

Legs McNeil **Arturo Vega: “TO HELL WITH YOUS!”**

The Making of an Artist

Arturo Vega was the most optimistic, jubilant and fun pal anyone could wish for. If it wasn't for Artie, Joey Ramone and I would've starved to death in those early days. He used to give us each a buck fifty so we could each buy a quart of beer and a pack of cigarettes. Joey smoked Winstons; I smoked Marlboros, at 75 cents a pack. The quart of beer was also 75 cents. Which makes a buck fifty. I used to sit in awe and watch Joey and Dee Dee write those first Ramones songs by the windows of Artie's loft with a two-string guitar. Everyone said it was a three-string guitar, but I never saw that third string. When things were at their worst, which was quite often, Arturo would laugh and say, “Happy, happy, happy,” like some twisted mantra until everyone was in a good mood again. If you wanted to get in a good mood, you hung out at Arturo's. I miss him everyday.

—Legs McNeil

Once, when I was still in Mexico, I must have been about 16 years old, and I used to walk home after a night in La Zona Rosa, Mexico City, ya know? La Zona Rosa was like a district where all the chic boutiques are, and the nice hotels and the art galleries—but there was no such thing as gay bars or anything like that then—just gay hang-outs and restaurants. And I used to walk home, and all these guys wanted to pick me up in their cars, and every time I used to tell myself, “I'm gonna ask them for money, I'm gonna ask them for money tonight!”

But it was too ugly. I never did.

I had been a rock & roll fan all my life, so I started doing *Tommy*, the rock opera by The Who, at the National University in Mexico City, and then we toured other colleges. I have the record of our performance. We translated it, we did the costumes, we did the choreography—and I played Cousin Kevin—so I was into music, ya know?

Then I moved to the States in the late 60's, and Tomata Du Plenty and I used to hang outside bars in San Francisco, and I didn't have any ID. I was too young, so we couldn't go into the bars. So Tomata and I used to hang out outside.

Gorilla Rose and Tomata De Plenty were original Cockettes, ya know? And I saw the Cockettes and I thought they were unbelievable. They were not like your typical drag queen act, that wants to look feminine, and act feminine, and does lip-sync to Diana Ross. And because of the Cockettes' look, because of their visuals—it's very hard to tell now, now that we have seen it ALL! Now you turn TV on, and you're gonna see the most outrageous drag queen on *All In The Family* or *Family Matters*, or whatever, any TV show, you've all seen the look already.

But this was pre-Alice Cooper, so if Alice Cooper made an impact, imagine what it was like before him?

This was the Cockettes and this was absolutely the beginning of everything, the beginning of all glitter, the beginning of all glamour, the beginning of all those precious whore costumes, it was the beginning of everything, just amazing to see, something so SPECTACULARLY original ya know? But so glamorous at the same time...

This was San Francisco in the 60s, so everybody was there. It was just a young, trippy audience, and of course, everybody was on acid, and whatever else you could get. And there was no distinction between gay and straight. It was very, very nice.

This was also a time when music was still kind of mixed, ya know?

I remember going to see Joan Baez and The Mamas and the Papas together with Jimi Hendrix, ya know?

That doesn't happen anymore. But in those days you could have like totally opposites together, because everybody that was in San Francisco liked to see everything that was happening.

Legs McNeil Arturo Vega: “TO HELL WITH YOU!”

The Making of an Artist

That’s what we used to do; it was just like people would tell you, or we’d say, “What’s happening?” And you would see the same people at the Fillmore at the Cockettes, or the Family Dog taking acid at night in the hills and the parks, and in the morning the sun rise at this beach, and the sun set on that other beach, everybody was the same people, ya know? It was great.

But I moved to New York on Christmas Eve of 1972, and at first I lived in a penthouse on 63rd and 3rd, with Carla, my wife. We lived there for about six months, and I started going to see The New York Dolls at the Mercer Arts Center. I went to the Mercer with Carla, and her sister Beatrice, who used to date Johnny Thunders. So we used to go to the Dolls all the time, and I liked them a lot, I loved their whole scene. Everybody was dressed up, and it was a real event, it was the instant party, anything that had to do with the Dolls was instant party!

Ya know, you arrived at the Mercer and the party was already there, and then the Dolls played and it was a party, and when they finished, there was a party, ha, ha, ha!

