

SOUL ON

THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF

PETER STEELE

FIRE

WAGNER

BY JEFF



Dedicated to the memory of Peter Thomas Ratajczyk
and Barbara Emma Banyai

Soul on Fire: The Life and Music of Peter Steele

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***“There is no weapon more powerful than
the human soul on fire”***

—General Ferdinand Foch

***“Do you believe in forever?
I don’t even believe in tomorrow”***

—Peter Steele



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TOO LATE FOR APOLOGIES

Anyone who met Peter Steele never, *ever* forgets it. Throughout the writing of this book, I talked to many people who met Peter, and every person's story has an element of humor, pathos, profundity, and danger, or some combination of those things.

The briefest brush with the man would leave an indelible impact. His imposing frame, basso profundo speaking voice, scathingly self-deprecating sense of humor and caustic wit ... these were his most identifiable traits, and there was a lot more just below that surface. His seemingly manic-depressive behaviors and too-rude-to-be-true jokes belied an extremely shy personality. He was a master of contradiction, most of it intentional. While he was hardly the stereotypical rock star, just as soon as he walked in the room, you would have known he was famous even if you didn't have a clue who he was. If you met him before he was touring the world and selling hundreds of thousands of records, you knew he was *going* to be a rock star. He couldn't have stayed employed by the New York City Parks and Recreation Department all his life, even if he always harbored a desire to return to the simplicity of no-surprises blue collar living. He had too much talent to spread wood chips and pick up garbage all his days; too much vision, too much to get off his chest, too many private demons to slay in public. He answered his calling with loads of exclamation marks; he worked his sense of humor into a kind of sophisticated vulgarity with which he laughed at the life he so angrily despised.

I met Peter Steele three times, and the first meeting was good enough to get my name in the thanks list of *Bloody Kisses*. I didn't deserve the honor, but Peter thought I did.

It was 1992 and I had just started my own fanzine. A fan of Peter's since the first Carnivore album and now wildly into his new band, Type O Negative, I used what paltry connections I had in the industry to secure an interview with Peter and Josh. *The Origin of the Feces* had just been released and the interview was memorable from the start. Someone miscommunicated regarding the interview schedule, so I was napping soundly one afternoon when I heard the phone ring. Bleary and barely aware, I found Peter Steele and Josh Silver on the other line. I made excuses, fumbled for my tape recorder, hooked it up and attempted to play the serious, investigative reporter. Fifteen seconds later I tossed my list of questions aside, realizing these guys weren't going to take anything seriously. They were very kind, however, darting from one silly subject to the next, keeping themselves and their interviewer amused for the 30 minute time slot until moving on to the next unsuspecting amateur journalist. Apparently I was such a good sport that Peter made sure to tell his publicist I should be thanked on their next album.

Eighteen months later, I met Peter a second time. Type O played a medium-size club in Des Moines, Iowa named Hairy Mary's. *Bloody Kisses* had just been released but had yet to grow into a phenomenon, wallowing in an uncomfortable purgatory between the loss of fans that didn't get its directional shift and the gain of new followers that eventually made the album an incredible commercial success. Type O played to about fifteen eager disciples that evening. Near the end of the set, Peter handed his Mogen David wine jug to the worshippers in the front row, gesturing for us to drink. We each took a sip as this guy who looked like a goth/doom version of Jesus Christ looked on. It felt like a very special communion.

After the show we went out to the band's bus for autographs. As he always was, Peter was there to give us what we wanted. I remember how sweet, gracious and cordial he was to each of us. Never being much into autographs, I asked Peter to dot a beauty mark onto one of the girls' faces on my *Bloody Kisses* shirt. He laughed, said with amusement "that's a new one," took his Sharpie to my shirt and honored the request. We all left feeling like we'd gotten face time with God.

The third time I met Peter was somewhere in Manhattan at 2 a.m. in some hallway in some club whose name I've long forgotten. It was around 1996 or so. We were there waiting for Lycia to take the stage after an interminable delay. We said hello, I reminded him of the mole he put on my shirt several years prior, he said he remembered that, we laughed, and he

went on to satisfy the attentions of the many other people who recognized him. By that time, he was on his way to becoming a household name.



Josh Silver told me at some point during the writing of this book: “The only way this would do Peter justice is if it pissed off everybody.”

Noted.

I learned a lot of amazing things about Peter Steele before I got into the thick of writing this book, and the thing that resonates the loudest is how incredibly, *insanely* possessive people are of this man.

“Peter wouldn’t want this book written.” “Peter was a private person.” “Peter would hate this.” On and on the peanut gallery opined. Some people forget that Peter himself was considering writing his own book someday. In 2003 he told *Ink19* magazine, “I have a title for it: *Give Pete a Chance*. I have tons of really funny, strange, sad and sick things that have happened to me that are just unbelievable. Stories about school, or family or tour stories—misadventures. Maybe someday, when I get my head screwed on correctly, I will pursue this seriously.” He never got his head screwed on correctly—at least not long enough to write his book—so you’ll have to settle for this one. (Peter talked about writing his own book more than once, too, offering another title idea, *White Dope on Punk*, a paraphrase of the Tubes song “White Punks on Dope”.)

