## Crunch Gods from Kentucky Call It a Day: The Saga of

NERTL

Louisville, Kentucky's Squirrel Bait were, among other things, a frickin' huge group, but one thing they weren't is just one person. So in talking with only one member of the group, bassist Clark Johnson, I tried to take into account the fact that his responses for "the group" might be slanted a bit toward his view of how things happened. As a result, much of our lengthy conversation concerned some of the more factual aspects of the band's great but short-lived career.

Some things you gotta know: The guy stands an imposing 6'7" tall. He's got a mean sumbitch of a cat ("bad pussy"). He loves Big Black, Antietam, the Allman Brothers and Mission of Burma. He goes to Northwestern. And he's younger than me.

He agreed to spend the last day (and a wet one at that) in February rapping about the band's beginnings, their ascent to superstardom, and the events leading up to their decision to break up last October. I supplied the human beatbox.  $T\colon \mathsf{Okay}.$  Squirrel Bait, the beginning. Who were the original members, what were you guys doing at this time, and when was this?

Clark: First time we ever played together was Christmas of '82, although we formed in concept Halloween of '82. It was Dave (Grubbs), Rich Schuler on drums, who was a freshman at the University of Cincinnati. Dave and I were each sophomores

T: Were you involved with other bands? Clark: No, I had never been in a band before. I couldn't play bass and didn't own one when we started. I bought one finally that spring. And Dave had been in a band called the Happy Cadavers, who have a 7-inch out that is extremely hard to find. People will pay big money for it.

T: Do you have it?

Clark: Do I have it? No, he (Dave) took it from me 'cos he knew I'd give it to people. It can be found in Louisville in record stores. And Rich had played in some Rolling Stones cover bands when he was in high school. That was it, really. T: How long did Grubbs play guitar before the band?

Clark: Well, he played piano for like eight years; he started in the second grade. And he'd been playing guitar for three or four years. T: What were you guys into at that point? What kind of music?

Clark: We were originally called Squirrelbait Youth, as you know, or maybe you

Clark: Yeah, an art/noise band in the sixth grade. They were just little kids. They had songs like "White Castles" and "Fire Engines," then they also had songs like "K Song," "L Song," "M Song," "N Song," etc. Their best song was called "Big Pussy," and it was so good. Brian sings on it way before his voice changes; it's like (in falsetto), "Big pussy!!" (laughter) Yeah, Languid and Flaccid were

that one spring, and we tried another drummer out, and he was a complete fool, I won't even mention his name. So, as I said, when we got Britt back, we got him

back for the purpose to record a record to release, because we'd been offered a

T: Every time you got a new drummer, did it get more serious? Clark: Generally. First it was Rich, and we didn't really consider recording with him, for a record. But then again at the time, it wasn't very easy to put a record out. And then we got Britt and started thinking about it. Britt quit for

deal from Upstart Records. A guy named George Newberry did it. We sent him a tape of us playing in the basement, and he said to record it and send it out and we'll do it. The tape which I played for you (ED. NOTE: This refers to the famed 1984 sessions, which included "When I Fall" and "Disguise") was going to be released on Upstart in the winter of '84. Like, December of '84/January of '85, and it was going to be called The Nearest Door. But he went bankrupt and didn't ever put it out, which was a blessing, really. T: When did you first seriously consider making a record? Spring of '84?

Clark: Let's see...yeah, around then. January of '84 we started thinking, "Shit, we can put out a record." This was right after the Faith/Void thing happened. we were originally going to do one side Squirrel Bait, one side Some Booty Puddin', but that never came to, either. T: When did you get Ben (Daughtrey) as drummer? This was right after we had Clark: I guess this would be October of recorded with Britt that summer, then he'd quit again because we were done with the recorded with britt that summer, then he d duit again because we were done with the record. Ben was hanging up flyers. He was generally into Talking Heads and shit like that. Well, it's not exactly that, but he wasn't into hardcore, or his idea of hardcore was the Dead Kennedys. We ran into him and he was like, "Man, I heard y'all's tape, and I thought it was just great, " and then he asked, "So what are you guys doing now?" We said, "Nothing," and he goes, "Man, I'll be your drummer." So we said okay, and we practiced with him a few times. The first few practices really didn't work out, 'cos he wasn't used to a hard style at all. Not like complex but like a pounding style.

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March of '85; we added him as second guitarist.

liked it and offered us a Reflex Records contract then.

T: Non-stop orgasm. So then Bob Mould was all over you guys?

