Crank Prophet
Bestride America, Grinning:
The Case of David Thomas

“My name is David,” David Thomas of the Cleveland band Pere Ubu wrote in 1980, in a dashed-off ditty he called “Lonesome Cowboy Dave.” “My name is David, and I’ve got a hat the size of Oklahoma,” he croaked. “I’ve got shoes that look like Florida / I’ve got a coat that’s like California / I’ve got spurs on my feet / Whoopie-ti-yi yah.”

Thomas didn’t sing “Lonesome Cowboy Dave” when Pere Ubu appeared in October 2000 at the Knitting Factory in New York City, one stop on their twenty-fifth Anniversary Tour. “I know that the sacrifice of success breeds longevity,” Neil Young once said of why he scatters terrible concept albums among dissonant masterpieces and craven, comfort-food crowd pleasers. “Being willing to give up success in the short run guarantees a long run. If you’re really doing what you want to do.” But it’s unclear if Pere Ubu’s story allows the words failure and success any meaning at all. They’ve never had any hits, they’ve never made the charts, and they’re still alive.

A quarter-century ago, emerging out of the dissolution of a catch-as-catch-can art scene, the wreckage of a now legendary band called Rocket from the Tombs, and what Thomas would later call “the ruins of the industrial midwest,” the band thought it was the avatar of a new sound that would sweep the country, then the world, a sound they tried, there in Cleveland, with nobody from anywhere else watching, to give the almost immediately meaningless name “The New Wave.”

The New Wave prophesies a New World—it says that new world is already there, and that a new art will reveal it. It says a new world is waiting to be born, and that speech will call it into being. Whether or not realizing such dreams can fit into the American definition of the word success is dubious, but like any band Pere Ubu wanted it all: world conquest, with the rewards of the old world and the promise of the new world. There was never a chance for the former. As art mavens, the five or six or seven who passed through Pere Ubu in its first days believed far
too deeply in disappearance, insult, confrontation, and shadow play for anything resembling financial security or commonplace fame.

They embraced the degraded trash momentum of the Seeds’ 1966 grunge hit “Pushin’ Too Hard”—a song so insistently simple it seemed as it played to reduce itself almost to nothing, until for a brief instrumental break a melody emerged that pulled the song inside out, waking you up, making you wonder where you were—but the displacement Pere Ubu was after they got through far more traditional, atonal, musique concrète tricks; feedback and strangled cries from an abyss the band had dug itself; vocals that faded out of words into groans and squawks; horror-movie sound effects; heavy, fraying bass patterns sucking the air out of the room in which a song was recorded and in which it was heard.

You can hear it on old records, but you can also hear it in words: perhaps the best account of Pere Ubu’s call for a new world comes in a memoir by Allen Ravenstein, the band’s original synthesizer player. “In those days we’d play wherever they’d let us,” he wrote in the late 1980s, in a piece he called “Music Lessons.” “We had learned to speak,” he said, “and we were certain that our voices were endowed with something to say. We lacked only opportunity, but its arrival was foretold. There was a certain current that ran through the air around us, something that seemed to be in the light that fell everywhere we went, a vibration that ran through all of our conversations . . . it was like putting your ear to the rail, and we could hear the rumble of the train any time we bothered to listen; our time would come. It was as tangible as the modern noise we made.”

Ravenstein was leading up to an account of the avatars of the new world playing a high school dance. It was 1975. Carrying their songs “Final Solution,” “30 Seconds Over Tokyo,” “Heart of Darkness,” and their version of “Pushin’ Too Hard,” walking down the high school corridors they had themselves left behind only a few years before, the band, he said, knew their purpose: “We were missionaries, but we had not come to appeal to the ethereal, we were not there to make promises of a better tomorrow, we were not the bearers of good news. We bore a darkness whose weight we foolishly felt was ours to wield, and we had come to share it.” As all avant-garde artists wish, the result was revolt—a revolt against the band, and inside that refusal, a second revolt against the first one. Ravenstein:

We mounted the stage and the singer bowed. The crowd looked into each other’s eyes, they were expecting people who looked like them. . . .

Billy turned his hands loose and lit up his guitar; he released from its strings the things stored deep in metal and wood. The things that were his alone to find. There were sounds that moved beyond the stroke and placement of his fingers, things that happened when he didn’t seem to be moving . . . We told the truth as we knew it . . .

The crowd didn’t let themselves move, they were waiting for the real music to start. They waited and wondered if this might be some practical joke. Maybe there was a camera somewhere, perhaps there would be a picture of those incredulous looks in the yearbook. Sure, that was it, little black and white photos with captions: “James Oliver looks into the
future and sees tapes of his fumble at the Super Bowl,” “Mary Campbell learns of her Pulitzer Prize nomination.”