Why *wouldn’t* Peter want this book written? Because he was a private person? A guy who posed in the nude, rock hard, in *Playgirl* magazine, was “private”? A guy that revealed so many fears, insecurities and struggles in his lyrics, for decades, was a private person? Just as this book was nearing completion, Josh Silver told me this: “What’s great about being dead is you really don’t care what people remember. That concept is only romantic during life.”

As well as Josh knew Peter, Josh never tried to tell me what Peter would want. In fact, most people acting as Peter’s self-appointed posthumous mouthpieces weren’t people that ended up having much to offer this book. This phenomenon of people taking it upon themselves to speak for Peter after his death, to apparently know what Peter would and wouldn’t want, is the domain of the numerous losers and hangers-on Peter tried so desperately to shake off while he was alive.

But I get why Peter Steele makes people so incredibly possessive. He had this power, this way of making people feel like *they* were the star, like *they* were the center of the universe, even if it was clearly Peter who was the center of the universe in any room he walked into. Peter's concern and attentiveness was genuine. He could make even the most insecure person feel like a million dollars, despite having numerous insecurities of his own. It's why he continues to command loyalty and reverence. It's why girls who admitted they only met him for 40 minutes say that albums such as *Bloody Kisses* and *October Rust* were written about *them*. Had Peter wanted to be a cult leader rather than a songwriter or a municipal worker, he would have been the greatest and most dangerous cult leader in the history of cult leaders. We should feel grateful he left us with so much amazing music rather than a pile of psychotically-damaged disciples.



Early in the process of this book's creation, some hubbub was made of the fact that the surviving members of Type O Negative did not want to talk to me on record. This was disappointing, but I've come to understand it. Each member assured me it was nothing personal. Josh even eventually offered some respectful correspondence via email, even if it was limited and near the end of this book's creation. Sal Abruscato, Type O Negative co-founder and original drummer, said it was simply too difficult to speak about Peter within a project of this magnitude. As for Johnny Kelly and Kenny Hickey, they had apprehension for various reasons. And it seemed like they too were still harboring pain from Peter's death. Not only did they lose their careers the day Peter died, they lost an incredibly special friend. This has to be respected.

Soul on Fire is a story of many different viewpoints, of many different truths and even untruths. I have tried to avoid or correct the untruths wherever possible in telling this story, and where I cannot possibly know the story, I let those who were there tell it for me.

Peter would probably ignore or shrug off the kind of attention he gets throughout this book. The sad fact is that he's not here to pass judgment on it. But the guy was a great sport. He could laugh at himself and did often. I hope he'd laugh at some of this if he was able to read it, and I hope he wouldn't kill me for using this as an excuse to exalt him. It's definitely not

an attempt to speak for him. Nobody has that authority, although many have tried since his death.

Pass the wine jug around wherever you are, Peter. Whoever is in your circle of friends and family now loves you like the rest of us among the living do. We're all with you, man, laughing and crying and triumphing right along with you.

— Jeff Wagner, October 2014

RED

GROUND ZERO

BROOKLYN

*“I do have faith, I just hope
when I die I don’t go to Queens.”*

— Peter Steele, 2007

The black-maned demigod seems invincible up there. His four-string weapon slung over his left shoulder in battle position, his bellow obeyed by thousands of eager lieges, his presence commanding respect, his every move profound. He has the magnetism of a dictator lording over a rally of 100,000 subjects. In that moment, he is eternal. In that moment, he is all. In that moment, he’s wishing to be home with Mom and Dad in Brooklyn, in his basement bedroom with his cats, power tools, and textbooks.

He’s shitting his pants. The stage fright is unbearable.

It’s June 28, 1996, the Roskilde Festival in Denmark: the giant and his three cohorts cut a menacing shape onstage, each seeming titanic in size. Thunderous rhythms detonate, ominous melodies ooze, guitars and synths weave crystalline colors, lights pulse ... their passion is on fire and exploding for thousands of Europeans to witness.

The horde of sophisticated barbarians known as Type O Negative had traveled a long way from their home base, and for once in their cursed career things were on schedule and running smoothly. The audience devoured “Christian Woman,” “Blood and Fire” and other magic spells the band threw at them. They had arrived on the continent with the hugely successful *Bloody Kisses* album behind them and a new one, *October Rust*, chomping at the bit for August release. It would also do well. The black and green crew was adding gold and platinum to its color wheel.

The year 1996 was one of innocence lost for the band’s leader, Peter Steele. The bassist, vocalist and songwriter had been on a mission since the dawn of the 1980s. His post-high school band, Fallout, became local Brooklyn heroes, and his malicious Carnivore slammed an ugly fist down on the New York underground in the mid ’80s. When Type O Negative’s first

album debuted in 1991, Peter's vision was fully realized. As the '90s went on the band became a dominating force in the rock/metal landscape, yet they swam apart from any main stream. Despite massive success, business pressures and personal heartbreaks nearly swallowed Peter whole. While always master of his creative domain, the six foot eight giant wrestled with a number of personal demons and temptations in a protracted struggle that lasted well into the 2000s. He weathered the storm to write and realize a remarkable body of music that exorcized demons for those who listened and believed, but in trying to keep Type O Negative vibrant, and in extending his over-generous hands to anyone around him in need, Peter Steele sometimes neglected to help himself.