Clark: Nah. We played out like once before we decided to put a record out. We never played out in Louisville, except for an occasional party, which was not at never played out in Louisville, except for an occasional party, which was not at all like a Squirrel Bait gig or anything. We played out like twice or three times in two or three years. We played live in Louisville with Britt two or three times to my knowledge, and he was in the band for quite a while. And when Ben joined the band, he was like, "Man, let's go play out. It'll be fun, we'll get free beer and shit. Man, I know the girls are going to love us." So when Ben joined the band, we started thinking we ought to play out more, and this was around Halloween of '84. We practiced in November and December, and our first show out with him was in Louisville right after Christmas. After that, in January, we played with Articles of Faith in Cincinnati. And then we played around Louisville a lot in January and February of '85. In March, we played with Naked Raygun in Cincinnati, and by this time we were getting really serious about being a real band, doing

and by this time we were getting really serious about being a real band, doing serious shit like putting out records and touring nationally. And we played with Husker Du in May, right after we recorded the songs with Ben in April -- "Final Chapter," "Hammering So Hard," that kind of thing. Brian joined the band in early

Clark: Yeah, in fact he wrote "Hammering So Hard." Anyway, we played with Husker Du in May and gave them a tape of the songs we had just recorded. They really

Clark: May 20th of '85. We played with Husker Du on that Friday night, Saturday I just tied a big buzz on all day, Sunday morning I graduated, and then Monday we heard we were on Homestead. Hell of a weekend.

Clark: Not necessarily even fast, because by then we'd slowed down.

T: Had you toured before your decision to put the record out?

T: Where did you open for them?

T: When did he say that quote that your record was as good as anything Husker Du Clark: It appeared in Spin in October of '85, but I don't know when the interview

was. It was probably September, or around there. T: What kind of contract did you sign for the first record?

T: Options for them, right?

Clark: So to speak. (laughter)

Clark: Oh yeah, it's purely to their advantage. There's nothing for a band to gain from an option. So it was for one record, 70 cents a record, after three years what they've pressed that hasn't sold we can buy for 30 cents a record from

Clark: It was generally your average record contract. We got 70 cents a record. It was a one-record deal, without even an option; Homestead's way into options

Clark: Yeah, it was completely apeshit. We had these songs and we recorded them, and we thought, "Fuck man, this is great," and we got a great mix of it. We went out of the studio for a week and listened to the mix we had, and said, "No, this isn't what we really want." It sounded good, but it didn't sound very powerful.

So we went back in to try to beef things up, and it ended up coming out really

T: Now, the April of '85 sessions...what was the recording like? It seems like it

muddy. We spent more money recording those six songs than we did recording the 10 for the new record (<u>Skag Heaven</u>), 'cos we remixed everything. The first mix was good, not great, but the second mix sucked. T: Was the second mix what turned up on the record?

Clark: Yeah. Also, something got fucked up in the mastering. The guy who masters for Homestead generally does a really good job, but I don't know what happened to the tape. He must have dropped it in a mud puddle or something. T: Was the actual recording done live? Clark: Yeah. The way the studio works, it's in this guy's (Howie Gano's)

basement, and the weirdest thing about it is you can't see the drummer; he's in the laundry room. It's a great studio, really. The guitar players are in the living room, so it's a lot harder than you think to play without being able to see the drummer. And we'd practice not looking at each other and shit. T: Did you have monitors to hear what everybody else was playing? Clark: Yeah, we had headphones to hear what everybody was doing. We also had a live mike in our room so we could talk to Ben on a track, and then we could cut it

out later. We could give him cues. We'd all been in the studio before, at least once, and everything went really well for the first record's recordings. Brian

had some problems with his guitar, but we solved them.

T: Was there a lot of flailing around while you were playing?

time through it was drums, bass, and Dave's guitar. Then Dave and Brian did overdubs, I think they used two tracks apiece on that record. Then vocals, and then backup vocals. So it was me and Dave in the living room and Ben in the laundry room playing for the basics. T: Was it 16 tracks?

Clark: Eight for the August, '84 sessions, and 16 for April of '85. So, Dave and I were standing and just like looking at each other, not jumping around or

Clark: No, actually...oh, let me finish talking about the recording of it. First

T: So what was happening around this time?

Clark: Okay, we recorded, played with Husker Du, got signed to Homestead and all that shit. And then that summer, things fell apart completely. We had planned to play out as much as possible that summer, but we really stagnated. We spent so much time writing songs to record that we just stopped. All that previous winter we had like two songs a week to work with, but for a while, like in June of '85, we only had one new song, "Choose Yr Poison." We played one horrid show at a punk rock festival in Louisville. Then we played at a birthday party for this girl, and it was just ugly. There was this really tiny P.A., and by that time we were into big P.A.'s and good sound, and it was just a hoax. Plus I didn't like the girl. They wanted us to play for free, and I said \$150, which was a lot of money for us at the time. They ended up paying us \$70 or something, but Ben and Peter really liked this girl and so they were like, "Man, you can't dick these people over, blah blah." So we didn't talk to each other. Around this time, Dave and I were getting ready to leave for college, and we wanted to play one good live show. We set it up to play with the Meat Puppets in Cincinnati, which I thought

We set it up to play with the Meat Puppets in Cincinnati, which I thought

would be a great fucking show to end on, because the next day Dave was leaving for Georgetown. This was August 20, 1985. T: This was in Spin, wasn't it? Clark: Yeah. Anyway, Ben and Peter were like, "We can't do it," so I said, "Fuck, what are we gonna do?" So we got Britt, who has been our friend all along, and

T: Maximum RockNRoll was all over it.

