

POPULAR CHRONICLES

MEET THE SHAGGS

Three girls from New Hampshire who became one of music's strangest legends.

BY SUSAN ORLEAN

THINGS I WONDER (2:12)

DEPENDING on whom you ask, the Shaggs were either the best band of all time or the worst. Frank Zappa is said to have proclaimed that the Shaggs were "better than the Beatles." More recently, though, a music fan who claimed to be in "the fetal position, writhing in pain," declared on the Internet that the Shaggs were "hauntingly bad," and added, "I would walk across the desert while eating charcoal briquettes soaked in Tabasco for forty days and forty nights *not* to ever have to listen to anything Shagg-related *ever* again." Such a divergence of opinion confuses the mind. Listening to the Shaggs' album "Philosophy of the World" will further confound. The music is winsome but raggedly discordant pop. Something is sort of wrong with the tempo, and the melodies are squashed and bent, nasal, deadpan. Are the Shaggs referencing the heptatonic, angular microtones of Chinese *ya-yueh* court music and the atonal note clusters of Ornette Coleman, or are they just a bunch of kids playing badly on cheap, out-of-tune guitars? And what about their homely, blunt lyrics? Consider the song "Things I Wonder":

There are many things I wonder
There are many things I don't
It seems as though the things I wonder
most
Are the things I never find out

Is this the colloquial ease and dislocated syntax of a James Schuyler poem or the awkward innermost thoughts of a speechless teen-ager?

The Shaggs were three sisters, Helen, Betty, and Dorothy (Dot) Wiggin, from Fremont, New Hampshire. They were managed by their father, Austin Wiggin, Jr., and were sometimes accompanied by another sister, Rachel. They performed almost exclusively at the Fremont town hall and at a local nursing home, beginning in 1968 and ending in 1973. Many people in Fremont thought the band

stank. Austin Wiggin did not. He believed his girls were going to be big stars, and in 1969 he took most of his savings and paid to record an album of their music. Nine hundred of the original thousand copies of "Philosophy of the World" vanished right after being pressed, along with the record's shady producer. Even so, the album has endured for thirty years. Music collectors got hold of the remaining copies of "Philosophy of the World" and started a small Shaggs cult. In the mid-seventies, WBCN-FM, in Boston, began playing a few cuts from the record. In 1988, the songs were repackaged and rereleased on compact disk and became celebrated by outsider-music mavens, who were taken with the Shaggs' artless style. Now the Shaggs are entering their third life: "Philosophy of the World" was reissued last spring by RCA Victor and will be released in Germany this winter. The new CD of "Philosophy of the World" has the same cover as the original 1969 album—a photograph of the Wiggin girls posed in front of a dark-green curtain. In the picture, Helen is twenty-two, Dot is twenty-one, and Betty is eighteen. They have long blond hair and long blond bangs and stiff, quizzical half-smiles. Helen, sitting behind her drum set, is wearing flowered trousers and a white Nehru shirt; Betty and Dot, clutching their guitars, are wearing matching floral tunics, pleated plaid skirts, and square-heeled white pumps. There is nothing playful about the picture; it is melancholy, foreboding, with black shadows and the queer, depthless quality of an aquarium. Which leaves you with even more things to wonder about the Shaggs.

SHAGGS' OWN THING (3:54)

FREMONT, NEW HAMPSHIRE, is a town that has missed out on most everything. Route 125, the main highway bisecting New Hampshire, just

misses the east side of Fremont; Route 101 just misses the north; the town is neither in the mountains nor on the ocean; it is not quite in the thick of Boston's outskirts, nor is it quite cosseted in the woods. Fremont is a drowsy, trim, unfancy place, rimmed by the Exeter River. Ostentation is expressed only in a few man-size gravestones in the Fremont cemetery; bragging rights are limited to Fremont's being the home town of the eminent but obscure nineteen-twenties meteorologist Herbert Browne and its being the first place a B-52 ever crashed without killing anyone.

