

Raveonettes' Sune Rose Wagner: This music is one for the books

by *George_Varga*

Many budding and wannabe rock stars alike learned about the music they love by listening to records, the more the better. Having limited access in his small seaside hometown of Sonderborg, Denmark, Sune Rose Wagner turned to books to educate himself about the music that - since 2002 - has made his band, the Raveonettes, the hippest and the most popular international rock 'n' roll export in Danish history.

THE RAVEONETTES - After studying in a Copenhagen music conservatory, Raveonettes vocalist Sharin Foo, right, went to India to learn the northern Hindustani style of dhrupad singing. Her bandmate, Sune Rose Wagner, got his music education by reading about rock; now, the raves are for the band. CNS Photo courtesy of Bella Lieberberg and Stefan Ruhmke. One man's musical favorites

Sune Rose Wagner, the mastermind of the Danish band the Raveonettes, got bit by the classical-music bug while living on Seattle's Bainbridge Island.

"It was hard to get to know people up there because they would not allow a stranger to protrude into their circle of friends," he recalled. "I wanted to ask a girl out on date and she had to ask 'permission' from her friends! I went: '(Forget) that.' So, I quit drinking and started taking piano lessons and going to hear the Seattle Symphony every Thursday."

Wagner, 34, regularly attends concerts by the New York Philharmonic when he's not on tour. But his love for rock continues unabated. Here are three of his favorite bands and albums:

THE DOORS

Album: "The Doors."

The 1967 debut by the Los Angeles band whose doomed singer, Jim Morrison, profoundly influenced Billy Idol, the Cult's Ian Astbury, INXS' Michael Hutchence and many more.

Standout songs: "Break on Through," "Light My Fire," "The End."

Wagner: "'The Doors' is probably one of the best debut albums of all time. It's beautiful, from start to finish. Brilliant musicianship, brilliant songs, brilliant words and such a great California vibe."

THE VELVET UNDERGROUND

Album: "The Velvet Underground and Nico." The 1967 debut by the pioneering New York band, whose dark songs and feedback-fueled songs created a template for countless others, from David Bowie, the Stooges and Patti Smith to the Jesus and Mary Chain, the Pixies and the Strokes.

Standout songs: "Venus in Furs," "Heroin," "I'm Waiting for the Man."

Wagner: "It's a very paranoid and beautiful album that I think really sums up what rock is all about. It's absolutely stunning."

SUICIDE

Album: "Suicide."

The 1977 debut by this edgy New York electro duo, whose raw, confrontational music frequently incited audiences to violence - usually directed at the band - and later inspired everyone from Joy Division and Nick Cave to Bruce Springsteen and Cars' leader Ric Ocasek, who produced albums for Suicide in 1988 and 1992.

Standout songs: "Frankie Teardrops," "Rocket USA," "Che."

Wagner: "Phenomenal! I still think it's the best electronic album ever made. I don't think anything will ever top it." "I'd read rock encyclopedias all the time," Wagner, 34, said recently from a tour stop in the French coastal city of Saint-Malo (which, he noted, "has the most seafood restaurants in all of Europe").

"Reading is how I discovered The Doors and Jefferson Airplane and Jimi Hendrix, whom I'd never heard of. Eventually, I'd get one of their records and I was like: 'Wow!' I'd make extensive lists of bands to check out

and I remember clearly how hard it was to get a hold of the music. There was no way to get ahold of an Eddie Cochran record where I was from. One day, my mom took me to Copenhagen and I found an Eddie Cochran box set in a secondhand record store. It was the biggest day of my life."

Today, New York-based guitarist-singer Wagner and his musical partner in the Raveonettes, Los Angeles-based singer, bassist and resident sex symbol Sharin Foo, 32, are revered in indie-rock circles for their quirky synthesis of various rock eras. Armed with a new album, the lyrically brooding "Lust Lust Lust," the band recently kicked off a monthlong North American tour.