T: Were those the ones in CBGB's?

Clark: Yeah, that's the bathroom of CBGB's.

T: You were in school, and you went out to New York?

we practiced with him twice and went up there and played. Dave sung on maybe two songs, the rest were instrumentals. Mainly he told stories while playing guitar. I couldn't really tell, but I thought I liked it a lot. After the show, Dave left for school. Then the record came out in November, and it got really good reviews generally. I had been talking to Grubbs all along, and I said, "I'd like to get together and play over Christmas," and Gerard said we should come up to New York and play, too. I called Daughtrey and asked him what he thought, and he was like, "Man, let's go for it!" Our first show back together we opened for Agitpop, unannounced, in Louisville without Peter, because he was grounded. We hadn't played together in nine months, really, so we figured we ought to just play and get used to each other's timing again. It was a Tuesday night, there were like 10 people there, and we sucked pretty bad, but it was still a good time. And then after Christmas, we played a bugs show in Louisville appropried. We had never after Christmas, we played a huge show in Louisville announced. We had never gotten much respect in Louisville, but the record had come out, so whereas in August of '85 when 10 or 15 people would come to see us play, 300 people showed up on a Sunday night in December to watch us. It was great, and we played really well. Then we went up to New York to play at Maxwell's and CBGB's. We played well, but we really did suck. We've never been a really good live band, and we were even worse then than we were this summer (1986).

 $T\colon$  What kind of a response did you get? The reviews were ahead of the record, I thought, because I had a hard time finding it.

Clark: The  $\underline{\text{Spin}}$  review of it came out while we were in New York, in early January of  $\overline{\ ^{1}86}$ . So we played those two shows, and that's when almost all of our

equipment got stolen. This was around January 10, and I had to be in school, so I flew from Chicago and met them in New York. So it was really complicated, with Grubbs having to fly back to Washington, too.

Clark: Yeah. So Ben drove up with the van, with Peter and this other guy Chris.

Clark: I can't really say, because I'd heard the record plenty by that time. (laughs) A lot of people think it didn't come out until January of '86, but it had been out six weeks.

Clark: Yeah. So Ben drove up with the van, with Peter and this other guy Chris. We played our gig on Saturday night, and I was leaving Sunday morning. They were going to take my amp back to my house in Louisville, and luckily I took my bass back with me to school to play. But we were like, "Ben, you've got to sleep in the van or the equipment will get stolen." So he said, "Alright, I'll sleep in the van." He got cold during the night or had to take a piss or something, and Brian got two of his guitars stolen — a brand new Telecaster he worked all summer to buy and the Voxx he learned to play on — plus his head. Grubbs lost his head and I lost my bass head. It was at least \$2000 worth of equipment, with a lot of sentimental value, too. And it's all Daughtrey's fault. Completely his fault. He has yet, to this day, to apologize for it, either. But luckily, we were making some money off the record, and the way we figure it is any money you lose from being in the band is taken off the top, and the rest is split five ways. So we had "Squirrel Bait insurance." It's technically money that would've been ours to

T: That gave me a totally false impression of the band. Clark: See, everyone thought we were like Doggy Style or something after that. You know, wacky shorts and beer t-shirts. Generally, Ben and Peter like to go You know, wacky shorts and beer t-shirts. Generally, Ben and Peter like to go party and hang out and try to get pussy and stuff like that, while me and Dave and Brian go to record stores and just chat with folk. So, New York was really bad and we were really sick of them, but we wanted to do records and play so bad we put up with it. The recording of the single went really well, and I thought Ben's drumming on that was phenomenal. So he was getting to be a better drummer, and Peter was getting to be a worse singer, in my opinion. He's a little bit too sure of himself; I like his singing on the first record better than on the second record. Ben is one of the best, if not the best, drummers I've heard play. And I récord. Ben is one of the best, if not the best, drummers I've heard play. And I

Clark: I don't know...playing in New York, I think we were all pretty scared.

like his style, too, although you could say Scratch Acid's drummer and Britt are technically better, and they are, but I like randomness more than perfectly timed rolls and shit. So I said I'm going to do my best to put up with Daughtrey because he can hit them skins. T: Did you guys begin to feel more pressure when the record started getting a lot

Christmas...