In the nineteen-sixties, when the Wiggin sisters formed the Shaggs, many people in Fremont raised dairy cows or made handkerchiefs at the Exeter textile mill or built barrels at Spaulding & Frost Cooperage, went to church, tended their families, kept quiet lives. Sometimes the summer light bounces off the black-glass surface of the Exeter River and glazes the big stands of blue pine, and sometimes the pastures are full and lustrous, but ordinary days in southern New Hampshire towns can be mingy and dismal. "Loneliness contributed to severe depression, illness and drunkenness for countless rural families," Matthew Thomas wrote, in his book "History of Fremont, N. H. Olde Poplin: An Independent New England Republic 1764-1997," which came out last year. "There may have been some nice, pleasant times . . . but for the most part, death, sickness, disease, accidents, bad weather, loneliness, strenuous hard work, insect-infested foods, prowling predatory animals, and countless inconveniences marked day-to-day existence."

When I was in Fremont recently, I asked Matthew Thomas, who is forty-three and the town historian, what it had been like growing up there. He said it was nice but that he had been bored stiff. For entertainment, there were square



Thirty years later, the Shaggs may yet make it big, with the rerelease of their homespun album, "Philosophy of the World."

dances, sledding, an annual carnival with a Beano tent, Vic Marcotte's Barber Shop and Poolroom. (These days, there are weekend grass drags out near Phil Peterson's farm, where the pasture is flat and firm enough to race snowmobiles in the summer.) When the Shaggs were growing up, there were ham-and-bean suppers, boxing matches, dog shows, and spelling bees at the town hall. The hall is an unadorned box of a building, but its performance hall is actually quite grand. It isn't used anymore, and someone has made off with the red velvet curtain, but

it still has a sombre dark stage and high-backed chairs, and the gravid air of a place where things might happen. In a quiet community like Fremont, in the dull hours between barn dances, a stage like that might give you big ideas.

WHO ARE PARENTS? (2:58)

WHERE else would Austin Wiggin have got the idea that his daughters should form a rock band? Neither he nor his wife, Annie, was musical; she much preferred television to

music, and he, at most, fooled around with a Jew's harp. He wasn't a showoff, dying to be noticed—by all accounts he was an ornery loner who had little to do with other people in town. He was strict and old-fashioned, not a hippie manqué, not a rebel, very disapproving of long hair and short skirts. He was from a poor family and was raising a poor family—seven kids on a mill hand's salary—and music lessons and instruments for the girls were a daunting expense.

And yet the Shaggs were definitely his idea—or, more exactly, his mother's

idea. Austin was terribly superstitious. His mother liked to tell fortunes. When he was young, she studied his palm and told him that in the future he would marry a strawberry blonde and would have two sons whom she would not live to see, and that his daughters would play in a band. Her auguries were borne out. Annie was a strawberry blonde, and she and Austin did have two sons after his mother died. It was left to Austin to fulfill the last of his mother's predictions, and when his daughters were old enough he told them they would be taking voice and music lessons and forming a band. There was no debate: his word was law, and his mother's prophecies were gospel. Besides, he chafed at his place in the Fremont social system. It wasn't so much that his girls would make him rich and raise him out of a mill hand's dreary métier; it was that they would prove that the Wiggin kids were not only different from but better than the folks in town.

The girls liked music—particularly Herman's Hermits, Ricky Nelson, and Dino, Desi & Billy—but until Austin foretold their futures they had not planned to become rock stars. They were shy, small-town teen-agers who dreamed of growing up and getting married, having children, maybe becoming secretaries someday. Even now, they don't remember ever having dreamed of fame or of making music. But Austin pushed the girls into a new life. He named them

the Shaggs, and told them that they were not going to attend the local high school, because he didn't want them travelling by bus and mixing with outsiders, and, more important, he wanted them to practice their music all day. He enrolled them in a Chicago mail-order outfit called American Home School, but he designed their schedule himself: practice in the morning and afternoon, rehearse songs for him after dinner, and then do calisthenics and jumping jacks and leg lifts or practice for another hour before going to bed. The girls couldn't decide which was worse, the days when he made them do calisthenics or the days when he'd make them practice again before bed. In either case, their days seemed endless. The rehearsals were solemn, and Austin could be cutting. One song in particular, "Philosophy of the World," he claimed they never played right, and he would insist on hearing it again and again.

