

"We're old, we're not good looking, and we're not a rock band," says singer/guitarist Chuck Cleaver of his band Ass Ponys. "Mass appeal is still kind of a questionable thing."

Questionable or not, it didn't stop A&M Records from signing this old and ugly Cincinnati unrock band that prefers writing songs about Grandma and riding bikes to your typical sex-and-drugs rock fare.

Electric Rock Music, the group's major label debut, has been well-received by the music press and music listeners,

cially successful product. *Electric* is an escape to rural America; under the influence of a distorted blend of country, folk, and pop music, the album paints a picture of a small town where kids ride their bikes all over the neighborhood, a boy is reprimanded by his grandmother for playing with a knife, and a man tries to write his girlfriend's name in the snow (but can't piss "Denise").

What might seem Norman Rockwell-ish (or as Rockwell-ish as the '90s will allow) on the surface hints at something a little more menacing underneath, an element of Cleaver's lyric writing that he partly attributes to his own experiences

Riding Around The

Ass Ponys'

Neighborhood



(L to R) Chuck Cleaver, Dave Morrison, John Erhardt, Randy Cheek

and their first single "Little Bastard" has not gone unnoticed by MTV or alternative rock radio. The Ass Ponys - Cleaver and fellow bandmates Randy Cheek (bass), John Erhardt (guitar), and David Morrison (drums) - are getting their first morsel of national exposure, and although it may appear that they have surfaced out of nowhere as just another "alternative" band with a deliberately obscure name, they have been a staple of the Cincinnati indie rock scene since their inception in 1989.

The Ass Ponys' first effort *Mr. Superlove* was released on Okra Records in 1990, and *Grim* came out on Safehouse in '92; *Electric Rock Music* was initially going to be released by the band at their own expense on their own label. Plans soon changed when a friend sent a copy of the still-unreleased record to A&M, who liked it and was willing to release it as-is.

The band, however, remains skeptical about these recent developments. "The big misconception," notes Cleaver, "is that once you get signed to a major label, all of a sudden life is rosy and you have this easy road to walk. It's not that way. This whole thing is kind of a trial basis. Check with me in five years. If I'm still making a living off it . . . then I can click my heels together."

Standing trial as well is the album *Electric Rock Music* (dubbed thus by

growing up in a small town. Cleaver admits that he "hung out with a pretty morbid bunch of people," but he defends, "I didn't wear cat heads around my neck or anything like that."

When selecting subject matter for his lyrics, Cleaver finds that "highlighting the mediocre" is often more interesting than the sensational, and he gets his ideas from stories that people tell him or that he overhears. "People don't tell me stories because they think I'll write about them," Cleaver says. Exploring the everyday may seem commonplace, even mundane, but there's something not quite right with the normalcy of it, and in the charge of the Ass Ponys, the music and its subject matter generates an eerie appeal.

The cover art of the album, for example, is indicative of what you find in the music. The figurines adorning the cover are constructed out of fruits and vegetables obviously created by someone's grandmother - John Erhardt's to be exact. "There's sort of an underlying lunacy behind her stuff," explains Cleaver of this particular brand of arts and crafts. "If the right person gets ahold of it, it can get pretty fucked up."

This is true of rock 'n' roll as well: in the hands of the right people, such as the Ass Ponys, the seemingly normal can get pretty fucked up. And that's always appreciated.