The music spilled from the stage and struggled to the floor. It danced alone there self-consciously like a gate crasher at a country club. And then a few did hear it, they moved past the stunned and frozen and walked out to the floor. They danced and smiled and their bodies moved inside their clothes in a way that made you see how they didn’t fit. These were the people we had come to play for, the ones whose parts didn’t fit together in the prescribed way. The ones who look out a window and wonder if what they see is what their neighbor sees. The ones who aren’t sure that Maybelline and General Motors have what they want.

The others were now certain that this was no joke, that the real music wasn’t going to start and they’d be damned if they were going to be made fools of by these misfits. They booed and hooted, and some of the boys, feeling like they had to be men and defend the sensibilities of their womenfolk, approached the stage and swore at us.

“Turn that shit off!”
“Play something we can dance to!”

With that the singer pulled the mike from its stand and screamed, “Dance? You people don’t know how to dance! I’ll teach you how to dance!” He threw himself from the stage and with the true abandon of the insane he spun and tottered and writhed on the floor. He danced a reckless ballet befitting a man talking in tongues.

Then, of course, the high school administrator in charge of the dance pulled the plug. “We left that room as brothers,” Ravenstein concluded, “bonded loosely by the trappings of renewed exile.”

At the Knitting Factory in 2000, Thomas did not writhe on the floor. There was no room; the small space was packed. Over twenty-five years, enough who had heard the music had stepped out of the larger crowd to give Pere Ubu something of a following. There were calls for favorite songs.

Even in 1975, David Thomas took up enough space to make the notion of a hat the size of Oklahoma, shoes the size of Florida, and a coat the size of California credible. He called himself Crocus Behemoth in those days. The name of the band, personified by its singer, was itself a clue: “Pere Ubu,” protean saint and unkillable demon of the twentieth-century avant-garde, arriving in Paris in 1896 by means of Alfred Jarry’s play *Ubu Roi*, his recreation of a hated teacher—fat, stupid, ugly, fascist, gross above all—the huge, clumsy monster personifying authority without intelligence, power without motive, respectability without honor; King of Poland, King of Nowhere, King of Everywhere, King of Europe first of all, lumbering like a maggot on two legs into the First World War.

Ubu—who then waddled through the century, reemerging again and again as Rasputin, Fatty Arbuckle, Warren Harding, as any businessman or general or priest in any painting by George Grosz, as Emil Jannings’s Professor Rath in *The Blue Angel*, Huey Long, Hermann Göring, Kate Smith, as Lyndon B. Johnson trumpeting that the ultimate goal of the Vietnam War was to bring the Great Society...
to North Vietnam itself, Elvis Presley bursting out of his jumpsuit in 1977, as Idi Amin, Imelda Marcos, Slobodan Milosevic, on and on and on.

This is the figure David Thomas named the band for, redrawing Jarry’s grotesque Ubu woodcuts for the sleeves of the band’s first singles. The physical resemblance between Thomas at twenty-two and Ubu as he, or it, was born was obvious. The love affair with the repulsive figure, a love affair that finally swallowed Jarry himself, the satirist finally taking on every aspect of the creature he’d invented as a field for satire, was just barely less obvious. Ubu is what you latch onto as a teenager when you don’t want to say “Holden Caulfield—is me!” “All the deepest, most unacceptable, most bestial and most banal impulses in the human being rolled into one,” is how a friend of Thomas’s from those days sums Jarry’s Ubu: “It was that character that [David] wanted to impersonate.”

“I went through high school as one does reading all the surrealist/dada stuff I could get my hands on,” Thomas says now. “That’s the sort of age group that’s suitable for the pursuit. . . . I read all the Ubu plays. I was fascinated by the production ideas. The plays themselves were old hat but the idea of how to present theater linked in with my fascination for late night talk radio and the Ghoulardi legacy”—the legacy of one Ernie Anderson, who hosted a grade Z horror/sci-fi show on late-night Cleveland television in the mid-60s. “[He] dressed in a lab coat with obviously fake goatee that was always slipping off, fright wig, sunglasses with one lens missing,” Thomas recalls happily. “[He] viciously mocked local media celebrities, newsmen and icons. Blew up things with firecrackers. Insulted sponsors so successfully that they adopted his insults. ‘Stay Sick and Turn Blue’ attack against a fast food restaurant led to them adding a Stay Sick and Turn Blue shake to their menu. Inserted himself into movies via blue screen and became part of action or warned characters”—Don’t open that door!