Helping others was easy—Peter was as adept at that as he was at writing music. In fact, his selflessness became almost as legendary as the music itself. Yet he suffered from depression and used sharply self-deprecating humor to veil his insecurities. Life was hard enough, and he found life in the spotlight even harder. Touring was not at all to his liking. That long slog away from home was nothing Peter ever wanted. But his musical vision made it a necessity, a byproduct of immense talent and relentless creative drive.

Peter would have rather spent his days working for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, a job he treasured but had to forsake once the demands of artistic success forced him to make a choice. He was, after all, just a blue-collar boy from Brooklyn. Gold albums and mass-scale adulation did not alter the fact that his heart was in Midwood, and in Prospect Park, and in the comfortable womb of his lair on Eighteenth Street, his dwelling underneath the family home. As Peter liked to say, he lived “around the Mother Mary on the half shell, past the eight garbage cans, down the crypt-keeper stairs, under the heat pipe and you're there.” Peter's talent practically forced him onto the global stage, but the familiarity of his own quiet environs, the simple life he longed for away from the glare of lights and cameras, was what Peter truly thrived on.

Peter Thomas Ratajczyk legally became Peter Steele in 1996, but he would always be Peter Thomas Ratajczyk to those who knew him best. Peter Ratajczyk the bookworm, Peter the prankster, Peter the son, brother, uncle, band mate, boyfriend, and pal. Peter—the incredibly generous boy who longed for peace, and when he discovered peace was not an option, harbored a constant and disturbing wish to die.



It seems fitting that Peter was born where novelists, poets, gangsters, and horror pioneers made their mark. Norman Mailer, Al Capone, and H.P. Lovecraft all spent significant time in a section of South Brooklyn called Red Hook.

A peninsula sitting at the southern edge of the borough's downtown district, Red Hook was settled by Dutch colonists in the seventeenth century, giving the area its original name, Roode Hoek, for its reddish soil and distinctive shape. The first major battle in the Revolutionary War following the United States Declaration of Independence was fought there; the Battle of Brooklyn was home to Fort Defiance, a major fort in the battle and one that General George Washington called "small but exceedingly strong." After the war was won and the British evacuated the area in 1783, Red Hook never saw such conflict again, although it went through periods of drastic change, with upswings in economy and employment, and downfalls too. In 1990 *LIFE* magazine named it one of the worst neighborhoods in the United States, and "the crack capital of America."

In an era of prosperity, the Red Hook Recreation Center opened in 1936, as the country was climbing out of the Great Depression and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program was in effect. The fifty-eight-acre area includes a paved path, handball courts, softball fields, a soccer and football field, running track, and the Sol Goldman pool. Maintained by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, its opening was cheered by 40,000 area residents and was instantly popular, especially on weekends, when local workers retreated to the park with their families. Families were started there too.

In the summer of 1938, Peter Paul Ratajczyk and Annette Catherine Pallon met at the Sol Goldman pool. Toweringly tall with striking blue eyes and ash-blond hair, Peter was an excellent swimmer and somewhat of a local hero on the ball diamond. He was working as a lifeguard, and Annette cut a figure so beautiful that Peter could not ignore her. Described by her daughters as resembling movie starlets Vivian Leigh and Jean Simmons, Annette quickly fell in love with Peter, and they were married a year later. They had a simple legal service in City Hall on August 10, 1939. Seventeen years later, when enrolling their daughters in Catholic school, the couple was informed they would need a marriage certificate from a proper Catholic wedding before their children could be enrolled. So, in the summer of 1956, they wed again, this time under the church's watchful eye at Red Hook's Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Roman Catholic Church. But it was mere formality; they'd been in love since 1938, and it was a love that lasted until death.



Peter and Annette ("Nettie")
Ratajczyk, 1941
(used by permission of the
Ratajczyk family)

Family friend Mark Martin remembers seeing evidence of Peter and Annette's fondness for one another. "Every day Mr. Ratajczyk would come home from work, he would grab his wife, and the two of them would walk around the corner and around the block every day. You could see that there was true love between the two of them. They were absolutely infatuated with each other."

Many of Red Hook's Italian, Irish, and German residents found employment at Todd Shipyards or the nearby Domino and Sucrest sugar refineries. Peter worked at the shipyard, a rigger/engineer at first, eventually moving up to become a boss, or "snapper." He worked on the first *Queen Mary* and some of the enormous oil tankers that rolled in and out of New York City's ports in the 1950s and '60s.

With the variety of locales from which ships would come, Peter was able to secure exotic gifts for his daughters—umbrellas from Japan, or soapstone that the children would use as chalk. It provided income enough for his small but rapidly growing family, and there was much to provide for. Peter and Annette were having daughters regularly, one arriving every few years. The first was Annette (nicknamed Nancy), followed by Barbara, Patricia, Pamela, and Cathleen. Around the time of the birth of their second daughter, Barbara in 1944, Peter was drafted into the army at the height of World War II. The Allies were gaining ground against the Axis, and the US increased troop numbers to assure victory. Serving in the Army Corps of Engineers, where he helped build bridges, Peter was also awarded medals for marksmanship. He was honorably discharged on February 15, 1945.

