

Odd pop from an American in Paris

By Tom Popson

A lot of pop musicians have taken odd jobs during those times when they weren't playing regularly—or when they were playing but not earning enough to support themselves—but Theo Hakola might have held one of the oddest jobs ever. Singer, guitarist and central figure in the band Passion Fodder, Hakola once made doll's eyes in a small factory in Barcelona, Spain.

"That was particularly picturesque," recalls Hakola. "It was a very small shop with nine employees, owned by the father of a female comrade of mine in Barcelona. The father was an Italian who was a fascist and had fought with Franco in the Civil War and had lost a leg in the war—and didn't want to go back to Italy after the defeat of Mussolini for fear of perhaps losing his other leg.

"By the time I met him, he was just an old grandfather and very sweet, and he and his wife stuffed me full of food. They gave me the job for a few weeks because I needed money while I was in Barcelona.

"I'd punch out the plastic eyes on a machine, then put them on a tray. The eyes would go by these ladies who, with syringes full of ink, would put in first the black pupil and let it dry, then put in either brown or blue color. Then the eyes would move down the line to be fitted with something that would make them open and close through the force of gravity."

Making small orbs is just one of the jobs Hakola has held during a years-long, circuitous journey from Spokane, where he was born and raised, to his current residence in Paris. Among other things, he has worked in the New York office of the U.S. Committee for a Democratic Spain, handled lights and sound at Tramps nightclub in New York, been a deejay on French radio stations and acted in a French production of "Mahagonny."

For the last three years, though, he has been front man for Passion Fodder, a five-



member band—all natives of France, except for Hakola—that is making its first tour of the U.S., opening for former Bauhaus stalwart Peter Murphy (the band arrives Friday at Cabaret Metro).

The tour follows the recent release by Island Records of a Passion Fodder LP, "Fat Tuesday," in this country, the single record being a slimmed-down version of a double album the band released in 1986 in France. Marked by some stark, angular playing and idiosyncratic talk-sing vocals from Hakola, the album is a showcase for Hakola's poetry-on-the-darkside lyric imagery, the songs prowling a world of bleakness, disillusionment and love-as-struggle.

While some of the imagery in "Fat Tuesday" seems too cryptic to have meaning for anyone other than its author—"esoteric poetic excess," Britain's New Musical Express called it—there are times when the ambiguity produces an interesting effect, as in the song "Luz Blanca." A number that could be about either love or drugs, "Luz Blanca" explores a sensation described as "light flowing up my veins/ burning a track

like a runaway train."

"Actually, 'Luz Blanca' describes the pleasant and enjoyable part of love," says Hakola. "It's a love song inspired by a drug song. I think of 'Heroin' by the Velvet Underground. That's a really beautiful song. I've always loved it. It's just a pity that it's smack propaganda. But I think its approach to the drug in question is my approach to love when love is right. Which is a cliché—everybody knows love is a drug—but it's just kind of a wink toward those Velvet-type songs.

"Anyway, that's celebrating the positive aspect of love, what the French call 'the lightning bolt,' which is their expression for falling for somebody. That's the best part. The rest of what I talk about is how it falls apart after.

"There is, definitely, an element of dealing with what it's like to be dumped when you're in love. Or what it's like to just not connect again after a long period of love. The difficulty of succeeding in love, making love stay is what another song, 'Not Waltz Away,' is referring to."

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Besides dealing with the downside of love, "Fat Tuesday" also contains its share of political allusions, particularly in the song "Hard Work," which opens—no ambiguity here—that "it's difficult to pass a law/ When you're dumb as a horse." The song was written about members of the current French government, says Hakola, and its mention launches him into a lengthy discussion of that country's rightist National Front, which he describes as "ex-fascists who are trying to play the democratic game."

"Something that's perhaps lacking in the record is positive proposals for alternatives and change," says Hakola. "To that extent, I wouldn't call us a political band, as people often do. Apart from being a strongly worded manifesto in favor of humanism, the record isn't really giving specific solutions.

"But even 'Hard Work' is based on love. The anger expressed there is based on love, a love of democratic ideals, love of—if I could be so pretentious—humanity, and

then hatred for those who don't improve humanity's lot when in a position to do so. For me, a fair amount of hate is inspired by love."

Given Hakola's own admission that some of his lyrics and their inspirations—which include French politics, Stendhal's "The Red and the Black" and a Buddy Holly song—won't be obvious to listeners, you might wonder whether he considers his audience at all while writing songs.

"I think about it," he says. "But I would never adage anything in order to be understood. I might think something is too cryptic or that it's ridiculous if only I'm going to understand it—but if it's right, I would leave it that way.

"A lot of lyrics written by people I've liked I can't say I completely understand. A lot of Dylan lyrics, I can't really say I know what he was trying to say. But I do know what the lyrics do to me."

Hakola was 18 when he left Spokane in 1973 for Ohio's Antioch College, which turned out to be simply a launching pad for further travel. "Antioch allows you to do classes outside the school itself," says Hakola, "a lot of 'life learning,' which you can abuse or take advantage of. I spent a grand total of 15 months there over four years, but I still got a degree out of it. They're very loose.

While enrolled at Antioch, Hakola studied at the London School of Economics and traveled to Mexico and Spain, working odd—once in a while very odd—jobs to finance his wandering. Eventually he landed in Paris and started a punk/New Wave-oriented band called *Orchestre Rouge*, calling upon the minimal guitar experience he had gotten in "crummy little" bands back in Spokane.

When that band broke up, Hakola put together *Passion Fodder*. He would like to see his current band relocate to the States, preferably Los Angeles. For one thing, he says, it's nice to play to audiences that understand English—audiences that can at least have a reaction, pro or con, to his lyrics.

"We make American music," says Hakola, "and it's ridiculous to try to do it based in Paris."