It was all, Thomas says, part of the revelation that “the media always lie, will always lie, can only lie, and that to say something real you have to go sur-real—using the term the way the surrealists formulated it,” above the real, “NOT the way they ended up pursuing it”—inside the real. “I remember being overwhelmed,” Thomas says, “by the rightness of the scene [in Ubu Roi] in which the Polish Army crosses some river and what happens onstage is that a placard announces the action while one person walks across the stage. This seemed to be the obvious way of engaging the audience’s imagination . . . like radio plays in which you hear a creak or a sigh and see immediately without verbal description Philip Marlowe’s office with the dust motes frozen in venetian blind light.

“So it came time to come up with a name for a band,” Thomas says. “I chose ‘Pere Ubu’ because . . . the name looked good, had three syllables and wasn’t likely to mean anything to anyone in our audience and would be neutral unless you had knowledge in which case we were giving you a clue but the key to the clue was—and here is the vital point—the key to the clue was NOT the obvious one. And if all this sounds a bit pretentious for a bunch of kids in their early twenties remember
that we were the ones who had taken the name of a French cinematic movement to apply to what we were doing. We were beyond pretentious. We were in the right place in the right time with the right tools . . . and we didn’t care.”

Of the band at that long-ago high school dance, only Thomas and bassist Tom Herman, now playing guitar, remained when Pere Ubu set out to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary. By 1977 Peter Laughner, the guitarist Allen Ravenstein called “Billy,” had drunk himself to death. Thomas was an enormous, darkening presence in the mid-'70s—dressed in a long coat, his hair tumbling out and down like a nest of snakes, an empowered version of the terrifyingly pathetic outsider Henry Spencer that Jack Nance was playing at the same time in David Lynch’s *Eraserhead*—but in the year 2000 he was if anything harder to read. The gleeful clowning in Thomas’s talk to the crowd and the comic specter of a man who seemed as big as the other four people onstage put together—bald, with long sideburns, sweat pouring, wrapped in a bright red vinyl apron—was belied by the frightening seriousness of songs introduced as jokes.

When Thomas let the wave of a tune carry him to the stack of amplifiers, the microphone and transmitters secreted in his apron produced howls of feedback as he hugged the black boxes like a lover. He pulled two microphones together and sang into them both and two mikes didn’t seem like enough. At another rise in the sound he held his arms wide, gesturing with a broad smile like a headwaiter happily waving the crowd back: *No tables!* *No tables!* The sound seemed to grow bigger with every song, but inside of the big rock and roll sound was the high lonesome sound, a mountain whine from Wise County in the western corner of Virginia, a sudden thinning of Thomas’s voice, a strangle in the throat, now matching the twisted vowels of the banjo player Dock Boggs, working out the terms of a miner’s nihilism in “Country Blues” in 1927.

“This is a song written for men going through their mid-life crises,” the forty-seven year-old Thomas announced, “—who have punk roots. If there’s ever a time for punk,” he said, now seeming to loom over himself, “it’s when men have their mid-life crises.” Instead of driving out the demons, the band entered into a slow, langorous rhythm.

“Mom threw me out til I get some pants that fit,” Thomas had complained a quarter-century before in “Final Solution.” “She just don’t approve of my strange kind of wit.” “What got him thrown out,” a friend recalled long after, was the show where “he did the dance where you wallow along on your belly over the floor, and he had a box of dog biscuits and he was doing [the Stooges’] ‘I Wanna Be Your Dog’ and he started throwing the dog biscuits but he was rather excited, it wasn’t happening fast enough, so he threw the whole box and hit his father on the head.”

“This is the pogo section,” Thomas said in New York, in the present, not leaping like Sid Vicious, let alone crawling on his belly like a reptile, Little Egypt–style, but moving gingerly around a tightly circumscribed area of the stage, and another
Ubu came into view: Sidney Greenstreet in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Mask of Dimitrios*.

Again and again the performance offered itself as a parody of a time that had passed—and then, with the sound turning fiercely beautiful and Thomas hammering his voice and body against his words, the performance drove into its own past as if it really were a rocket from the tombs, heading who knew where, toward what unimaginable future, a future that would look no different from what, in the moment, you were looking at.

As he weighed himself down on the mere boards of the stage, opening his mouth as if waiting, along with the audience, to hear what sounds might issue from it, Thomas was stirring. He was himself the flag he was unfurling: black flag, red flag, purple flag, anything but a white flag. He performed as a crank, even in the spotlight whispering bad news or just a drunken non sequitur from an alley; as a crank he performed as one who knew the truth but would tell it only in bits and pieces, hints and warnings, shaggy dog stories, jokes in their relation to the unconscious.