Although he served less than a year in the service, Peter lost his job seniority at Todd Shipyards once he returned home. While he was able to secure occasional employment at the yard, he was forced to "shape up" daily and hope for work between steadier, more dependable full-time positions. With his experience in engineering, foundry work, and related specialties, not to mention an impeccable work ethic, the head of the Ratajczyk household always made do for himself, his wife, and five daughters.

In 1962, with a surprise sixth child on the way, nobody got their hopes up that a boy would finally arrive. Except, that is, for Dr. Milton J. Meyer, who hinted to Mrs. Ratajczyk that she should be prepared to have

a boy this time. She believed no such thing would happen, but Dr. Meyer's prediction came true. On January 4, 1962, Peter Ratajczyk was born at Adelphi Hospital in Brooklyn. (His middle name, Thomas, was taken upon confirmation at age eleven, after his mother's brother Tommy.)

Peter was big, even at birth. He later said, "I was born twenty-four inches long and ten pounds. My mother said it was like giving birth to a pumpkin." Peter came into the world greeted by adoring females, and he adored them right back. This remained a constant throughout his life.



In September 1964, before baby Peter turned three, his father moved the family to the Midwood section of Brooklyn. Situated between Avenues K and L, life on Eighteenth Street was good. Midwood in the 1960s was a microcosm of the American melting pot ideal. Polish, Jewish, Russian, and Italian families peacefully coexisted. Kids played ball in the street, fathers hunched underneath car hoods trying to get the damn things to go, and the occasional block party gave everyone an excuse to mingle en masse.

The Ratajczyks were happy in their new neighborhood. As longtime neighbor and family friend Gary Kippel relates, "We're Jewish; the people next to us and between us are Italian, and then the Ratajczyk family was Polish. And it was very heavily Jewish for many years. Peter's father once said that he was very comfortable living in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood because there was a family background where, if you're aware of history, Poland was a very poor country. There were famines and economic hardships. Peter's father mentioned that there simply was not enough food to go around, and when his family didn't have food, the Jewish families nearby, who also barely had food, shared what little they had, even though they came from a different religious background. He would say to me, 'They were neighbors. Good people.' He said that most respectfully."



Peter's first Christmas, 1962
(used by permission of the
Ratajczyk family)

The Ratajczyk family's heritage is a mixture of Polish on the paternal side and Scottish, Irish, English, and French on the maternal side. While

it's been reported the family carries some Icelandic blood, that's complete fabrication arising from Peter Thomas's fascination with and desire to visit Iceland (which he eventually did in 1999).

Despite knowing Polish, Peter's father insisted the family speak only English in the home. They were proud Americans, after all, although that didn't mean their cuisine was all American. The family loved kielbasa and babka, as well as a variety of Celtic dishes. Food was plentiful and diverse in the home, and so was music.

The handsome Ratajczyk father was six feet five inches tall and possessed a robust singing voice to match. His deep, beautiful baritone belted out ditties such as "Ramona" and "Old Man River" when the family would gather, usually on weekends, for bouts of singing and playing. While he harmonized with his wife (nicknamed Nettie, to distinguish her from the eldest daughter, Annette), other family members, including the parents' siblings, nieces, and nephews, chimed in on piano, ukulele, mandolin, harmonica, guitar, and tambourine. The anchor of the event would be the family's player piano, its repertoire covering classical music up to more contemporary fare, such as "Mammy" and "I Don't Know Why (I Love You Like I Do)."

Cathy O'Connor, the youngest of the Ratajczyk daughters, remembers, "On the weekends, after everybody worked so hard to raise their children, people would gather to play music in their homes. We were not trained musicians, but everyone could play something." The very young Peter Thomas even got in on the act, playing a comb with paper threaded through its teeth, a sound that resembled the goofy, rattling toot of a kazoo.

Music was ever-present in the Ratajczyk household. Nettie would even be singing while taking care of the kids. The sight of her in a housedress and spiked high heels, dancing with a broom, is an image her daughters still remember fondly.

This wealth of music left a great impression on young Peter. His sisters were digging into the popular music of the day via 45-rpm records, and it didn't take long for Peter to follow their lead. Says sister Barbara Stilp, "I remember coming home from school and he'd be sitting on the windowsill, in this great big picture window, with my phonograph. He knew how to play 45s when he was only two years old, maybe younger. He'd be playing Elvis Presley as I was coming in the door, and I'd say 'What are you doing?' and he'd say 'I'm playin' wekkids.' He called them his 'wekkids.'"

It was sister Patricia Rowan who first tilted Peter's ear toward the bass clef: "I was trying to teach him how to dance one time. I said, 'Peter, listen

to the bass line. Every time you hear the bass, that's when you want to take a step."

Pat also remembers that, "Peter got his baritone voice from dad, who sang the 'Many brave hearts are asleep in the deep' sailor song as a lullaby to baby Pete." The 1897 song, "Asleep in the Deep," conveys the fear of drowning at sea. An unusual choice of bedtime music, perhaps, but considering his creative aesthetic later in life, baby Peter may have very knowingly absorbed its dramatic power right there in the crib. It's easy to imagine his father's rich baritone softening the song's tough subject matter, giving assurance that everything was going to be okay:

"Loudly the bell in the old tower rings
bidding us list to the warning in brings.
Sailor, take care! Sailor, take care!
Danger is near thee. Beware! Beware! Beware! Beware!"