Even that first show in Louisville in front of 300 people. It was like we put out this record and everyone loves it, and then we go to New York, and every fucking rock critic in the country is here. It's not like we really gave a fuck about these critics so much, but we didn't want to suck, anyway. There wasn't that much pressure. Then for "Kid Dynamite" and "Slake," we knew those songs were a lot better than anything on the first record. We knew when we were playing them that they were really fucking good songs, and so we didn't have to worry about people not liking them as much or anything like that. It turns out that, generally, people weren't as crazy about the single as they were about the first record. T: I think the single is a better-written song, but just the way you guys put together the other songs made them sound better. They're like weird constructions of songs, but just that emotion or whatever puts it across. Clark: I mean, you can think of Peter as the depressed high school junior who's going to kill himself. RJ Smith had that line, "I think Blind Lemon Jefferson felt this way," and we always thought that was pretty funny. But, in the initial lyrics I wrote, that's kind of true, because senior year in high school, I was depressed as hell. "Final Chapter," "Thursday," etc. T: Now how did your friends and family feel about all this?

Clark: Most of my friends didn't really change or act differently, because I have generally a small group of friends that I know really well. And there wasn't anyone trying to be my friend because I was, like, a rockstar, thank god. My parents were way into it. They supported everything, we'd been practicing at my house all along. They were completely surprised, but were really supportive. T: Now, for Skag Heaven, you wrote "Slake Train Coming" and "Kid Dynamite" during

Clark: We didn't want to have to put those on the album.

T: When did you write the rest of them?

Clark: Grubbs wrote some of them in spring of '86. Most of that stuff was written in May and June of '86, although "Short Straw Wins" was written the day before we went into the studio. We practiced it like four times and then recorded it. T: And "Choose Yr Poison" was old? Clark: "Choose Yr Poison" was written in June of '85. And "Black Light Poster Child" was from a way long time ago, August of '84. So, actually, all we really wrote this summer was "Virgil's Return" and "Kick the Kat," which we worked out in one practice. Those are some of my favorite Squirrel Bait songs. Oh, and "Too Close to the Fire" was written a really long time ago, January of '85. In fact,

T: What were some of the better shows? Clark: Let's see...shows that I enjoyed the most, or shows where we played really Clark: Boston was the best show we ever played, probably. It was the Volcano Suns and us, and another Boston band like Chaotic Upset or something. I don't know

and us, and another boston band like Chaotic Upset or something. I don't know exactly what it was, but it was a huge crowd, and we were just partying with them, if you know what I mean. It was just like, "Whoo!" Minneapolis was also pretty good. Our sound throughout the tour was pretty bad, I hear. It sounded good on stage, but every person who saw us this summer said, "Your sound sounded like shit!" And that's pretty bad because we brought our own soundman with us and everything. I like Cleveland a lot, as a city. We didn't play well, but the show was fun because we played with Diposaur and Sonic Youth was fun because we played with Dinosaur and Sonic Youth. T: The funner ones were when you played with bands you liked?

Clark: Yeah, and so since we played with Volcano Suns a lot, that was a fun time.

T: Must be pretty tiring hearing them 15 or so times.

Clark: Especially because their bass player is such an asshole, but Peter Prescott T: What weird experiences did you have, besides GG (Allin)?

Clark: That's the thing, there weren't really any, and I kind of feel inadequate

Clark: That's the thing, there weren't really any, and I kind of feel inadequate for that reason. Every band has a great story about people they met or things that happened to them. The basic thing for us was, in almost every city, there'd be one guy drunk as shit running around yelling and pulling Peter's pants down or something. In Minneapolis, it was Rifle Sport's singer. In Madison, it was some guy in a Black Flag t-shirt. They were generally 35-year-old guys with moustaches and Black Flag t-shirts. Oh, and speaking of guys with moustaches, when we opened for the Descendents in Trenton, New Jersey...you know the story about Bill Stevenson (of the Descendents), so I'm not going to tell that one. (ED. NOTE: Hey kids, but I will! Backstage, ol' Bill was trying to hit on a girl who was definitely of jailbait age, when Brian suggested it would be a good idea that he

told the promoter to kick Squirrel Bait our of their shared dressing room, and the promoter complied. Yowsa!). That was an early show, 'cos in Trenton they have a curfew and kids have to be off the street by like 10:00. So the show started at like 4:00 in the afternoon, and these guys from Princeton came up to us and said, "We do this radio call—in show, and we want you guys to be the guests. We'll give you a place to stay and all the good, hard liquor and food you can eat and drink." So we said, "Fuck! Sure." We stayed at, like, this equivalent of a fraternity, it's called a "dining club." So anyway, my girlfriend was touring with us, and I wasn't drinking at all then, because I was the designated driver and also, not being straight edge or anything, but I had done too many things drunk that summer. So I spent seven months on the wagon. She and I really weren't into the whole radio interview thing, so we just went over to this dorm, this cool old abandoned dorm, and did our laundry. Ben, Peter, Brin and Dave went down to this radio show. This guy Ben ran into at the Descendents show —— Mr. New

definitely of jailbait age, when Brian suggested it would be a good idea that he do so because of the elephantine size of his penis. Bill got so flustered, he told the promoter to kick Squirrel Bait our of their shared dressing room, and

