square.

But Jonathan Richman -- known to most people as the guitar-slinging troubadour in "There's Something About Mary" -- is one of pop music's most liminal figures, recording his first album in 1973, right as the hippie dream crumbled but before punk could take its place. Richman and his band the Modern Lovers stripped the music of his beloved Velvet Underground down to two or three chugging chords, keeping Lou Reed's everyguy sing-song and replacing VU's decadence with his own boundless earnestness. Singing about getting old, his parents and girls who probably giggled at him, Richman was at once cool and utterly unironic, which might be why those recordings sat on a shelf until 1976, when punk was ready for that sort of juxtaposition.

It's exactly that liminal state that attracted 27-year-old playwright/producer/director Josh Frank. "Right before mainstream culture hails something as the (next big) thing, there's always someone doing that very thing," Frank says from San Marcos, where he's gone for a few days to visit his girlfriend and relax before his play about Richman, "The Man Who Was Too Loud," opens. "In the case of punk rock, it was what was going on with Richman and the Modern Lovers."

A formerly Austin-based playwright now working in New York, Frank became interested in Richman while working on "Teenager of the Year," his rock musical about another Boston band, the Pixies, due to open off-Broadway in 2004. In Austin to visit his girlfriend six months ago, Frank was staying at the San Jose Hotel on South Congress.

"I'm leafing through their CD rental and I came across the Modern Lovers," says Frank, who had never paid attention to Richman's music before. "I popped it into the CD player and it was just amazing. Richman was this guy that not many people know about, another artist that popular culture had blindly overlooked."

So Frank thought about putting together a show. "I came back to Austin to chill out while I waited for this Pixies project to be finalized, and I just couldn't help myself," Frank says.

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"This is the greatest town in the world to work on new projects."

"The Man Who Was Too Loud," named after a song about Richman by former Pixies frontman Frank Black, doesn't purport to be a straight-ahead bio. Rather, it seems a musical meditation on "the idea" of Jonathan Richman, based on his life and music.

"It's definitely an interpretation," Frank says, noting that Richman, whom Frank contacted to discuss aspects of the play -- though they have yet to meet-- wanted it to be very clear this isn't a literal retelling of the Lovers story. Apparently, Richman lives up to his earnest image. "He's a super nice guy, but he's doesn't make jokes at all," Frank says. "He is really into truth and honesty. He doesn't want to fool anybody or trick anyone or lie to anyone."

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Frank considered Richman's struggle life-affirming. "Everybody was dying in rock," Frank says -- Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison all died in 1970, a key year in "Too Loud" -- "and this guy was saying no, I want to live."

Starring local actors such as Joey Hood and featuring local musicians such as Adam Kahan and Ezra Reynolds of Summer Breeze, Phillip (Brown Whornet) White and David (Stinky del Negro) Wyatt, who served as the project's musical director, "Too Loud" follows a format not unlike "Hedwig and the Angry Inch": one set, one band, lots of rock.

"This is a 100-minute, 100 percent work in progress," Frank says a few days later at rehearsal.

They run through the show, complete with Frank's dead-on impersonation of Richman's head-cold voice. The band is tight, playing the songs with skill and ease.

"These guys did everything on their own terms," Frank says of Richman and Frank Black. "It was never just a band; they made a point of saying 'I am an artist.' I think that's how all these guys escaped the quick death of mainstream rock 'n' roll."

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'The Man Who Was Too Loud' opens tonight at 8 p.m. and continues 8 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, as well as Sept. 25, Sept. 27-28, Oct. 2-4, Penn Field, 3601 S. Congress Ave. (enter through Ruta Maya coffeehouse); and 7 p.m. Sept. 20-21, Room 710, 710 Red River St., \$10-\$12, 474-TIXS.

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