But little Peter slept soundly those nights. Everything was right in Midwood. There was nothing yet to fear.



As the baby of the family, Peter maintained a close relationship with his parents and five older siblings, despite the frictions that come with any family dynamic. As Peter grew (and grew and grew), his father taught him all he knew, passing his knowledge of construction, machinery, and engines along to his son. Mark Martin recalls, "His father used to have a station wagon, and when Peter was older they would work on that car incessantly. You could see the bond between them. Plus, Peter was his only son, so it was a really, really strong bond." And his love for mother Nettie was evident; he constantly brought her gifts. In his younger years, Peter presented her with bouquets of flowers, remnants compiled from various neighbors' gardens.

Peter easily absorbed the lessons taught him both in school and church; and indeed, these institutions were intermingled. From kindergarten to eighth grade, he attended Our Lady of Refuge, a Catholic school described by his sisters as much less strict than the Catholic schooling they went through in Red Hook. Barbara notes that, "Our Lady of Refuge had both nuns—Sisters of Mercy—and laypersons as teachers. The Josephite



Peter (right) and John Campos hanging out in Midwood (used by permission of the Ratajczyk family)

nuns we had were much stricter. They would hit you with a ruler. They were allowed to hit you. Peter's teachers did not do that. There was no abuse."

Raised Roman Catholic, the family's church attendance was no more than once weekly, plus holy days of obligation, and while the Christian faith was ever-present, it was not dominant in the family's life. Despite the reputation of Orthodox Catholicism as a rigorous, demanding faith, the Ratajczyk parents kept things cool. Everyone was baptized and went through all the sacraments and confirmations, but they generally adhered to the basics of any other mainstream Christian denomination: Know your Ten Commandments; respect others; practice a sound moral code. Simple, easy-to-follow stuff.

Peter was a very good student and stayed attentive during church services, which was unusual for his peers. In school he showed an aptitude in math and science, although he preferred reading independently versus whatever the teachers assigned. As with most schools, music was part of the curriculum, and here again Peter dove in and attempted to learn all he could. And his teachers loved him. Cathy explains, "Because Peter was brought up around women, and his nieces were all women, he was very flirtatious from the start. He was *charming*. He charmed his teachers. They loved him. They seriously loved him."

In an early example of his creative and generous sides conspiring, Peter would corral the neighborhood kids when the school held a half-day, telling them there was no bus to take them home. He'd call a car service, everyone would pile in, and when the car would arrive on Eighteenth Street, he'd run into the house to beg his mother for the fare money. On those days, the kids would arrive home in style, courtesy of Peter with a little help from Nettie.

Peter was also extremely bashful. His sister Barbara tells a story that, knowing some of his proclivities later in life, seems almost unbelievable. "He was an extremely modest child," she says. "He would go to the store for my mother. She wanted, say, two pounds of chicken breasts, and he was ashamed to say 'breasts' to the butcher. So he called them 'chicken chests.'"



While his stoic father provided the example of a strong work ethic and told his boy that he should never let people see him cry, his mother and sisters encouraged Peter's sensitivity and artistic whims. He was a collector, amassing a healthy coin collection and an assortment of rocks and fossils in addition to a growing heap of books and records. He particularly loved unusual sounds; a favorite record was Disneyland Records' *Chilling, Thrilling Sounds of the Haunted House*. He underlined his favorites in pen on the back cover: "The Dogs"; "A Collection of Creaks"; "Screams and Groans."

Peter showed aptitude in art and drawing, and enjoyed learning how to be a handyman from his father, who had mastered everything from car engines to deck building. He also showed adeptness with word games, toying with puns, accents, sound effects, and rolled Rs every chance he got; he had a keen ear for sound, too, as Cathy relates, "If you dialed on a push-button phone, he could tell you what numbers you were dialing just by the sound."

Living in as rich a musical environment as the Ratajczyk household, Peter became well-versed in a variety of music styles as the 1960s came to an end. On top of big band swing, show tunes, classical, and pop, he added his own discoveries of the heavier rock music emerging at the time. He was already infatuated with the Beatles, who remained a lifelong fascination, and this greased his wheels for something with similar impact.

Sister Pamela Wendt can be credited for first bringing rock and roll into the house, which exposed Peter to hard rockers such as San Diego's Iron Butterfly and English power trio Cream. His other sisters kept music playing constantly—through this, Peter absorbed the sounds of the Rolling Stones, the Byrds, and Detroit combo MC5. It was Cathy who unwittingly offered the epiphany that changed Peter's musical life. In late 1970, just before Peter turned nine, she brought home an album titled *Paranoid*. It was the second release by



An early inspiration: *Chilling, Thrilling Sounds of the Haunted House* (Disneyland Records, 1964)

a young quartet from Birmingham, England, named Black Sabbath, and this discovery was huge.

“I brought Black Sabbath into the house,” she relates. “We were only allowed to play it so loud, except when the parents left, then it got blasted. When ‘Iron Man’ was played for the first time on my record player, Peter ran into my bedroom, grabbed hold of the volume knob, cranked it up loud, and stood in front of the stereo rocking and singing, ‘I am Iron Man!’ Honestly, I really think that it started then.”