The Shaggs were not leading rock-and-roll lives. Austin forbade the girls to date before they were eighteen and discouraged most other friendships. They hadn't been popular kids, anyway—they didn't have the looks or the money or the savvy for it—but being in the band, and being home-schooled, set them apart even more. Friday nights, the family went out together to do grocery shopping. Sundays they went to church, and the girls practiced when they got

home. Their world was even smaller than the small town of Fremont.

This was 1965. The Beatles had recently débuted on American television. The harmony between generations—at least, the harmony between the popular cultures of those generations—was busting. And yet the sweet, lumpy Wiggin sisters of Fremont, New Hampshire, were playing pop music at their father's insistence, in a band that he directed. Rebellion might have been driving most rock and roll, but in Fremont Dot Wiggin was writing tributes to her mom and dad, with songs like "Who Are Parents?":

Parents are the ones who really care
Who are parents?
Parents are the ones who are always there
Some kids think their parents are cruel
Just because they want them to obey
certain rules . . .
Parents do understand
Parents do care

Their first public performance was at a talent show in nearby Exeter, in 1968. The girls could barely play their instruments. They didn't think they were ready to appear in public, but Austin thought otherwise. When they opened, with a cover of a loping country song called "Wheels," people in the audience threw soda cans at them and jeered. The girls were mortified; Austin told them they just had to go home and practice more. If they thought about quitting, they thought about it very privately, because Austin would have had no truck with the idea; he was the kind of father who didn't tolerate debate. They practiced more, did their calisthenics, practiced more. Dot wrote the songs and the basic melodies, and she and Betty worked together on the chords and rhythms. Helen made up her drum parts on her own. The songs were misshapen pop tunes, full of shifting time signatures and odd metres and abrupt key changes, with lyrics about Dot's lost cat, Foot Foot, and her yearning for a sports car and how much she liked to listen to the radio.

On Halloween, the Shaggs played at a local nursing home—featuring Dot's song "It's Halloween" in their set—and got a polite response from the residents. Soon afterward, Austin arranged for them to play at the Fremont town hall on Saturday nights. The girls worried about embarrassing themselves, but at the same time they liked the fact that the shows allowed them to escape the house and their bounded world, even if



"Remember that, honey? Serious testosterone!"

it was just for a night. At that point, the girls had never even been to Boston, which was only fifty miles away.

The whole family took part in the town-hall shows. Austin III, the older of the two sons who had been seen in Austin's future, played the maracas; the other son, Robert, played the tambourine and did a drum solo during intermission; Annie sold tickets and ran the refreshment stand. A Pepsi truck would drop off the cases of soda at their green ranch house, on Beede Road, every Friday night. Even though, according to one town-hall regular, most people found the Shaggs' music "painful and torturous," sometimes as many as a hundred kids showed up at the dances—practically the whole adolescent population of Fremont. Then again, there really wasn't much else to do in Fremont on a Saturday night. The audience danced and chatted, heckled the band, pelted the girls with junk, ignored them, grudgingly appreciated them, mocked them.

The rumor around town was that Austin forced his daughters to be in the band. There was even talk that he was inappropriately intimate with them. When asked about it years later, Betty said that the talk wasn't true, but Helen said that Austin once was intimate with her. Certainly, the family was folded in on itself; even Austin's father and Annie's mother, after they were both widowed, became romantically involved and lived together in a small house on the Wiggin property. The gossip and criticism only made Austin more determined to continue with the band. It was, after all, his destiny.

I'M SO HAPPY WHEN YOU'RE NEAR (2:12)

THROUGH the years, this author as town historian has received numerous requests from fans around the country looking for information on "The Shaggs" and the town they came from," Matthew Thomas wrote in his section about the band. "They definitely have a cult following, and deservedly so, because the Wiggin sisters worked hard and with humble resources to gain respect and acceptance as musicians. To their surprise they succeeded. After all, what other New Hampshire band...has a record album worth \$300-\$500?"