Jersey, we called him, because he was the fat, drunk, stupid, broken, ugly kind of guy with a moustache and blue windbreaker — well, Ben and him were like, "We're such losers, we're buddies," you know? So Ben was like, "Come with us!" So this 35-year-old guy is sitting down at the Princeton radio station, getting drunk off his ass. (laughter) And the Princeton radio people were getting really worried. Man, and people would call up, and Ben would hang up on them if they were guys. If they were girls, he'd say, "What do you look like? Why don't you come down to the station?" For two hours he did this, seriously. Anyway, I was sober and it was getting time for the radio show to be over, so I went back down to the station. The other guys came up to me and were like, "Man, how are we going to get rid of this Mr. New Jersey guy?" Then one of the radio station guys comes up to him and says, "Sorry. Only invited people can be down here; we're going to have to ask you to leave." So Daughtrey was like, "Well, then I'm leaving, too!" He was way way drunk. We were like, "Oh shit. We've got a show to play in New York tomorrow!" So Ben walks out and says he's going to sleep on top of the van. Five minutes later all these cops show up, like half of the Princeton security force. They asked whose van it was, and they asked if we realized there was someone

sleeping on top of it. Then they asked, "Who was breaking windows across the street?" We were like, "Oh fuck," because if it was Daughtrey, we were in a lot of trouble. It turned out to be Mr. New Jersey, though, and we said we didn't know him, and the cops nabbed him. I don't know whether he's still in jail or

Clark: After we recorded, we were going to do two shows, but Brian was really sick. It was the same idea as the summer before that -- this was going to be a huge thing, it's going to be a lot of fun. And Brian, I mean I believe him and

but he wanted to be freer to do other stuff, to do a band in Washington and put all his songwriting into that, you know? That would be better than only doing it three months out of the year, which I understand completely. So I said to him, "Shit, we ought to stop doing it because you don't have to be confined," and he said, "Okay."

the some of my best friends, but he didn't seem very sick and he was at the pool the next day. I don't know, he must have been sick because he had no reason not to want to play. So, fuck, we were pretty down on him, and he knew pretty well

Clark: Middle of October of '86.

T: When was this?

also that we weren't going to be doing anything else, but he wasn't at all surprised. Ben and Peter were like, "I can feel it, I can taste the top now. We're going all the way. We're going to get signed to a major label really soon, it'll be great." That kind of talk. It came as quite a shock to them, I think, but they found out pretty soon after that. Grubbs called them and told them. T: Did you play any final gigs in Louisville during Christmas?

T: When did everybody else find out about the decision?

busy doing all kinds of shit. T: Now how do you guys get along with each other? Clark: I didn't see Peter except once over Christmas break, and it was like a divorce kind of thing. We were pleasant, but... I do care about him, and he used to be one of my best friends when he first joined the band, but just the things he likes to do and the things I like to do are different. And I consider a lot of his actions bullshit. It seems like I should dislike Ben more than Peter, because I could deal pretty well with Peter, but for some reason I think Ben's great. I like him a lot. I'd like to give him a lobotomy and make him move up here and drum for me, you know? So, over Christmas, I really didn't see either one of them

Clark: No. We were going to, but band relationships weren't too good, and we were

that much, and we'd been broken up for a while. And, of course, they were all too proud to say, "Let's get back together" or anything like that. And Brian and Dave didn't really talk about it, because we'd already decided it and what was there to T: What are the other guys doing now?

T: Why don't you join Big Black?

Clark: Ben and Peter are in a band called Fancy Pants, kind of like Run-DMC with a little bit of Beastie Boys. They do a cover of "Play That Funky Music," and I think they do the Fat Albert song. Their plan is that they're going to record real soon, real major label shopping. I saw them play over Christmas, and I don't think they're that good, but they can play their instruments. But fuck, I didn't think they re that good, but they can play their instruments. But fuck, I didn think the Beastie Boys were going to be famous, so I could easily conceive of seeing Ben Daughtrey's face on the cover of Spin within two years, seriously. Dave's in a band that's looking for a name; they're working with the name Sweet Husk, but everyone says "Sweet Husker Du," so they're not going to use that. Instead they're going to call it Dulcino, which I think means "little boy" in Spanish or Italian. It's Dave and a guy who's an exhibitionist and a drum

Spanish or Italian. It's Dave and a guy who's an exhibitionist and a drum machine. Grubbs' songwriting is getting really good, and he's using really fucked-up tunings, but not like Sonic Youth. It's the same rock idea as Squirrel Bait, but it's a lot more ethereal, too. In the studio, they're gonna use some piano, too. Brian is in a band called Bead in Louisville, with Britt and a guy who was in Maurice, who went to study at Berkeley Guitar Institude and can play circles around Eddie Van Halen. They're really quiet and subtle, but other times they're really angular, too, so it's kind of cool. And they do a Phillip Glass cover; that's hip as shit. And me, I'm not doing anything. Looking for people to play with. to play with.

Clark: Because they're breaking up. They're breaking up in August; Durango's going to law school. That'll be the end of Big Black. And after that, I'm going to fuck Steve Albini. (laughter) (Send your condolences, praises, money, etc. to Squirrel Bait at: 3345 Brownsboro Rd./ Louisville, KY 40207)

T: I thought that was a joke.