The boy was utterly galvanized by Black Sabbath, unquestionably the heaviest rock band of the day. Tony Iommi’s morbid chords were thick as tar; the band’s rhythm section, bassist Geezer Butler and drummer Bill Ward, delivered a forbidding Neanderthal thump, and the chilling, neurotic-sounding vocals of Ozzy Osbourne combined to transport a listener to darkly difficult dimensions. The otherworldly atmosphere that Black Sabbath laid down made a significant impact on Peter, something that profoundly shaped his musical life.

By 1973, Peter became interested in playing guitar. He was already toying with a variety of other instruments, but the power of the guitar had become clear. The comb-and-paper kazoo didn’t quite have the impact of a distorted electric six-string. Peter took formal guitar lessons for a few years, but found deeper satisfaction mimicking songs from his favorite records. And he had plenty of time for it.

Peter’s sister Cathy was athletic, as were some of his other sisters and many of his peers, and while Peter liked to play street ball, street hockey, paddle ball, and stoop ball, and longed to take part in organized school sports, he was restricted by metal leg braces. Diagnosed with “pes planus,” or flat-footedness, at age two—a fairly common affliction—Peter’s case required correction. Already an intensely shy young man, the braces, combined with a chunky, husky frame, made him ripe for bullying and name-calling. The awkward preteen years were worsened for Peter by physical conditions beyond his control.

Mark Martin notes that Peter’s attitude about the braces was “not to show them. If you didn’t bring them up, he didn’t talk about them. Also, Pete was growing, and he was never comfortable with his height. So the braces were just another thing that people gawked at. He was very self-conscious over all this. More often than not he wore long pants to hide the braces.”

A growth spurt in Peter traded boyish chub for awkward preteen lankiness. His frame was suddenly an imposing one, finding him a full

head taller than most of his peers, and even boys older than he, yet his shyness and “gentle giant” demeanor kept him on the defensive, pelted with taunts from younger, smaller kids who felt they had something on the gangly Polish boy. Despite being likable to the core, there were still kids in his school and neighborhood who found Peter an easy target for abuse. He gradually withdrew, spending more and more time alone, reading and listening to music. As an introverted kid, Peter dove headlong into these activities. He still played like any other boy, whether it was baseball in the street, casual neighborhood basketball, or roller-skating, but the braces were a barrier to greater agility.

Sister Pat relates, “He did whatever he wanted to as best as he could do it. When he couldn’t do it any more than that, he would turn to something else and become an expert at that.”

Peter’s leg braces came off just before he turned ten. It would have been a great opportunity to finally pursue sports and become one hell of a basketball or football player, but by that time, team sports were of no interest to him. “He didn’t like organized sports where he had to play on a team,” says Mark Martin. “He wanted everyone to be successful, but he wanted to be the driver of it, so he preferred individual sports that he could work on in his own time and become very good at, and he did.” But Peter concentrated on sports less and less the farther he got into his teens. Something more important was beckoning.

The bullying that made an introverted boy even more introspective, and the braces that had him sitting on the sidelines, pushed Peter into intellectual solitude. He went out of his way to learn everything he could, even away from school. While he always loved the outdoors, he stayed inside a lot. He not only listened to music, he studied it. He not only enjoyed machines, but learned the mechanics behind them. He was fascinated for a while with train sets, which he set up and played with in the basement of the family home. He loved instructional manuals, beyond the assigned textbook reading in school. Sister Barbara recalls, “He was always learning on his own. The more things he could learn, in regard to increasing his intelligence more and more, he would.”

That learning included his self-assigned curriculum of total music absorption. The Beatles, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, King Crimson, the Doors, Santana, and so many more were being spun on his turntable, and the fantastic artwork of the album sleeves added to his experience. This stuff was incredibly exciting to him and offered a variety of sonic portals to explore. Later, image-heavy bands such as Kiss and Devo gave Peter his own

ideas about uniformity and identity in a rock context. Gears turned in his head; primordial concepts began to form; he kept playing guitar, learning from the twentieth century's decibel-driven long-haired masters.

"I'd never heard him practice," Pat recalls. "Then all of a sudden, one day he was down in the basement playing guitar. I don't know if he was forming it in his mind before he picked up an instrument and actually did it, but all of a sudden it was there."

The braces and bullies that once caused him hurt and embarrassment now provided fuel for his creative fire. Away from sunshine and plugged into pure electricity, Peter Ratajczyk's transformation was underway.



INTO THE REACTOR

*Life fades away all too fast
To live in the past
But the pictures of times gone
Somehow do live on*
— “Bleed for Me,” 1981

In 2007 Josh Silver took a walk through Coney Island, “home of the hot dog, home of the mugging victim.” He offered commentary on its infamous amusement area and attractions such as the Wonder Wheel and the Parachute Jump. Delivered with unimpressed wryness, his mass of wiry hair, epic grayed goatee, multiple piercings, and tattoos barely disguise the gentle, highly intelligent human being underneath.

Described variously by people close to him as *steady, private, consistent, skeptical, on the ball, sardonic, caustic, visceral, suspicious, an enigma wrapped in a riddle*, and *like an M&M: hard on the outside and amazingly soft and sweet inside*, Josh Silver is an impressive human being, a complicated puzzle, and a tough nut to crack.