The Beatles' arrival in America piqued Austin. He disliked their mopyy



"As far as I'm concerned, it just takes my kind."

hair but was stirred by their success. If they could make it, why couldn't his girls? He wanted to see the Shaggs on television, and on concert tours. Things weren't happening quickly enough for him, though, and this made him unhappy. He started making tapes and home movies of the town-hall shows. In March, 1969, he took the girls to Fleetwood Studios, outside Boston, to make a record. According to the magazine *Cool and Strange Music!*, the studio engineer listened to the Shaggs rehearse and suggested that they weren't quite ready to record. But Austin insisted on going forward, reportedly telling the engineer, "I want to get them while they're hot." In the album's liner notes, Austin wrote:

The Shaggs are real, pure, unaffected by outside influences. Their music is different, it is theirs alone. They believe in it, live it.... Of all contemporary acts in the world today, perhaps only the Shaggs do what others would like to do, and that is perform only what they believe in, what they feel, not what others think the Shaggs should feel. The Shaggs love you.... They will not change their music or style to meet the whims of a frustrated world. You should appreciate this because you know they are pure what more can you ask?.... They are sisters and members of a large family where mutual respect and love for each other is at an unbelievable high... in an atmosphere which has encouraged them to develop their music unaffected by outside influences. They are happy people and love what they are doing. They do it because they love it.

The Wiggins returned to Fleetwood a few years later. By then, the girls were more proficient—they had practiced hundreds of hours since the first recording session—but their playing still inspired the engineer to write, "As the day progressed, I overcame my disappointment and started feeling sorry for this family paying \$60 an hour for studio time to record—this?"

I once asked Annie Wiggin if she thought Austin was a dreamer, and after sitting quietly for a few moments she said, "Well, probably. Must have been." If he was, it no doubt got harder to dream as the years went on. In 1973, the Fremont town supervisors decided to end the Saturday-night concerts, because—well, no one really remembers why anymore, but there was talk of fights breaking out and drugs circulating in the crowd, and wear and tear on the town hall's wooden floors, although the girls scrubbed the scuff marks off every Sunday. Austin was furious, but the girls were relieved to end the grind of playing every Saturday night. They were getting older and had begun to chafe at his authority. Helen secretly married the first boyfriend she ever had—someone she had met at the dances. She continued living at home for three months after the wedding because she was too terrified to tell Austin what she had done. On the night that she finally screwed up the courage to give him the news, he got out a shotgun and



"Good news, Mrs. Bryant—I think we got it all."

went after her husband. The police joined in and told Helen to choose one man or the other. She left with her husband, and it was months before Austin spoke to her. She was twenty-eight years old. The Shaggs continued to play at local fairs and at the nursing home. Austin still believed they were going to make it, and the band never broke up. It just shut down in 1975, on the day Austin, who was only forty-seven years old, died in bed of a massive heart attack—the same day, according to Helen, they had finally played a version of "Philosophy of the World" that he praised.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE WORLD (2:56)

SHORTLY after the newest rerelease of the Shaggs' album, I went to New Hampshire to talk to the Wiggin sisters. A few years after Austin died, Betty and Dot married and moved to their own houses, and eventually Annie sold the house on Beede Road and moved to an apartment nearby. After a while, the house's new owner complained to people in town that Austin's ghost haunted the property. As soon as he could afford it, the new owner built something bigger and nicer farther back on the property, and allowed the Fremont Fire Department to burn the old Wiggin house down for fire-fighting practice.

Dot and Betty live a few miles down the road from Fremont, in the town of Epping, and Helen lives a few miles farther, in Exeter. They don't play music anymore. After Austin died, they sold much of their equipment and later let their kids horse around with whatever was left. Dot hung on to her guitar for a while, just in case, but a few years ago she lent it to one of her brothers and hasn't got it back. Dot, who is now fifty, cleans houses for a living. Betty, forty-eight, was a school janitor until recently, when she took a better job, in the stockroom of a kitchen-goods warehouse. Helen, who suffers from serious depression, lives on disability.