Performing in a style that might best be described as neo-retro for alt-rock hipsters, Wagner - who writes, arranges and oversees all of the duo's music - draws from the music of pioneering 1950s rockers (Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Richie Valens) and the classic girl groups of the 1960s (the Ronettes, the Marvelettes and nearly any other female act of that vintage whose stage name ended in the suffix "ettes.")

The twists, and there are several, come with what Wagner then adds to the mix. They range from moody, film noir-inspired lyrical imagery (which is reflected in the videos and stage attire he and Foo favor) to jazz and hip-hop-inspired rhythm loops and the heavily distorted guitar approach of such 1980s noise-pop favorites as My Bloody Valentine and Jesus and Mary Chain.

"Most of the cymbal samples Sune used were from old Max Roach records; there were a lot of jazz drummers sampled on the first few Raveonettes records," said the band's Danish drummer, Jakob Hoyer, who has played with pianist Brad Mehldau, Danish bass great Niels Pedersen and jazz piano mainstay Butch Lacy.

"Sune hired me because he wanted a jazzy touch on percussion, instead of a rock-solid, modern rock drummer approach. I love the whole Raveonettes' sonic experience."

A more oblique artistic influence is Wagner's love of classical music, in particular the work of such pioneering Russian composers as Igor Stravinsky and Dmitry Shostakovich.

The head Raveonette's decision to write and record every song on "Whip It On," the duo's eight-song 2002 debut, in the key of B-flat minor was inspired largely by the fact Shostakovich's Symphony No. 13 ("Babi Yar") was composed primarily in the same key.

Equally intriguing, Wagner limited himself to using just three chords on each of "Whip It On's" eight songs, for which he also dispensed with the use of any ride cymbals or high-hats in his sampled drum parts. This decision to restrict himself stemmed in part from the similarly minimalist approach of Dogme 95, a group of convention-defying Danish filmmakers.

"It was done as a guitar thing," said Wagner, who named his band after "Rave On," a choice 1958 Buddy Holly song. "There was something about tuning the strings that way that made it seem the right thing for me to do. It wasn't about restrictions. It was about having certain guidelines.

"Had we recorded 'Whip It On' in a traditional way, with a real drummer and two guitar players, it would have been extremely boring. Because I chose to do it with different sounds and mixing that sort of 'garage-y' rock music with modern beats, something new and fresh came out of it. I chose to do all the songs in the same key to challenge myself. I wanted to see if I could write eight songs, which were basically the same, and make them sound different from each other."

The Raveonettes' next release, 2003's "The Chain Gang of Love" changed the format by featuring 13 songs that Wagner wrote all in the key of B-flat major. The band's 2005 follow-up, the uneven "Pretty in Black," featured guest appearances by former Velvet Underground drummer Maureen Tucker, ex-Ronettes singer Ronnie Spector and Suicide's Martin Rev.

Like "Chain Gang," it was produced by Richard Gottehrer, whose previous credits include albums by Blondie and Marshall Crenshaw, as well as writing "My Boyfriend's Back" and "I Want Candy." The latter song is saluted on "You Want the Candy," a standout song on The Raveonettes' new "Lust Lust Lust" album.

Wagner credits Dire Straits' Mark Knopfler for inspiring his switch from piano to guitar at the age of 14 and cites Bob Dylan's revolutionary mid-1960s work as his impetus for becoming a songwriter. He acknowledges the dark tone of The Raveonettes new album, as embodied in such songs as "Expelled From Love" and "Sad Transmission," reflects his own experiences.

"This is the album I wanted to do, personal from start to finish," he said. "It's basically the story of my life at the time when I wrote the album. I used to be very 'rock 'n' roll,' in that I thought I had to drink a lot and do drugs for people to take me seriously. But I found out that is not true at all.

"Still, it's a lot easier for me to write about things that bother me. The good things I just take for granted."

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