It was like parties from the minute you walked in the place! With the Dolls, everything was a party! It was just a great feeling to be there.

I didn’t actually meet the Dolls and talk to them, until I tried to design an album cover for them with florescent swastikas, and this little Nazi plane that the German’s built at the end of World War II, like a total desperation plane! It took off like a rocket and carried 12 missiles in the nose, and it shoot the 12 missiles, and then it couldn’t land, ha, ha, ha! The Nazi’s were using it to shoot at formations of B-17 bombers, the flying fortresses, but it couldn’t land, and had to crash, ha, ha, ha!

These planes were like *Too Much Too Soon*, which is the perfect Dolls symbol, ya know? I thought this is what the Dolls were all about—maximum power in a minute and a half, but then they have to crash, so I made this design with florescent swastikas.

I used to wear fluorescent swastikas in those days, arm bands; I can’t believe I used to walk around this city like that. Now you can’t do that, they’ll kill you, but I went to the record company, and David Johansen looked at it, then he looked at me like, “You gotta be kidding?”

But he said, “This is so perfect, but you know this is impossible.”

And he went around showing everybody, “Look, look, look, this should be our record cover,” and I remember Marty Thau looking at it, and he goes, “Yeah, right...”

Well that’s when I started talking to David and Johnny, and we became friends a little bit after that.

But Carla and I only lasted about six months in the penthouse, and I don’t think I ever came south of 14th Street, until I had to come and look for an apartment that I could afford, ha, ha, ha!

I was looking for something of \$150 a month and I came to Alphabet City and, oh, it was a surprise, ha, ha, ha!

I was working at the Orange Julius stand in Times Square. I used to make \$67.50 a week, and on pay day, I used to run to Woolworth’s and spend it all on plastic raincoats and plastic umbrellas and plastic sunglasses!

They were like three dollars a piece, and we used to make dresses out of plastic table cloths, ha, ha, ha! It was great, and we had great wardrobes, ya know?

Legs McNeil Arturo Vega: “TO HELL WITH YOU!”

The Making of an Artist

So I moved to the loft on 2nd Street, and I was painting supermarket signs. Tomata and Gorilla Rose, who'd also moved to New York from San Francisco, were living upstairs with another person from their troupe, Sweet Pam; she was staying upstairs with them.

My door was always open, and Dee Dee used to come upstairs to see Sweet Pam, who was his girlfriend at that time. And Dee Dee started talking to me, and telling me that he and his friends were putting this band together, and how he thought that I was a really cool person, a really cool dude, and that I should design things for them.

That's how I first met him.

What did I think of Dee Dee?

I thought he was sweet, and I thought he was cute. I wasn't really attracted to him, but I thought he was a sweet kid. So I went to see The Ramones at one of those parties in Soho, at some loft. Because, by then, Fayette Hauser kept telling me, “Oh you have to see them! You have to see them!”

So the first time I saw The Ramones, I didn't know what to think, you know what I mean?

It was beyond your reason, I mean your senses told you that something was happening there, but then it would just be this big “MMMMMMMMMM,” ya know?

I was into rock & roll, and of course, by 1973, 1974, nothing was happening. I couldn't get that much excited over the new Rolling Stones album, any more than the new Led Zeppelin album. I mean Led Zeppelin was okay, but then there were things like Yes and Emerson, Lake and Palmer, and those people. I guess they looked very good on the stage, but the music was not much. The music didn't say much.

So Dee Dee came here to the loft, and would talk, and then one day they needed an ad for *The Village Voice*. It was going to be very small, of course, and we didn't have a photograph where everybody looked good.

So I cut out each one of them from different photographs, with just a white background, so it would stand out a little bit, that was the first thing I did. And then I did some fliers and posters and things. And just started helping them to set up the drums, ya know?

Then Tomata and Gorilla played with The Ramones at CBGBs, the Ramones opened up for them in that play, *Savage Voodoo Nuns*, and I played the novice Connie.

And my favorite line was when the Mother Superior interviewed me, “Well Connie, why do you want to be a nun?”

And I said, “I want to become a famous virgin!” Ha, ha, ha, oh ha, ha, ha! It was great, some of the nuns were killing each other, ha, ha, ha, killing the other nuns, throwing transistor radios in the shower, ha, ha, ha, electrocuting them, ha, ha, ha!

It was great, those were the days...