

Passion Fodder



STAYING IN

(l-r) Lionel Dollet, Pascal Humbert, Theo Hakola, Benedicte Villain, Johnny.



TOUCH WITH THE MOTHERLAND

BY MIKE SHEA

It isn't too often that one mistakes the lead singer of a band for a sound technician for you can usually see the egotistical charisma a mile away coming at you. With Passion Fodder's leader, Theo Hakola, that circumstance actually does happen. Monsieur Hakola, to begin with, isn't unnoticeable. He must be about six foot two, skinny with beautiful, large brown eyes that, when they sight an object, seem to stare it into the ground and chaotic blonde hair that is stretched up and back and all around. His casualness supersedes his notoriety and possibly because of some humbleness, explains the lack of superstar "attitude." Now, not everybody knows about Passion Fodder just yet but things do change. For Theo Hakola, the meaning of life is change. Constant.

One can only go into so much of a biography without writing a book about the numerous positions and titles that Theo has held over the years but at 33, he has undoubtedly, more experience about the world and its inner-workings than probably any other performer off hand. "If I have the pretention of maybe knowing what I'm talking about lyrically, apart from writing the music," he explained calling from Washington D.C. where two recent gigs at the 9:30 Club with Peter Murphy were underway, "it's because I have a right to because of doing a whole lot of things before doing music. Especially opposed to England where the common thing is to start doing music when you're fifteen or sixteen and never do anything but that. Then you might get political and you might want to discuss international relations or problems in your own country but you won't really have had any real experience in really facing that because you would have spent most of your life trying to be a rock star or just trying to make music."

Hakola, spurned from his hometown of Spokane, Washington has moved from place to place and job to job more or less to make money and move on. His list of

credits read like an entry in *Who's Who*. Some of the more inconspicuous positions held were as a waiter in numerous restaurants; a teacher in language schools; a lecturer on the Spanish Civil War and photography at Antioch College in Ohio; hospital work in Seattle; a translator in various other universities; as a DJ/Programmer/Producer for Radio France, RMC, Radio Cite 96 and Radio Nova in Paris; a journalist on European arts for various European and American publications; sound and light technician at New York City's TRAMPS club; as an assembly line worker in a little shop in Barcelona making doll's eyes; studied for a year at the London School of Economics; as a volunteer on the McGovern campaign in Eastern Washington state when he was 18 and several trips and months in Mexico, Spain, and England.

His most proud achievement came in 1975 when he was hired full time as an organizational secretary by the United States Committee for a Democratic Spain in New York City. "We functioned up to the death of Franco. We fought against American policy in support of Franco through lobbying Congress and press coverage. Common solidarity work like trying to draw attention to political prisoners being held in Spain and bringing people over to inform Americans about it," he explained. "What I did politically was much more practical and organizational than theoretical. It was a nice way to leave home as well. I never had been across America until I was 18."

It wasn't until he finally settled down in Paris in 1979 before he eventually wound up getting into music. It started with a well-known European band called Orchestre rouge, which he began in 1980 with several others, doing lead vocals and some violin. The band had two well-received albums off RCA-France, the first being produced by Martin Hannett of Joy Division fame and the second by Adam Kindrone of Ian Dury and Pere Ubu Projects. Orchestre

rouge made "a lot of noise" in France, "probably more than Passion Fodder has," he admits. Elsewhere in the world, Orchestre rouge was nothing. "And thank God," Theo adds. "I mean, it was like a school. In less than three years we didn't get along very well together. We split up rather badly." By this time it was 1983.

That year, Theo switched gears again and accepted the role of Alaskawold Joe in Hans Peter Cloos' production of Brecht/Weil's *Mahagonny* in Paris, Lille and St-Etienne. With this production, he was able to live comfortably off his payment for over a year and produce a four song EP entitled *Passion Fodder* and distribute it through Celluloid in May of 1984.

By October, Theo had met up with several other musicians that he had been seeing around the area and, to his own surprise, ended up forming a band for Passion Fodder. "At first I was really just looking for people to play with and not really make a band again," he explains. "I didn't want to be constrained and chained to a band and it turned out that we got along so ridiculously well that it's become a band." He met their current violinist Benedicte Villain from his days with Orchestre rouge. She had studied classical violin for seven years and then stopped due to several reasons. After becoming hooked on Orchestre rouge and seeing Hakola play, she picked up the violin again inspired. "I don't play very well," he jokes. "My right hand is wonderful but my left hand is pathetic." Bassist Pascal Humbert was picked up from another band and Lionel Dollet and Nicholas Magat were added on guitar and percussion respectively. In 1987, Magat was replaced by Johnny.