It was a thrill to watch, because hovering in the air was the promise that at any moment the truth of being in this place, at this time, in this moment, if only for an instant, would not merely be told but summoned up, as if by a man casting a spell. Robert Wheeler, a great-grandnephew of Thomas Edison, who now runs the Edison Birthplace Foundation in Milan, Ohio, and lives on the Homer Page Farm, site of the famous summit meeting between Edison, Ford, and Rockefeller, stood off to the side of the stage, waving his hands over two homemade Theremins, which looked less like any sort of musical instrument than tiny UFOs. The faraway sound of creatures trapped within them snuck through the room. Thomas seemed to get bigger every time you looked from one band member back at him.

“‘We live in the beginning of a voodoo age,’” Thomas had said from a European stage a few years before, as his accompanists for the night, the Two Pale Boys, manipulating devices that produced a multiple of instrumental voices, vamped through the melody of Ben E. King’s “Stand by Me.” “‘We live in a time of magic, superstition, and ignorance,’” Thomas said. “‘We are the last generation that will ever know what it is like to live in an enlightened world. Twenty years from now, if we’re all still here, you’ll dandle your grandchildren on your knees and you’ll tell ’em stories of the Golden Age of the Nineties. 1996 was a good year! You’ll tell them about how in 1996, you didn’t have to wear personal laser-guided backpack protection systems. You could leave the windows open. Cows were animals. And your grandchildren will look at you, and they’ll think you’re crazy. And in that moment, you’ll think back to when you were a child, and your grandparents were telling you about the golden old days, and you looked at them and you thought that they were crazy. That’s the heritage to be passed on, from generation to generation—an echo of pain, through time. It’ll be too late, because your parents will be long dead, and no one will understand you.’”15
In 1953, in an essay that grew out of a seminar he was teaching at Princeton on the literature of the Civil War, Edmund Wilson seemed to argue that a prophet is someone who calls a people to their defining, truest, deepest, or most resistant values: that is, those values hardest, or least possible, to live up to. “It was as if he had not only foreseen the drama but had even seen all around it, with a kind of poetic objectivity, aware of the various points of view that the world must take toward its protagonist,” Wilson wrote. “In the poem that Lincoln lived, Booth had been prepared for, too, and the tragic conclusion was necessary to justify all the rest. It was dramatically and morally inevitable that this prophet who had overruled opposition and sent thousands of men to their deaths should finally attest his good faith by laying down his life with theirs.”

Bob Dylan, speaking of Peter Guralnick’s biography *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley*, catches the same sweep of history, of wish and event, in a line: in Guralnick’s book, Dylan said, one would find a young “Elvis Presley as he walks the path between heaven and nature, in an America that was wide open, when anything was possible.”

The prophetic figure may seem to predict or call forth the future, but if this is so it’s not because he or she sees the future, but because he or she embodies his or her place and time—his or her commonality, and all those who make it up. This prophet looks at the present and the past, at promises made and promises broken—or perhaps worse, forgotten—and asks what fate is appropriate for such a people. More than that, the prophet may embody both the promise and the betrayal, embody the fate of his or her nation—“nation,” because for better or for worse the idea of prophecy has always been bound up with the idea of a nation, a commonality, a group of people who are not just like everybody else, ever since prophecy emerged from the mouths of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos. “You only have I known of all the families of the earth,” God says to the Israelites through Amos: “Therefore I will punish you for your iniquities.”

The prophetic figure personifies the voice of his or her commonality—speaks not from its body but as its body, finding the voice that all members of the commonality can hear, or should hear. If the prophetic figure cannot find the voice in the land, he or she makes the voice up, because the prophet is sure the voice exists, and because only with this voice can he or she, as Wilson suggests, not only call a people to judgment but embody that judgment, trying to lead the people to accept that by their betrayal of whatever it is they are betraying, they will call down the wrath of God, in a form that no one can predict—perhaps in a form few if any will even recognize if judgment comes.

Take these famous lines from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, as he spoke of the Civil War as a curse upon the land, North and South, for the offense of slavery: “Yet if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as
was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said: ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’” Shocking words, for their time, as we look back: but what if the words really point us forward? What if Lincoln’s curse is a prophecy for our time no less than his? What if this is a national fact that we must all of us act out in our own lives, as actors in our own national drama or spectators of our own history, until some unknowable day when the debt, compounded every day that racial injustice persists, is finally paid?