Clark: It was a joke, but we really were called that. See, we started and we were listening to, I don't know, Minor Threat and that kind of thing, but at the same time there were a lot hardcore bands in Louisville that didn't have any contact with us that we thought were really stupid, but turned out to be really cool. So we started Squirrelbait Youth as a parody of hardcore, and our first song was "Tylenol Scare," right after the Tylenol thing. And "That Badge Means You Suck," things like that. So yeah, it was Squirrelbait Youth and it was like a hardcore parody. Grubbs was not taking it seriously at all and not putting any time into it. And then, fuck, I just kept pressing him, and we dropped the "Youth," and I hought a bass and we started playing ceriously bought a bass and we started playing seriously. T: So was it "Squirrelbait," with no space between the "Squirrel" and the "Bait"?

Clark: It's never been a set way. We change it. I hyphenate it now. Or another popular way to do it is one word, but capitalize both the "S" and the "B". SquirrelBait. T: What were the early goings-on of the band like?

Clark: It was really great, because Dave, Rich and I were really great friends. And it would generally consist of us going to big, prep high school parties and begging the cover bands to let us play a song during their breaks on their equipment, and getting laughed off the stage. But, y'know, things were simple, and it was fun and cool. So Rich was away at college most of the time, though, so we decided we ought to get a different drummer. This guy Britt (Walford) was playing in a band and he was a great drummer. They were originally called Some Booty Puddin', but they changed their name to Maurice. So Britt was playing for both of use for a while and we recorded with him in the summer of '84. us for a while, and we recorded with him in the summer of '84. T: When did you get him as a drummer? Clark: Fall of '83. We played with him all that fall, and then the people in Maurice made him quit Squirrel Bait. So that spring, spring of '84, we were without a drummer, and we were like, "What the fuck are we gonna do?" So we said, "Britt, will you just play with us to record?" and he said, "Sure." So he just recorded with us. But this is only in the drummer category. Dave was singing at first, then a guy named Steve Driesler, who's on the cover of "Kid Dynamite," sang for us, but he didn't have it in him. Like, zero rhythm. We got Peter (Searcy) to sing after that; he was just one of our friends.

anything, and well, too.

more thrashy?

T: Who was Britt? A high school friend? Clark: Yeah, generally. We met him through a large base of people, y'know, who are interconnected through friends. Like, the bass player of the band that he was drumming for was one of our best friends, but has since turned into a complete fag. And Britt was in the eighth grade when we recorded. He was a classically-

trained piano player. He can play circles around just about anybody, including Marvin Hamlisch. As a musician, he can play an instrument perfectly; he can play

T: So you sounded like "When I Fall" and "Disguise" at this point, except a little

Clark: Yeah, that was the idea. At the time, Minor Threat was our favorite band. T: Were you guys straight edge?

Clark: Uh, yeah. But then again, we weren't old enough to be getting into drinking anyway. You can't get beer at that age, so you might as well be straight edge. (laughter) Although Britt and Brian (McMahan) both...Brian was in this other band Maurice, and they both would get stoned as hell everyday when they were in the eighth grade.

T: Was Brian in a band called Languid and Flaccid? Clark: Oh yeah, they were in like the sixth grade then, that was a really long time ago. Generally, it was Brian, this guy Ned, who has since turned into a dick but was one of the coolest guys, and Britt, and a girl named Stephanie Harda (sp?).

And they were generally like an art/noise band. T: In the sixth grade?

Clark: Cincinnati. Well, we said were looking at Homestead pretty seriously, because in April of '85 we played in Chicago with Big Black and Rifle Sport, the "Triumph of the Well-Hung Dudes" show. We hung out with Albini. I guess this is the time that Homestead, even though they hadn't put out a lot of records, everyone was saying this was going to be <u>the</u> hot label, because Raygun had signed, Big Black had signed, and Albini was like, "Go for Homestead. These guys are the best, and Gerard is the greatest."

T: How did you make connections with Albini and stuff, to play Chicago?

Clark: He was writing for  $\underline{\text{Matter}}$ , and I imagine we wrote him a letter. And shit, we were into Big Black too, so we had been corresponding like, "Send us a Big Black sticker or t-shirt." And then we sent him a tape of the Britt stuff, and he really liked it a lot and offered us to play. Plus Naked Raygun said we were alright. So Albini said we could play with them on the stipulation that we didn't suck. (laughs) Anyway, when we were up in Chicago in April of '85, he said, "Go for Homestead. I'll talk you guys up." (Steve) Bjorklund (from Breaking Circus) did the same, called Gerard every day and said, "The hottest band around? You know who they are -- Squirrel Bait." T: What about the  $\frac{\text{Flipside}}{\text{S girlfriend}}$  ad, where David put in a personal and Sheilah (Mitchell, Gerard's girlfriend) responded?

