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Mutaytor records album in iconic SF house

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Recently in San Francisco, [a unique and iconic band](#) recorded an album in a [unique and iconic house](#), and the two entities seemed to resonate beautifully.

Mutaytor might be the ultimate Burning Man tribe, an eclectic group of Los Angeles-based performers who came together in the event's Black Rock City more than a decade ago, forming into a band that's like a traveling circus that evangelizes the burner ethos and culture everywhere they go, just by being who they are: sexy, scruffy, wild, warm, colorful denizens of the counterculture.

Mutaytor is perhaps the most popular and emblematic musical act to emerge from Burning Man, a group whose

spirited performances on and off the playa reflected and helped to shape and define the culture that birthed them. And if that's not enough cultural cred, many of the two dozen members work for Burning Man in various capacities, from building Black Rock City with the Department of Public Works to forming the backbone of event's regional network in Los Angeles.

My path has crossed Mutaytor's many times, from watching them play at my first Burning Man in 2001 to joining them on the burner-dominated Xingolati cruise ship in 2005 to being invited on the weekend of March 13, 2010 to watch them record their fourth album, "Unconditional Love" in the sprawling Westerfeld House, a Victorian mansion on San Francisco's Alamo Square that is the legendary former home to such countercultural figures as Satanist Anton LaVey and members of the Manson family to noted '60s promoter Chet Helms' Family Dog Productions and the band Big Brother and the Holding Company.

Today, the house is owned by Jim Siegel, a longtime Haight Street head shop owner and housing preservationist who did a masterful job at restoring this place, showing a striking attention to detail. Siegel owns the Distractions store on Haight Street, one of the few walk-in outlets for buying Burning Man tickets, and became a friend of the Mutaytor family in 2004.

"It all started with a guy crush that I had on someone in the band," Siegel said, noting how that evolved into a real friendship with the whole band, which he's hosted many times in his sprawling, 28-room house with the colorful history.

Although the dancers and other women who perform with Mutaytor weren't at this recording – Siegel said they usually prance around the house topless and lend a debaucherous energy to Siegel's house – he still loves the energy that the band brings when they invade his house: "It reminds me of my hippie days living in communes."



Jim Siegel (from left), Buck Down, and bassist John Avila (formerly of Oingo Boingo) take a break.

Buck A.E. Down – a key band member, singing and playing guitar, as well as producing and arranging their songs – said the album and accompanying documentary film is Mutaytor trying to build on a career that began as basically a pickup group of musicians and performers on the playa.

"We're a total product of that environment," Buck said of Mutaytor's musicians, dancers, acrobats, fire spinners, aerialists, hoopers, thespians, producers, culture mavens, and facilitators of the arts. While there were nine musicians that played on the latest album they recorded in San Francisco, their full crew is more than triple that number.

"We've been underground for 10 years and have a voluminous body of work," Buck said, talking about the decision to take their three albums worth of songs and other material they've developed in live shows and put it all into a new album before adding wryly, "You can't really call it a greatest hits if you've never really had a hit, can you?"

But the band itself has been a huge hit everywhere it's gone, particularly cities where Burning Man is popular. Buck said that around 2002, rock bands were starting to die out in the Los Angeles area, but the rave scene was still going strong, with DJs packing people into big venues, both underground and clubs. So the members of Mutaytor started to plug into that scene, which was already drawing energy from Burning Man, the event they know so well.

"We knew that the first band that could penetrate the rave scene was going to make it," Buck said, noting that the tactic worked, with the ravers drawn to their mix of electronica-infused music and performance art. "So, between that and Burning Man, we developed just a ravenous following."

With this built-in fan base of burners and ravers, Mutaytors was able to start getting gigs in the clubs of Hollywood, San Francisco, and other cities that had significant numbers of people who attended Burning Man.

"We became a very recognizable and tangible part of that culture," Buck said, noting that burners sought out Mutaytor to plug into the vibe of Black Rock City, if only for a night in their cities. "What we were able to do is provide that vibe."



Christine “Crunchy” Nash, Mutaytor’s tour manager and self-described “den mother,” said that Burning Man founder Larry Harvey has been very encouraging and supportive of Mutaytor, urging them to essentially be musical ambassadors of the event and its culture. “That’s one thing Larry said to us is I want to do this year round and that’s what we’re doing in LA,” Crunchy said. “Most of the people in the band have been going to Burning Man for more than 10 years.”

Buck added, “We’re like the Jews, the wandering Jews,” which totally cracked up the group, but I understood what he meant, particularly as he went on to explain how the burner tribes are scattered through the world, but they retain that essential cultural connection.

Particularly down in Los Angeles, where the Mutaytor crew regularly works and plays with other Burning Man camps, from the Cirque Berserk performers and carnies to longtime members of my own camp, Garage Mahal, Crunchy said their extended tribe really is a year-round, active community of burners.

“It really is like we are there in LA and we just pick up and move to the playa,” she said.

Crunchy said they have family-like connections in San Francisco – to such businessman-burners as Jim Siegel and JD Petras, who both have sprawling homes where the band can stay – and in cities around the country that have big, established Burning Man tribes, from New York City to Portland, Oregon.

“It’s the movers and shakers of the San Francisco community and others that have allowed us to survive as we’ve

tried to make it,” Crunchy said. “It’s made traveling so much easier because we have places to stay at many places we play.”

Buck said that was essential to their survival: “You take that kind of culture away from Burning Man and we would have broke up a long time ago, or we wouldn’t have even formed.” Just as Mutaytor is rooted on the playa, its members also wanted to root this album in a special place and immediately thought of the Westerfeld House.

“There are just places where stuff happens, just certain environments that are special places,” Buck said, citing of the house’s notable past residents, from rock stars to Satanists. “What’s interesting here is the particular blend of eclectic thinking.”

Buck said Mutaytor is made up of musical professionals – from session players to sound guys at venues like the Roxie and for concert tours -- and they have three recording studios at their disposal among them, but they chose to do the recording here because it felt magical and personal to them.

“We had an epiphany on the road and decided we just had to record it here,” Buck said, adding how well the decision has worked out acoustically. “Rather than just recording the band, we want to record the house. That’s how we’ve been miking it up.”

Each room on the group floor was filled with musical instruments and recording equipment, and Buck said excitedly that they have been resonating with this 120-year-old building: “We’re getting some of the best tones.”



Mutaytor is trying to carry over into a new era just as Siegel is closing a chapter on an old one. He was one of the original head shop owners on Haight Street, but he says that he's unhappy with the combination of commercialism and NIMBYism that have overtaken his neighborhood so much so that he's choosing to close up shop.

"The Haight is dead now, it's over," said Siegel, who plans to close Distractions at the end of August, right before Burning Man, and reopen a new business in the thriving, culturally rich Mission District. "I've run that store since 1976, so it'll be a big change in my life."

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