But a prophet can also be found in the shadows, like the figure named “The Prophet” early on in *Moby-Dick*, warning Ishmael of the satanic quest he’s signing up for. “‘Have ye shipped in her?’” the man says, and it’s not the sort of voice Ishmael or anyone wants to hear, not the sort of man you want to look in the face: “He was but shabbily apparelled in faded jacket and patched trowsers; a rag of a black handkerchief investing his neck. A confluent small-pox had in all directions flowed over his face, and left it like the complicated ribbed bed of a torrent, when the rushing waters have all dried up.”

“‘We have just signed the articles,’” Ishmael replies politely.

“‘Anything down there about your souls?’”

“‘About what?’”

“‘Oh, perhaps you hav’n’t got any . . . No matter though, I know many chaps that hav’n’t got any,—good luck to ’em; and they are all the better off for it. A soul’s a sort of fifth wheel to a wagon.’”

Especially in America, in a place where it is presumed that everyone has a right to speak, to be heard, to do as they please, to pursue their own happiness—and where, as D. H. Lawrence wrote in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, “if I say anything that displeases them, the free mob will lynch me . . . . I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen. Because . . . they are free to lynch him the moment he shows he is not one of them”—especially in such a place, as a student I once had put it, it maybe that “the American voice can only be heard in the collective stories of those who are for some time, no matter how brief, pushed outside of the definition of ‘American.’ . . . the American voice is how one responds when silenced because of who he or she is.” And here we get much closer to the crank prophet: the person standing on the street telling you what you don’t want to hear, the person you pretend you don’t hear, don’t notice, never saw.

This is the crank, the outsider, the loser—at his or her most splendidly absurd, the type forced into heroism in such 1940s Preston Sturges movies as *Hail the Conquering Hero* and *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek*, people “trapped in such ridiculous situations,” as the film critic Manny Farber once wrote, it seems certain that “headlines will scream about them to a hooting nation for the rest of their lives,” like “such nationally famous boneheads as Wrong-Way Corrigan, Roy Riegels, who ran backwards in a Rose Bowl game, or Fred Merkle, who forgot to touch second base.
in a crucial" pennant race, "living incarnations of the great American nightmare that some monstrous error can drive individuals clean out of society into a forlorn no man’s land, to be lonely objects of an eternity of scorn, derision, and self-humiliation."

“This nightmare,” Farber said—anyone’s worst, naked-in-the-halls-of-my-old-high-school nightmare transposed into a national drama—“is of course the reverse side of the uncontrolled American success impulse, which would set individuals apart in an apparently different but really similar and equally frightening manner.”

This is the sort of person whose name becomes forever afterwards a warning of how utterly silenced one can become in America, how one’s very presence can be an embarrassment to anyone forced to acknowledge it. Remember Jimmy Carter, who not only lost the presidency but, on election night in 1980, seemingly could not wait to give it up, as if to say to the country at large that he had never been worthy, almost offering himself for the sacrifice to which, over the next eight years, he was forced to submit, blamed by the man who replaced him for everything that went wrong? Remember how long it took this man to climb his way back to even a shadow of respectability, to the point where one could speak his name without shame?

On *Mirror Man*, a production David Thomas first mounted in London in 1998, and recast in 2003 at UCLA, as part of his four-day “Disastodrome!” festival—named “Disastodrome,” in the words of an old Cleveland joke, “so nothing can go wrong”—many voices share the stage, but as captured in the London recording of *Mirror Man* it is the singer Daved Hild who goes completely nuts, starting off a monologue reasonably enough with stories about geography and landmarks and odd formations of land and water he remembers from his youth in Florida and then speeding up, chasing his own words until you just want him to shut up about “Now they tell you ‘It’s a Small World After All,’ *IT IS NOT A SMALL WORLD!* It used to be a small world before Disney came, before Exxon came and took it all away from us, and took that smallness and made it BIG, *BIG IS GOOD, RIGHT?*”23 But despite the hysteria his voice is smooth, absolutely colorless, the real voice of Anywhere, U.S.A., and you wonder how hysterical anyone with such a familiar voice can really get.

David Thomas, off to the side, commenting like the Interlocutor, sounds queer and diseased by comparison. His heavy voice, which can go tight and small, changing from a bear in the trees to a mole in the ground in an instant, immediately puts you off, but at the same time, more than any ordinary voice can do, it pulls you in.

