

# Revival for the Notekillers, Still Noisy After All These Years

By Sarah Grant

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The student and the teacher faced each other on plain black foldout chairs. It was past 9 on a windy night, and this was David First’s last guitar lesson of the day. The student, Karen D’Ambrosi, a shy 28-year-old marketing manager at Etsy, began strumming one of Mr. First’s electric guitars. He joined in, gently plucking a melody over her chords.

In the next room, Mr. First’s wife, Mira Gwincinska Hirsch, listened in the dark, eating a piece of pumpkin pie. A small table lamp illuminated a jasmine flower in a red vase.

The scene was surprisingly tranquil considering that Mr. First, 63, is something of a lost noise-rock legend. In the late 1970s, his avant-rock band, the Notekillers, performed at clubs that now exist only as urban myths, like CBGB and Hurrah. Their songs were fast, jagged and wordless. They shared stages with volatile performers from Glenn Branca to the Misfits.

Before the lesson, Mr. First sat at his kitchen table with a mug of piping tea, clearly aware that his sedate appearance — cargo pants, button-down shirt, tea — belied his punk credentials.

But evidence of Mr. First’s rock ’n’ roll past abounds in his third-floor walk up in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Every wall seemed to be adorned with a Notekillers concert poster, and the group’s record covers were mounted on bookshelves. Their single, “The Zipper,” turned out to be pivotal for a band that went much further than the Notekillers.

“‘The Zipper’ was one of the Top 10 documents for me at the time,” Thurston Moore, singer and guitarist for Sonic Youth, said in an interview recently. “It was emblematic of the guitar music that inspired me. I mean, this guy was shredding like Hendrix.”

But in those pre-internet days, the Notekillers’ obscurity wasn’t a badge of honor. It was proof to the band that it had failed. One day in 1981, after four years together shuttling back and forth from the Lower East Side to their native Philadelphia, the trio (Mr. First, along with the bassist Stephen Bilenky and the drummer Barry Halkin) took the New Jersey Turnpike home and gave up on the New York music scene.



Mr. First performing at the Roulette in Brooklyn. “For 25 years, I just thought we had no impact,” he said of the Notekillers. “So to find out that we had a major influence — let alone on Sonic Youth — that was pretty huge.” Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times

“We really weren’t connecting with people,” Mr. First said impassively.

Now, more than 30 years after inspiring Sonic Youth, the Notekillers are coming somewhat closer to having a moment.

The past 12 months have been a kind of renaissance for Mr. First, who released two solo records in addition to a new Notekillers album. He has just returned from performing at the Tate Modern in London as part of an exhibition of the experimental artist Phill Niblock. And he just released an album of pop songs, under the name Star Ballads.

“I’ve always thought David was one of the most underrated musicians,” said Kyle Gann, a Bard College professor and composer, who befriended Mr. First after years of covering his live performances for The Village Voice. Mr. Gann’s son, Bernard, formed the metal band Liturgy after taking guitar lessons from Mr. First. (He also plays bass on the Star Ballads record.)

“David’s music is amazing,” said Mr. Gann, who included Mr. First in his book, “American Music in the Twentieth Century.” “It’ll start strangely out of tune and then it just goes haywire in slow and gradual ways. He’s made the hair on the back of my neck stand up many times.”

Recognition was a long time coming, but one day Mr. First woke up and his fate changed.

About 15 years ago, Mr. First got a phone call from Barry Halkin, the drummer in the Notekillers. The glossy British music magazine Mojo published an article about the musicians who inspired the guitar innovations of Sonic Youth. Among more celebrated favorites, Mr. Moore singled out the Notekillers.

“Honestly, I assumed it was a mistake,” Mr. First said. But he sent a note to Mr. Moore, just to double-check.

The astonishment was mutual.

“I was blown away when David emailed me,” Mr. Moore, 58, said with boyish exuberance. Mr. Moore immediately wrote back and offered to release a Notekillers compilation on his own record label.



Notekillers circa 1979. From left: Stephen Bilenky, Barry Halkin and Mr. First. Barry Halkin

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Mr. First rang his former bandmates to gauge their interest in playing again. The drummer had become a successful architectural photographer. The bassist designed custom-made bicycles.

“I said to them, ‘Maybe the world’s finally ready for us.’”

The compilation Mr. Moore released in 2004 catalyzed the Notekillers’ reunion after 23 years. They released a record in 2010 (“We’re Here to Help”) and another last year, “Songs and Jams Vol. 1.”

The Notekillers — all of whom are 63 — now do gigs at Brooklyn sites with rock bands half their age.

“To think that we’re still doing this at all,” Mr. First said, his voice trailing off. “Not to mention doing it better than we did it the first time, is still unreal to me.”

Mr. First grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Philadelphia. His parents encouraged him creatively by letting his band, three Grateful Dead-worshipping teenagers (who later became the Notekillers), rehearse in their basement. By 1976, the Notekillers, already entrenched in Philadelphia punk clubs, were drawn by New York’s thriving avant-garde music scene.

But they found the downtown scene was difficult to crack.

“Back then, nobody really knew how to play guitar in a traditional sense,” Mr. Moore said. “And if you did, it was an anomaly.”



Mr. First giving lessons to Karen D'Ambrosi at his apartment. He has worked quietly as a guitar teacher since the Notekillers disbanded. Demetrius Freeman for The New York Times

Before forming Sonic Youth, Mr. Moore said that his band, the Coachmen, also failed to emerge from the same scene.

By 1984, the Notekillers were over, and Mr. First relocated permanently to Manhattan, working part time as the manager of a cookie store in Midtown. He paid \$75 a week to live in a transient hotel, chaining his guitar to his bed before going to work.

A year later, he was laid off from another job, as the manager of an ice cream shop. This was not a setback but a windfall. During six months of paid unemployment, Mr. First finally had time to do music full time, playing solo and with other ensembles he formed. And, critically, he amassed a cadre of students to teach guitar for extra cash when necessary. He never worked a 9-to-5 job again.

As a free musician, Mr. First has flourished. Now he is considered a beacon of futuristic sound among experimental composers.

Though much of his music is heavily electronic, at a recent performance at the Roulette theater in Downtown Brooklyn, Mr. First switched among very traditional acoustic instruments during a suite of improvisations: a crimson sitar, a scalloped-neck electric guitar from Vietnam and a harmonica (just the regular kind). His ensemble partners were equally diverse: a violist, a trombonist and a percussionist.

“People who know me in these contexts would be very surprised to find out I’d been in this crazy rock band,” Mr. First said.

As are his students. Today, Mr. First composes and records from his Greenpoint apartment thanks to an amalgam of creative grants and commissions. Through it all, he has maintained his side gig as a guitar teacher.

Ms. D’Ambrosi, the Etsy employee, asked Mr. First for guitar lessons through a mutual musician friend five years ago. “I remember seeing on Facebook that he was in this band, but we didn’t really discuss it,” she said. “We just play Bob Dylan and Neil Young.”

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