Dot and Betty arranged to meet me at Dunkin' Donuts, in Epping, and I went early so that I could read the local papers. It was a soggy, warm morning in southern New Hampshire; the sky was pearly, and the sun was as gray as gunmetal. Long tractor-trailers idled in the Dunkin' Donuts parking lot and then rumbled to life and lumbered onto the road. A few people were lined up to buy Pick 4 lottery tickets. The clerk behind the doughnut counter was discussing her wedding shower with a girl wearing a fuzzy halter top and platform sneakers. In the meantime, the coffee burned.

That day's Exeter *News-Letter* reported that the recreation commission's kickoff concert would feature Beatle

Juice, a Beatles tribute band led by "Brad Delp, former front man of 'Boston,' one of the biggest rock bands New England has ever produced." Southern New Hampshire has regular outbreaks of tribute bands and reunion tours, as if it were in a time zone all its own, one in which the past keeps reappearing, familiar but essentially changed. Some time ago, Dot and her husband and their two sons went to see a revived version of Herman's Hermits. The concert was a huge disappointment for Dot, because her favorite Hermit, Peter (Herman) Noone, is no longer with the band, and because the Hermits' act now includes dirty jokes and crude references.

The Shaggs never made any money from their album until years later, when members of the band NRBQ heard "Philosophy of the World" and were thrilled by its strange innocence. NRBQ's own record label, Red Rooster, released records by such idiosyncratic bands as Jake & the Family Jewels, and they asked the Wiggins if they could compile a selection of songs from the group's two recording sessions. The resulting album, "The Shaggs' Own Thing," includes the second session at Fleetwood Studios and some live and home recordings. Red Rooster's reissue of "Philosophy of the World" was reviewed in *Rolling Stone* twice in 1980 and was described as "priceless and timeless." The articles introduced the Shaggs to the world.

Three years ago, Irwin Chusid, the author of the forthcoming book "Songs in the Key of Z: The Curious Universe of Outsider Music," discovered that a company he worked with had bought the rights to the Shaggs' songs, which had been bundled with other obscure music-publishing rights. Chusid wanted to reissue "Philosophy of the World" as it was in 1969, with the original cover and the original song sequence. He suggested the project to Joe Mozman, a vice-president of marketing at RCA Victor, who had never heard the band. Mozman was interested in unusual ventures; he had just released some Belgian lounge music from the sixties, which featured such songs as "The Frère Jacques Conga." Mozman says, "The Shaggs were beyond my wildest dreams. I couldn't comprehend that music like that existed. It's so basic and innocent, the way the music business used to be. Their timing, musically, was . . . fascinating. Their lyrics were . . . amazing. It is kind of a bad record—that's so obvious,

it's a given. But it absolutely intrigued me, the idea that people would make a record playing the way they do."

The new "Philosophy of the World" was released last March. Even though the record is being played on college radio stations and the reviews have been enthusiastic and outsider art has been in vogue for several years, RCA Victor has sold only a few thousand copies of "Philosophy" so far. Mozman admits that he is disappointed. "I'm not sure why it hasn't sold," he says. "I think people are a little afraid of having the Shaggs in their record collections."

While I was waiting for the Wiggins, I went out to my car to listen to the CD again. I especially love the song "Philosophy of the World," with its wrought-up, clattering guitars and chugging, cockeyed rhythm and the cheerfully pessimistic lyrics about how people are never happy with what they have. I was right in the middle of the verse about how rich people want what poor people have, and how girls with long hair want short hair, when Betty pulled up and opened the door of my car. As soon as she recognized the song, she gasped, "Do you like this?" I said yes, and she said, "God, it's horrible." She shook her head. Her hair no longer rippled down to her waist and no longer had a shelf of shaggy bangs that touched the bridge of her nose; it was short and springy, just to the nape of her neck, the hair of a grown woman without time to bother too much about her appearance.