He can speak in a heroic voice, full of a sailor’s pride and his chest puffed out. On a tune called “Wasteland,” leading off the 1993 Pere Ubu album *Story of My Life*, Thomas’s sea-shanty accordion pushes a firm, stately rhythm, and he declares
The sum of the years, the story untold,” he says to a hearty male chorus, and together they stare backwards: “We were throwing time away / Recklessly throwing time away / Oh ho ho ho throwing time away”—and nothing sounds more alluring. But even the proof that nothing has been lost—“Rock,” Thomas unexpectedly commands just as the nostalgia and regret of the tune has reached its highest peak, and the noise made by the slide down the neck of the guitar could not be more violent, more open to any possibilities, any future, for that matter any past—even this leads back to the alleyway.24

“The whole scene in 1974,” Thomas later wrote of Cleveland in the year before Pere Ubu formed, when he was still singing in Rocket from the Tombs—Cleveland, one of the places where rock and roll began, in 1951, with Alan Freed’s “Moondog Show” on WJW, and by Thomas’s time a city noted in song principally by Randy Newman’s “Burn On,” a celebration of the Cuyahoga River, in 1969 so polluted it set itself on fire—the whole scene “amounted to not much more than fifty people. It was a small, isolated society living in a space as isolated as any pioneer outpost on the plains of Kansas. And they identified with the land, passionately. Except the land wasn’t rural.” That tiny society found its way to a mostly abandoned part of the city, and into a bar where a band could play: “They had simply stumbled into a lost world where the sun would set, the inhabitants flee and the stones of the bridges, buildings and monuments whisper in the timeless dark, speaking a dead language.”25

That was the language Thomas set out to learn—but of course the language used to describe the quest is pompous before it is anything else: as Thomas says today, “we were beyond pretentious.” That’s the crank’s rhythm: from words that sound like they were taken from the portico of a museum straight into a rant that sounds like it was recorded in an asylum.

“This business of sexuality and adolescent rebellion has been bolted on to the history of rock and roll ex post facto,” Thomas once declared in outrage and indignation; even over the phone I was sure I could feel his face turning red. “It’s been grossly exaggerated! It’s abstraction! That’s why people are attracted to Elvis. People are attracted to the inarticulate voice. . . . Abstract thought was his big thing. Elvis introduced abstract thought into hillbilly music and rural blues: he was going for the sound of the thing. He didn’t even have to write his own words!”

If a critic were writing this no one would publish it: the ideas are too big and they come too fast, but the ranter slows down for nothing. “It was with Elvis,” Thomas rushed on, “that the singer becomes the priest, the mediator between the secret Masonic cult and the public.”

“The singer is the priest?” I said, more rattled than confused. “The secret Masonic cult is the band?” “Culture happens in secret, all art is secret,” Thomas explained patiently. “Ordinary people only see the ashes of art, or the failures, or frozen moments. Only rarely onstage do bands achieve reality; mostly it’s in re-
hearsals, in lost moments. Nobody ever sees that, or knows anything about it”—but, he said, speaking of the great running back for the Cleveland Browns in the 1960s, “Jim Brown would understand.”

So the crank rants on, and claims his familiar: You may not understand, he screams or mutters to the few who have, for a moment, gathered to see what the fuss on the street is all about and are now walking away as fast as they can, but Jim Brown would! Never mind that most of the people walking away don’t know who Jim Brown is, or was.

“Maybe I’m nothing but a shadow on the wall,” Thomas sang in “Heart of Darkness” in 1975; he has learned how to sing like one. He is an exemplar of the uncivilized, primitive, philosophically addled, unshutupable American, the midwesterner who somehow learned that just as you can always talk about the weather you might as well talk about what’s actually on your mind, and his gnostic argument—that art exists to at once reveal secrets and preserve them—makes sense of a particularly American, or modern, form of storytelling.

In a big, multifaceted democracy, you’re supposed to be able to communicate directly with everyone, yet many despair of being understood by anyone at all. Pere Ubu’s original recordings, Thomas has written, were the result of an “inward turning, defiant stance of a beleaguered few who felt themselves to be outside music, beneath media attention, and without hope of an audience.” It’s the voice of Ignatius J. Reilly, hero of John Kennedy Toole’s novel A Confederacy of Dunces, ranting madly against “Turkey in the Straw,” the middle class, romance movies, “American Bandstand.”

“In a sense I have always felt something of a kinship with the colored race because its position is the same as mine,” the corpulent, gaseous, thirty-year-old Ignatius writes in his journal: “We both exist outside the inner realm of American society.” Not that he has had much occasion to interact with members of the colored race, he notes, “for I mingle with my peers or no one, and since I have no peers, I mingle with no one.” It’s not a stance that works in America—in America, to feel yourself beneath media attention is to doubt that what you have to say is worth anyone’s attention, including your own.