During the Coney Island jaunt, Silver fixes on the Cyclone roller-coaster. “You’ll never find me on the Cyclone,” he says, “but you might find a few decapitated young people who stood up and thought they were cool and ended up headless. There have been a number of deaths on this wonderful attraction. It’s rickety and it sucks, and I wouldn’t get on it if my life depended on it.”

He buys one of the camera crew a ticket to ride the Cyclone, and hands it over. “Ticket to death. Here you go. Enjoy.”

At the time of this amusing waltz through Coney Island, Silver had, for many years, been trudging through the trenches and scaling the heights of rock infamy with his Brooklyn-based band. An excellent keyboardist, Silver is possibly an even more gifted producer. Given his mordant humor and keen understanding of music, he was bound to forge a long-lasting bond with another complex individual on the block of Brooklyn’s Midwood neighborhood where he grew up. The yin and yang relationship between

Josh Silver and Peter Ratajczyk started when they were ten years old. Peter was digging into music and science fiction and all those other escapes that made the awkward preteen years worth enduring, and Josh fully related.

Josh Silver, born November 14, 1962, met Peter Ratajczyk in 1972. That year the Silver family moved to the same block the Ratajczyk's lived on, East Eighteenth Street in Midwood. Even though the Ratajczyk working-class life was in contrast to the Silver's more professional one (his father was dean at a local college, his mother a psychologist), the boys' love of music, combined with their intelligence and complementary sense of humor took root quickly to form a kinship that lasted decades. Sometimes tumultuous and tense, like the love between brothers, their partnership was kismet—Josh was the black to Peter's green and, when it mattered most, the wind that fanned the flames of Peter's fire.



A couple years prior to meeting Josh, Peter found an ally in another neighborhood kid who shared his fascinations. The fourth-grade classroom of Our Lady of Refuge brought Peter and John Campos together. The pair discovered similar tastes in music, movies, and humor, and it didn't take long before they were playing music together, first in church and later in a more twisted secular project.

With a clear and growing interest, perhaps even obsession with music, various family members encouraged Peter to take guitar lessons when he was eleven years old. Taught by local teacher Charlie Rampino, who made house calls to the homes of his students, Peter and his niece Nancy took lessons together, with guitars bought by Peter's oldest sister and Nancy's mother, Annette, who also paid for the lessons. Peter and Nancy sometimes argued about who was to take the 7:00 p.m. lesson and who would get to watch *Barney Miller*, which aired at the same time. John Campos also began taking guitar lessons, adapting easily to the instrument and quickly becoming something of a prodigy. For the next several years the boys absorbed all the knowledge they could about their six-string acoustic guitars.

Peter and John, together with Nancy and neighborhood friend Susan Penta, made their first public appearances as musicians in church. Sister Theresa Kelly directed the kids in practice every Wednesday, with the fruits of their rehearsals heard regularly on Sundays at Our Lady of Refuge's

Folk Mass. John remembers how Peter, ever the subversive, would initiate playing forbidden music in church. “It’s me and Peter playing guitar for the Sunday morning Mass. We’re both sitting there, we’re in a Catholic Church, and Peter leans over and goes, ‘Let’s play “Paranoid.”’ So we both start playing Black Sabbath at the 10:00 Mass on Sunday morning. That kind of sums Peter up right there.”

Peter and John’s acoustic guitars were eventually usurped by the tantalizing lure of electric ones and the amplifiers that gave them the power of volume. Peter continued to play guitar throughout his teen years, but early into his forays with electric instruments he became a bass player. It was a move made out of total necessity.

By age thirteen, Peter was jamming with Josh Silver. Josh, who has said he was “forced” to take piano lessons, started his study of the instrument at age eight (later noting that he gradually became “less concerned with actual playing than with how the overall band sounds.”) Decoding the secrets of their heroes by playing along to albums, the guys worked up a repertoire of cover songs, and the group of neighborhood friends starting making noise in the Silver household. Josh shared Peter’s fascination with the Beatles and Black Sabbath, and he also brought a love of Deep Purple and Kiss into the mix. It was in this band that Peter took up the instrument he eventually became synonymous with.

“I started to play bass when I was about thirteen,” Peter remembered later. “I was in a band with Josh. I was a temporary rhythm guitarist. They were looking for a bass player, and as soon as they found one, they were going to kick me out. So I ran to the store. I was playing left-handed at the time and traded my guitar for a bass. The asshole at the store would not trade me for the left-handed bass because it was more expensive than the right. He said, ‘Take the right-handed bass and you’ll learn to play it.’ I did, but that’s the only thing I do right-handed.”

It was a perfect fit. Peter had already been drawn to bass clef instruments like the sousaphone tuba and the trombone in school—he even toyed with an upright bass in band class—and he embraced the electric bass. With the talents of Geezer Butler of Black Sabbath, Paul McCartney of the Beatles, and Roger Glover of Deep Purple guiding his way, the new bassist set his sights high and proved to be a natural on the four-string.

Naming Josh and Peter’s band proved challenging. They went by different monikers depending on the day. The name that stuck the longest was Aggression, but they also dubbed themselves Hot Ice and, for an even briefer time, Children of the Grave. With Peter on bass and Josh on keyboards,

they cycled through singers, guitarists, and drummers with incredible frequency. As Josh notes, “during that time, members were changed more often than underwear.”