A few minutes later, Dot drove in. She was wearing a flowered housedress and a *Rugrats* watch, and had a thin silver band on her thumb. On her middle finger was a chunky ring that spelled "Elvis" in block letters. She and Betty have the same deep-blue eyes and thrusting chin and tiny teeth, but Dot's hair is still long and wavy, and even now you can picture her as the girl with a guitar on the cover of the 1969 album. She asked what we were listening to. "What do you think?" Betty said to her. "The Shaggs." They both listened for another minute, so rapt that it seemed as if they had never heard the song before. "I never play the record on my own anymore," Dot said. "My son Matt plays it sometimes. He likes it. I don't think I get sentimental when I hear it—I just don't think about playing it."

"I wonder where I put my copies of the album," Betty said. "I know I have

one copy of the CD. I think I have some of the albums somewhere."

The Wiggins have received fan letters from Switzerland and Texas, been interviewed for a documentary film, and inspired dozen Web sites, bulletin boards, and forums on the Internet, but it's hard to see how this could matter much, once their childhood had been scratched out and rewritten as endless days of practicing guitar, and their father, who believed that their success was fated, died before they got any recognition. They are wise enough to realize that some of the long-standing interest in their music is ironic—sheer marvel that anything so unpolished could ever have made it onto a record. "We might have felt special at the time we made the record," Dot said uncertainly. "The really cool part, to me, is that it's thirty years later and we're still talking about it. I never thought we'd really be famous. I never thought we'd even be as famous as we are. I met a girl at the Shop-'n Save the other day who used to come to the dances, and she said she wanted to go out now and buy the CD. And I saw a guy at a fair recently and talked to him for about half an hour about the Shaggs. And people call and ask if they can come up and meet us—that's amazing to me."

Yet, when I asked Dot and Betty for the names of people who could describe the town-hall shows, they couldn't think of any for days. "We missed out on a lot," Betty said. "I can't say we didn't have fun, but we missed a social life, we missed out on having friends, we missed everything except our music and our exercises. I just didn't think we were good enough to be playing in concerts and making records. At one point, I thought maybe we would make it, but it wasn't really my fantasy." Her fantasy, she said, was to climb into a car with plenty of gas and just drive—not to get anywhere in particular, just to go.

We ordered our coffee and doughnuts and sat at a table near the window. Betty had her two-year-old and eight-month-old granddaughters, Makayla and Kelsey, with her, and Makayla had squirmed

away from the table and was playing with a plastic sign that read "Caution Wet Floor." Betty often takes care of her grandchildren for her son and her daughter-in-law. Things are tight. The little windfall from their recordings helps, especially since Dot's husband is in poor health and can't work, and Betty's husband was killed in a motorcycle accident six years ago, and Helen is unable to work because of her depression.

For the Wiggins, music was never simple and carefree, and it still isn't. Helen doesn't go out much, so I spoke with her on the phone, and she told me that she hadn't played music since her father died but that country-and-Western echoed in her head all the time, maddeningly so, and so loud that it made it hard for her to talk. When I asked Betty if she still liked music, she thought for a moment and then said that her husband's death had drawn her to country music. Whenever she feels bereft, she sings brokenhearted songs along with the radio. Just then, Makayla began hollering. Betty shushed her and said, "She really does have some kind of voice." A look flickered across her face. "I think, well, maybe she'll take voice lessons someday."

Dot is the only one who is still attached to her father's dream. She played the handbells in her church choir until recently, when she began taking care of one of Helen's children in addition to her own two sons and no longer had the time. She said that she's been writing lyrics for the last two years and hopes to finish them, and to compose the music for them. In the meantime, Terry Adams, of NRBQ, says he has enough material left from the Fleetwood Studio recording sessions for a few more CDs, and he has films of the town-hall concerts that he plans to synchronize with sound. The Shaggs, thirty years late, may yet make it big, the way Austin saw it in his dreams. But even that might not have been enough to sate him. The Shaggs must have known this all along. In "Philosophy of the World," the song they never could play to his satisfaction, they sang:

It doesn't matter what you do
It doesn't matter what you say
There will always be one who wants
things the opposite way
We do our best, we try to please
But we're like the rest we're never at ease
You can never please
Anybody
In this world ♦