It’s that dead end that may be the real source, or author, of Thomas’s voice. He whispered in the beginning, and as time went on the whisper turned into a rasp, a bad telephone connection. The whisper turned into the sound of someone talking to himself—a sound heard through a glass held against the thin walls of the rooming house both you and the speaker share. “Three Things” on Pere Ubu’s 1995 Ray Gun Suitcase is no fun, it is utterly creepy, but you can’t turn away any more than you can not look at a traffic accident. A chugging rhythm—like a needle sticking in a phonograph record, or a car trying to start on a cold morning—clatters behind a man whose singing is made of the cadences of a questionably literate man reading a letter out loud as he writes it in crayon.
“I find myself living in Heartbreak Efficiencies, at the corner of Governor and
West 114th St.,” he chants. Heartbreak Efficiencies—it’s a long way down from
Heartbreak Hotel, which at least had a doorman. This place has “six units and no
doorbells—but what do I need a doorbell for?”

The place couldn’t be more familiar: the last-resort residential hotel. There’s
one in the Frederick R. Weisman Museum at the University of Minnesota in Min-
neapolis: The Pedicord Apartments, a permanent installation of a 1982–83 work by
the assemblage artists Ed Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz. Just walk in and
you feel like you’re in a cheap film noir. The longer you stay in the corridor, the
more you find yourself imagining what crimes might have been committed behind
the closed doors.

You can imagine a single drunken punch; the atmosphere is too dispirited, too
enervated, for anything more. If anyone fired a gun in here, it’d be to shoot out a TV
set. Of course there’s always suicide: “The man in #2 hanged himself last month,”
Thomas in the voice of the man in Heartbreak Efficiencies reports: “The / Man / in / NumBeR / Two / HangEd / HiMsElf / LaSt / MoNtH. I think I know why he chose
the laundry room but I wonder what became of his two little girls.”

In the Pedicord, the anteroom smells funny; it’s the smell of dead air. You don’t
realize right away that all the proportions of the anteroom have been reduced, so
that one’s sense of confinement will produce a keenly oppressive claustrophobia
you will feel as your own fault.

In the dim corridor, lined with doors salvaged from the demolition of the Pedi-
cord Hotel in Spokane, but planed down so that the hallway feels even more as if
it’s closing in on you than the anteroom does, there’s nothing to see. Except for the
letters on the doors—“A,” “B,” and so on—the doors are alike. One’s inclination
is to look for detail, for the variation that speaks of human presence, for whatever
crummy prize the artists must have hidden in this discarded Cracker Jack box of a
hotel, so you lean into the doorways. Maybe, you think, there will be a peephole
in one of them, and something to see. There aren’t any peepholes, but when you
put your head to a door you break a laser beam, which activates a sound source
behind each door.

You hear a dog barking behind door B. There’s a party in C. In E, a man
and a woman are eating dinner or washing dishes, and arguing without any spirit.
There’s a mean, tired snarl from the man; the woman responds as if she’s talking
to someone else. “Do you know if Jean is coming over?” she says, and by this time
you are so hungry for action, for proof that something could actually happen in
this place, that you may wait around to find out if Jean is coming over or not, but
of course you never do find out.

The man in the Heartbreak Efficiencies is about to go out for a walk. On the
street, he passes the man who narrates Bob Dylan’s “Highlands,” the nearly
seventeen-minute song that ends Dylan’s 1997 picture of an emptied America, his
Neither man has left his room or spoken to anyone for weeks, or months; they don’t speak to each other, but something, maybe the same thing, the same street, opens up both men.

The man in Dylan’s song is cramped, complaining, sardonic, bitterly amused as he recounts his adventures, step by step: how he went into a café and talked to a waitress, how someone asked him if he was registered to vote, how he saw a dog. But the man in Heartbreak Efficiencies is transformed by the air, soon talking on the street, talking to whoever looks as if he or she might actually listen and talk back. The horribly suppressed, ugly sound he made back in his room is now a voice seeking harmony, in every sense.

He begins to sing a version of “Down by the River”—which since the middle of the nineteenth century has been, in American song, where the worst crimes are committed, where the bodies are dumped. In the Blue Sky Boys’ clinically detached, sadistic Depression-era reading of the folk song “On the Banks of the Ohio” you feel the singer draw his knife across his lover’s throat more than the singer does. In Dock Boggs’s 1927 “Pretty Polly” the momentum in the lovers’ walk to the river bank, where the woman’s grave is already waiting for her, has the buried tension of a man who can’t wait but who can’t bear to exchange anticipation for act.

The story in “Down by the River,” as the man from Heartbreak Efficiencies sings it on Ray Gun Suitcase, is just as bad—if you only hear the words as if you’re reading them off a page. But that’s not the man’s tone—telling a terrible story, he wants you to understand that life goes on, that no one can be absolutely sure what happened, that it’s so good to be alive. “I mighta been fine if she’d never confessed,” he confides, but the big power chords he hears in his mind carry him forward, and now on the street the man and the person he’s embarrassed into not turning away from him could be swapping ghost stories around a campfire, running down an open road arm in arm with good news to spread. Then the man goes back to his room, to kill himself or recharge his batteries.