Clark: That's what I'm coming to. Husker  $\operatorname{Du}$  offered us the Reflex contract and we turned it down, because we were pretty confident we'd get on Homestead. whether we were drunk or what -- we weren't straight edge at this point because we could buy beer -- and misled our friend Bob Mould, he got the idea that we were already on Homestead. This was on their New Day Rising tour, and apparently Bob ran into Gerard and said, "I'm so glad you guys signed Squirrel Bait; they're the greatest." And Gerard had gotten our tape and was like, "I didn't sign them." And so Sheilah was like, "Gerard's pretty mad that you guys said you were on his label already," and we were like, "Oh fuck." To make matters worse, this guy

named John Bailey, who's in the Bulls and was in Your Food (two Louisville bands), wrote a letter to a Columbus fanzine, I think it was the Offense Newsletter, and said, "Squirrel Bait just got signed to Homestead." Gerard read this and was like, "Fuck, who are these guys?" But then we sent him the mixed tape, and he called us back and said, "Okay, you're on the label." Which was cool. T: Now...what songs were recorded in that first session, in 1984, the one for The Clark: The first session with Britt we had "Tense/Earth-Shattering," like a medley, "Insult to Injury," "Tripe," which became "Black Light Poster Child," "The Nearest Door," "Rage for Life," "Disguise," "Occupant," "Notice When," and "When I Fall." I might have left one out, but I'm not sure. So yeah, we recorded

those with Britt at Sound on Sound Studios, where we've recorded everything.

start right away trying to find another way to put the record out?

T: Did you have a contract with him?

T: When did Gerard finally say you were signed?

T: It just seems like there was a lot of body English.

T: The first record's pretty damn good, though.

a lot better.

in my opinion.

Clark: It wasn't supposed to come out anyway until March 1 of '85 or something, and we were like, "Man, I can't wait for the record to come out." And so, the events that happened between August of '84 and May of '85, that was the turning of the content of the c point for Squirrel Bait. That's when Ben and Brian joined the band, we started playing out a lot and writing a lot of new songs. And that was the time when that record was supposed to come out, and it didn't. We weren't upset about it at all immediately, and we had so many new songs with Ben, we said, "Shit, we'll go for something else." We really didn't even know he was bankrupt until later.

T: Were you guys pretty pissed when the guy from Upstart went bankrupt, or did you

Clark: Yeah, in fact he's got rights to all the early songs, including "When I Fall" and "Disguise." Interestingly enough, we were pretty nervous about signing that contract, and Dave was 17 at the time, so we had him sign the contract. T: So he would still be a minor, and could get out of the contract. Clark: Yeah, it would be nullified completely. And actually, we did that for the first Homestead contract, too. (laughter) So, where were we...oh, so the record didn't come out. When we got the deal with Homestead, we called Upstart and said we didn't want to do it anymore and asked him to send the masters back, which he

Clark: Well, David and I, I think we were connected at birth or something. We've known each other for so long, just the shit that goes on between us. We're psychic, both of us...ah I'm just kidding. (laughter)  $T\colon$  Now after you recorded that stuff, did you guys think, "This is good. This compares to Big Black, or Husker Du"? Clark: We thought we were pretty fucking good. When we recorded with Britt and had that tape, we were like, "Shit, this is so much better than we thought it was gonna be." We thought we were a good band, but we had no idea what a studio could do. So we listened to the tape, or at least I did, and I was like, "Fuck, this is good." But not great, I'm not trying to say we were great, and I was wrone. 'cos it's not that good. By the time we were opening for Articles of

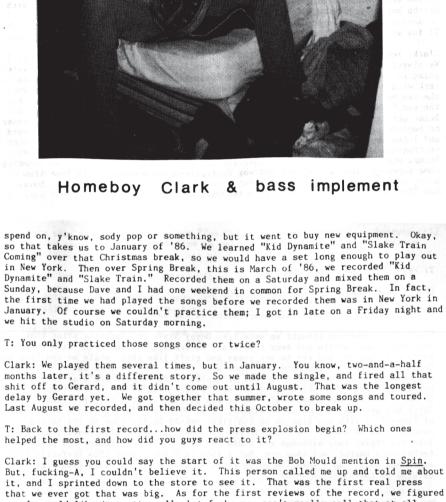
T: I like  $\underline{\text{Skag Heaven}}$  a lot, but it's a way different record. You can't really compare them; there's so much more diversity on the new record. Clark: Yeah, we incorporate jazz and blues and stuff like that. (laughter) T: So the first record was put out around September or October of '85?

wrong, 'cos it's not that good. By the time we were opening for Articles of Faith, we were doing alright. I always thought we were a pretty good band, even

when we weren't, so I don't know. I was just happy to do it. Now, the more I think about it, I think we're a good band, but there are plenty others who do it

Clark: See, that's the thing. The first record is shit compared to Skag Heaven,

Clark: No, it was the middle of November of '85.