Once the kids had their bearings and could keep time together without messing up too badly, they began gigging. Sister Pat relates, “I was his first roadie. I had a VW Bug, and all of their equipment could fit in my car. They used to play lunchtime at some of the schools. They would get special permission to perform. I’d bring the equipment for them, and they would set up and play during lunchtime, and I would take the stuff home. I would stay to watch them too.”

Although they didn’t have much to promote, they promoted themselves aggressively. A fourth grader at Brooklyn’s P.S. 199, in 1976, Bobby Tanzilo remembers Hot Ice playing at his school. “For some reason that remains a mystery to me; the school booked Hot Ice to play in the auditorium during the school day. I knew nothing of them, though I remember seeing their gig posters pasted up on poles in the neighborhood. They were full-on rock and roll—the clothes, the posture, everything—and seeing it come alive onstage before my very eyes most certainly helped fuel my passion for music. They seemed older and worldlier and living the rock and roll dream. It was only later that I thought about how influential this band I knew so little about was to me. The show must have been my first concert.” Even if it was in front of impressionable rock and roll newbies and not a seasoned, older rock audience, Hot Ice, just kids themselves, made an impact.

Peter continued to explore his new instrument with fervor. Most bassists begin on guitar first, Peter included, but even as a youngster he had a philosophy about the bass, including its role in a rock band, its attraction as a player and listener, its greatest practitioners, and what distinguishes it from the six-string guitar. He said that “a bass line should be a bridge between melody and rhythm, and Paul McCartney’s bass lines are counterpoint. He fulfills his bass function, but at the same time he says something without interfering with the vocal line. What I don’t like is when bass players play like guitar players. You gotta work with the drummer.”

Whenever he talked of McCartney and his influence, Peter took care to emphasize how difficult it is to play bass and sing a complementary but different melody on top of it. He never gave himself credit for doing the same thing, especially as a left-handed person who taught himself to play right-handed. Peter was far too humble to take credit for his considerable musical talent. He preferred to point out the talents of others, even if he possessed the same ability.

Another major influence, Geezer Butler's work in Black Sabbath is something Peter upheld as the pinnacle of bass playing. "The ultimate clean bass sound is Geezer's in 'Planet Caravan.' You can hear his fingers hitting the string, and you can hear the string buzzing a little on the fret ... and that's a cool sound." Butler showed Peter and the rest of the rock audience that the bass needn't be a mere background rumble, that it could take charge and deliver its own caustic splash of color onto the rock and roll canvas.

Aggression/Hot Ice/Children of the Grave was nothing more than a few kids banging away on instruments, yet even in this modest form, Peter and Josh had a clear directive, bent on making an impact by not only learning the songs of their heroes, but their moves and their volume. Peter's conceptual sense of organization and design could be seen in the T-shirts he created for the unit. Although they were only playing cover material, a visual identity was already forming in Peter's mind. He created a shirt that, while primitive, pointed the way for more serious endeavors far down the road. Positioning the words "HOT" and "ICE" in a right angle to each other, Peter would take the design to its logical limit later in his career. For now, Josh and Peter's band was content to jam on Beatles and Black Sabbath songs and have their own T-shirts to wear as a uniform.

Creative restlessness would come to define Peter's artistic life. As such, change came quickly. His and Josh's band dissolved as rapidly as it formed. There were other neighbor kids besides Josh and Peter playing instruments, kids as serious about it as they were, and pretty soon a core of four members solidified into a new unit. John Campos came into the fold, and they were fortunate to find another neighborhood kid into their kind of rock. It was even luckier that Dennis Rizzo actually owned a drum kit. Equipment was expensive, and the kids coveted any piece of it they could get. Family friend Mark Mueller gave Peter his first amplifier, and the boys acquired gear when and



The Northern Lights lineup before they were Northern Lights. L to r: Josh Silver, Dennis Rizzo, Peter, John Campos (used by permission of the Ratajczyk family)



Keeping it simple: Northern Lights business card, circa 1978

however they could. Jam sessions continued, with the kids lugging equipment between the Silver and Ratajczyk households on a regular basis. They dubbed the quartet with the celestial designation Northern Lights.

“In the early years of his life, Peter was on the shy side and his humor was already very self-deprecating.” John Campos remembers the mid ’70s, hanging out with Peter, right at the point where they were trading in their baseball bats and roller skates for guitars and records. “He was extremely intelligent and so intuitive. Even though he was on the quiet side, he could tell when people were bullshitting him. He was also an avid music listener. We would sit there and listen to the Beatles, Black Sabbath, all the groups that were influential from the ’60s and ’70s, and he would analyze it all. He would pick up stuff from it, and we would show each other what we learned.”

Northern Lights grew out of the grammar school circuit quickly and were soon playing local high schools. They were the hot teenage band of the day, at least to those in the Midwood section of Brooklyn who were witness to their sets. They developed a strong repertoire and showcased themselves at block parties, high schools, and local Mardi Gras celebrations. There were even some gigs in local bars and clubs. But Northern Lights was comprised of extraordinarily ambitious kids. They wanted more, and this ambition caused the first rift in their unit. They had differing ideas about exactly *what* they wanted and how to get it. They might have been a happening name in Midwood, but they didn’t mean shit in nearby Flatbush and Bensonhurst. World domination was a long way away.