HARD WORDS FROM A SOFT-MOUTH was Passion Fodder's first album. Released in 1985 through Barclay Records in France and Upright Records in the U.K., the album received a good amount of attention again throughout Europe

and was considered to be rougher than what the group currently produces. Almost immediately, Passion Fodder was being labeled as basically an American band though four out of the five members were French and all lived in France. "One of the better things to come out of America for some time," hailed *Sounds* magazine. Passion Fodder's roots, musically, situate them in the deep South of the U.S., where bands along the lines of R.E.M. fight over glory and multiply nightly. The difference here lies in several places. Lyrically, Hakola is more responsible and less idealistic. American roots rock bands tend to verge off right of center into mainstream contemplating and their views and ideas tend to be less controversial and more Sweet-N-Low. Passion Fodder explore a more wide variety of subjects with a tinge more of reality. Sure, they're primarily French, but that tends to make them more objective. Americans always did take things for granted.

Musically, Hakola sees differences lying in the overall construction of the bands. "One thing that might differentiate us from other American guitar bands is our rhythm section—there's a lot more going on. The bass just isn't doing the bass part; it's going a lot further. There's also some stuff going on in terms of harmony and rhythm that you just don't hear a lot of in those other bands. They tend to plod along, not badly. Actually Television's drummer was quite something. He did more than plod along. Bands like R.E.M. and The BoDeans, their rhythm sections really plod along and bore me." By adding Benedicte's violin and Pascal's rampaging bass compositions over a rather mellow, but sometimes unpredictable, melody, Passion Fodder have been able to take an American standard and make it unique.

Taking his knowledge of *Mahogony* and transposing it to a song entitled "As You Dig Your Hole" and adding a Dylan cover, "Tomorrow Is A Long Time", Theo and Passion Fodder released, *FAT*

TUESDAY, in late 1986 in France, a 15 track double album. In June of 1987, it was released in the U.K. through Beggars Banquet as a single album and eventually, ten months later, ended up in America as a single album through Island Records. Though technically it isn't, *FAT TUESDAY* is being called Passion Fodder's debut album. Musically, it's more cohesive and it derives more from experience than its predecessor. "I'm glad they're calling it our first album because it's more solid and more interesting," Theo says.

FAT TUESDAY speaks more of desire and needs and objects and items than most jangle bands tend to recite on about. "Luz Blanca", the college fave, rotates along as Theo craves the particular female before going into high speed several cuts later on "Mardi Gras". Other tracks like "In The Moodswing" and "Skin Poetry" pick up more guitar work and contribute more to the melodies branch that American bands tend to love. His Brecht/Weil interpretation on "As You Dig Your Hole" grunges through with a blues line and a Nick Cave vocal line that is perfect for a lonely desert night in Arizona around a campfire.

Meanwhile, Passion Fodder have already contemplated and partially completed their new album, *LOVE WALTZES AND ANARCHY*, due out in the U.K. in August and in the U.S. in November, which will then be followed by a tour. "For me it's the most wonderful thing I've ever done in my life. This album is more vocalized, more harmonious. Just more finely tuned, more honed," he explained.

While touring this spring in support of Peter Murphy, Hakola was concerned, as any opening act would be, that the majority of the people would show up by the time his act hit the stage. Though he admitted that the combination of his band with Murphy's didn't seem to be the most logical, musically speaking, he says that it was an offer they just couldn't refuse. "The key thing is for the

audience to pay attention and discover us," he points out.

This wasn't much of a problem for while Murphy and crew hid away in the back, Hakola and associates mingled throughout the crowds, answering questions and signing autographs from ardent fans. "He loves to talk and once he starts he doesn't stop," said Johnny, the drummer when describing Theo. "I mean, I don't mind to talk to people and do interviews, it's just that he does it so much better and seems to enjoy it so much more," he added. Hakola, though American, has a very slight French touch to his speech and injects French words and expressions into every conversation, making him even more interesting than he already is. Benedicte moves around with almost a mime-like resemblance, always being more than polite and courteous. Pascal is silent and laid back. Johnny looks innocent and boyish, always being concerned for his guests and speaks of The Triffids as a band that he listens to these days. Always thanking someone quite often for favors or help, the members of Passion Fodder are true to their customs and manners. True ladies and gentlemen. Their music, being an outlet, is a form of expression unlike their outside appearance.

While they continue to move on in their careers and await the arrival of their next album, Passion Fodder will see to it that somewhere along the line, that they can move here to America where they seem to be connected to so often anyways, even though they do have a solid following in Europe. "We are not going to cut ourselves off from the other side of the ocean," explains Theo. Until then, they can look back and see that in the course of four years, their training and experiences have made them more adaptable and accessible to generate predictable music to us into soulful and intriguing recitals. "We've grown a lot musically," Theo ends, "and on a human level, it's more like a permanent honeymoon." ■