He is an avatar of an American voice: you never know what he’s going to say. When he opens his mouth, you are sure you don’t want to hear whatever he’s got in it, but it’s easier to decide to turn away than to do it. There is madness in his voice—a madness that gives off the odd feeling that it might be cultivated, that it might be a con, that it might be there to get you to buy something, even if you can’t imagine what it is. There is authority in the voice—the authority of someone who really doesn’t care if you listen, but knows that if you won’t, the person behind you might, and you might be back. As a prophet he lays out the terms on which he, his audience, his city, and his country will be judged—by God, history, himself, ourselves. He embodies those terms: if we don’t speak the truth as we know it, we will be forced into a life of self-hatred and self-denial, where suicide, fast or slow, is the only way out—and if you do tell the truth as you know it, you will be forced into...
the role of a crank. Your voice will become more and more strangled, more and more pinched, and you will have to struggle ever harder to believe the sound of the noise you yourself make. As for getting other people to believe it—

“Pere Ubu is not punk,” Thomas wrote me three years ago, offended by the word as I’d used it to describe the band. He thought it associated the All-American Pere Ubu with the Sex Pistols, with Europeans. I said I meant “a dissident band with a sense of humor and a sense of doom,” a definition I’d made up on the spot he’d put me on, and anyway, I said, what was all that business about “if ever there’s a time for punk, it’s when men have their mid-life crises”? “The demands of any joke allow for a certain latitude,” Thomas said. “We are a rock band . . . in the mainstream . . . from a separate and lost evolutionary path if you must but still mainstream . . . We do not break with the past. We are in the direct line of descent of our esteemed forebears in rock music. We are our fathers’ sons.”

As a friend once said, “Everyone is the son of many fathers.” Just before Pere Ubu took the stage in New York on their twenty-fifth anniversary tour, they cued up a little fanfare music. It was “Shape of Things to Come,” a record not by Chuck Berry, or Little Richard, or Elvis Presley, or Martha and the Vandellas, but by a band that never existed: Max Frost and the Troopers, a concoction from the 1968 exploitation film *Wild in the Streets*, in which the voting age is lowered to fourteen, pop star Max Frost is elected president, and everyone over thirty is put in concentration camps and fed LSD all day long. Hovering in the background was a young Richard Pryor, playing “Stanley X”; a would-be James Dean named Christopher Jones played Max Frost, but he didn’t even get to sing for the soundtrack. For that, producer Mike Curb, later Lieutenant Governor of California and for a time seriously promoted as a future Republican candidate for the presidency, hired one Paul Wybier, who hit number 22 on the charts as Max Frost, but never touched them under his own name.

“Shape of Things to Come” was stupid, cheesy, phony, and inspiring in 1968, and it was no less inspiring in the year 2000. It made promises the rest of the night would keep: “Nothing can change the shape of things to come,” the phantom in the song chanted, and you could believe it; you could ride the song’s road. “The Shape of Things to Come”—who doesn’t want to know?

“I chose it,” Thomas said, “because of the uncompromised passion of the thing. I’ve always been a big fan of futures that never happened. . . . Convinced that we were destined to change the shape of music, that we represented the mainstream, we soldier on in futility—Japanese soldiers isolated on Pacific islands, carrying on the war decades after defeat.”

Aw, you want to tell him, it’s not that bad. But who knows?
Notes

3. David Thomas, notes to Pere Ubu, Datapanik in the Year Zero (DGC Records, 1996).
6. Ibid., 446.
7. Ibid., 452–54.
10. Thomas, e-mail to GM, 14 November 2000, 1645.
11. Thomas, e-mail to GM, 14 November 2000, 1316.
14. Pressler, quoted in Heylin, From the Velvets to the Voidoids, 149.
15. David Thomas and Two Pale Boys, Meadville (recorded live in Europe, 1996), included on David Thomas, Monster (Cooking Vinyl, 1997).
23. Daved Hild, on David Thomas, Mirror Man, Act 1: Jack & the Genera—The Pale Orchestra conducted by David Thomas (Cooking Vinyl, 1998).
25. Thomas, notes to Pere Ubu, Datapanik in the Year Zero.
32. Pere Ubu, “Down By the River II,” on *Ray Gun Suitcase*.
35. Thomas, e-mail to GM, 15 November 2000, 1659.
37. Thomas, e-mail to GM, 14 November 2000, 1623.