people would like it pretty well, but fuck, you can't really call that at all. Then, as you say, people didn't really pick up on it until like six weeks after it came out. The <u>Spin</u> review was one of the first reviews I'd seen of it. Then in January, there was an article in <u>Spin</u>, the <u>Village Voice</u> did that article after we played there, New Musical Express, those were the major reviews, I guess. T: What did you guys think of those? Clark: Well, you know, most of it was full of shit, especially the Spin stuff. We've said that before, that's pretty stupid. And calling us the most brutal band of '85 or whatever, that's just plain stupid, because we're not at all. They were all positive reviews, generally, but we got pretty sick of the Husker Du comparisons. I really don't think they were even that warranted.

is a lot of raw emotion there, like exultation and depression and shit. But, on the whole, the production of it is so miserable I can't even listen to it, and I've heard those songs so many times I can't really say. I like "Hammering So Hard" a lot, I like "Final Chapter" a lot, and other than that, the other songs are generally pretty good. There's none of them that I'm embarrassed about, but I really don't listen to the record at all and don't care for it and don't think

Clark: For a bunch of teenagers, I think it was a good record, and there certainly

T: What do you think of the first record now, looking back upon it?

T: Now after the first record had come out, you guys decided to get back together, but did things get shitty again right after that? Clark: We figured Ben and Peter were a good drummer and singer, and even though they're dumb-asses, we could get along with them and play and it'll be fun. Bu New York was really bad, because they were just fools, we were kind of embarrassed to be around them because they were so stupid. Fuck, I like Ben and Peter a lot; I'll clarify that now, but we're very different people in what we like and what we do. They're not dumb or anything like that, but we just have different opinions and points of view. And I think they're wrong in theirs. (laughs)

Clark: Oh yeah. During this summer (1986) it got really bad in several cities, particularly Columbus, Ben just getting drunk and doing really stupid stuff. If you noticed, the <u>Spin</u> and <u>Village Voice</u> articles both have pictures of only Ben and Peter. The deal with that was, Sheilah Mitchell, Gerard's girlfriend, was going to take a band picture. And she took some, and they were great. But we were told not to let Monica Dee take our photographs because we could let Sheilah sell the photographs and make the money. So we said fine, and Ben and Peter agreed to it. But then Monica Dee comes up and was like, "Let's do some photographs for <u>Spin</u>." And Ben and Peter were like, "Yeah! Come on, Dave and Clark!" We were like, "No, we're not gonna do it," so they said, "Fine, we'll do it We were like, without you."

T: Were they out to just party?

T: You had a rental van in Chicago.

include it

Clark: Actually, those are the only lyrics Peter wrote. (laughter) Man, people are really down on those lyrics, too, it's pretty funny. T: Did the tour this summer go the way you wanted it? Clark: Yeah. We went into it with the idea that we were going to lose some money, but it was going to be fun. We just hoped that no one would get murdered or beat up, and that none of the equipment would get stolen. Avoiding disaster was how it was planned, so I set myself up as the road sergeant. I had the keys to the van, I was the boss generally, but it had to be that way 'cos no one else in the band had much responsibility. They're nice guys, but I don't trust them with my ship.

Clark: Both times we had a rental, which was a mistake, 'cos we ended up paying like \$3000 in van rental, when we could have easily bought one for that money. But, then again, when you have a rental, you have the security of getting a new

van if the old one breaks down. And if you buy one and it busts down, you've had it. I've heard of too many bands' vans breaking down.

we wrote that the same time I wrote "Sun God," but never recorded it because it's not a very good song. But we wanted to make <u>Skag Heaven</u> longer, so we had to

T: If you hadn't printed the lyrics, it would've been a great song. (laughs)



T: On <u>Skag Heaven</u>, there are some more unusual guitar sounds and the song structures are a lot more complex. Was that a change in the group's writing ability as a whole, or was it just one or two people? Clark: It's a combination of a lot of factors, I think. Grubbs is the main song-Clark: It's a combination of a lot of factors, I think. Grubbs is the main song-writer, and when Squirrel Bait first started a long time ago, he couldn't write songs that were too hard just because I couldn't play them. But, then again, he couldn't have written them anyway, because he wasn't thinking that way. The songs on the first record are generally not too complex, even though they're good songs. I assume the change wasn't a big conscious effort; I don't know why Grubbs started writing better songs, but he did. I mean, what does it take to write a good song? I wish I knew, I'd sell it. I figure he listens to a shitload of music and has a lot of innate ability and talent, and he practices a lot. That's what it takes, I guess.

Clark: Grubbs had been dropping hints to me like, "I guess one show over Christmas and that'll do it," stuff like that, and he'd been that way for a while. Approaching this summer, he was like, "Well, this is the last summer of Squirrel Bait." So I'd gotten the feeling all along he wasn't really into doing it that much, and the only reason he was still doing it was because I wanted to do it, and we were really good friends. Not that he didn't want to tour and put out records,

T: Okay, then you decided to call it quits in October?