

The Residents: Eskimo/The Commercial Album (pREServed editions)

SC spectrumculture.com/2019/02/12/the-residents-eskimo-the-commercial-album-preserved-editions-review

Daniel Bromfield

February 12, 2019



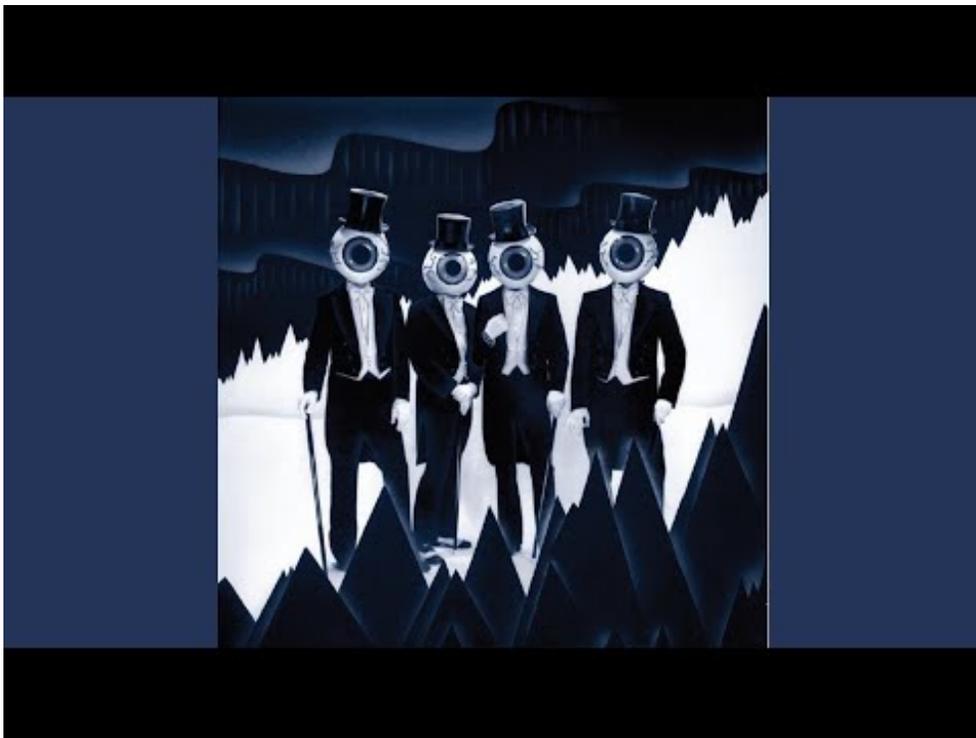
1979's *Eskimo* and 1981's *The Commercial Album* are the first two Residents albums to feature their iconic eyeball masks on the cover, which might be why they're among their most famous. While the band had operated for the last decade as a hermetic outfit who spoke through their art, the eyeball masks gave them a badass brand image as indelible as KISS's. The Residents tend to be a formative obsession for left-field rockers, which might be because of Primus's covers of "Constantinople" and "Hello Skinny" but also because certain aspects of their music appeal to a more juvenile mindset than most avant music. Beyond the masks, there's their dark-carnival aesthetic, which isn't too far removed from what we find in James Wan movies or the grungier corners of Midwestern rap. Americans, especially young Americans, love a good subversion of an innocent trope. Then, there's the way they like to tie their music into fake-deep anti-corporate concepts. The imagined Inuit on *Eskimo* are loyal consumers, incorporating Toyota and Coca-Cola slogans into their "traditional" chants. And *The Commercial Album* works on the premise that, given how repetitious pop songs tend to be, there's only about one minute of actual music in a three-minute single—hence an album of one-minute songs that are "commercials" for themselves. If you're the kind of rock listener for whom ambition and conceptual heft define great rock music, the Residents come with a built-in appeal. It's not a huge leap to go from *The Wall* to a Residents record.

These two albums, freshly reissued for the Residents' ongoing "pREServed" campaign, are the most recommendable Residents albums but far from their best. *Eskimo* is probably the band's most meticulously sound-designed album, making wonderful use of space and an omnipresent pall of digital wind to evoke a barren landscape. It's also an odious study in phony ethnography that, nearly two decades away from the end of the Canadian residential school system, uses an offensive exonym to reduce real people to props for a flimsy concept. Throughout the record, we hear garbled gibberish and fake-Native heya-heyas that once in a while cohere into something like "you asked for it, you got it!" or "Coca-Cola is life!" If the Residents wanted to make a statement about the wide-reaching tendrils of American-style capitalism, why not recruit real people to speak in real languages and talk about real issues plaguing their communities?

Why even use the fake language? It might've been fun if all we heard was advertising slogans in English. Erase the voices and the "Eskimo" conceit and we'd have a great ambient album on our hands. Either way, we don't get much out of the concept aside from the jokey incongruity of hearing these Times Square-friendly slogans in the midst of an Arctic whiteout.

The Commercial Album, a forty-track suite of one-minute songs, has a couple of the Residents' best tunes on it. "Moisture" offers a clue to a mysterious death but raises more questions than answers, and "Loss of Innocence" deftly captures the silence of the mind that follows a traumatic event. "The Coming of the Crow" is a good, creepy instrumental, and Euro-chic eccentric Lene Lovich is a gift to "Picnic Boy." The issue is that its stubbornly uniform sound palate dulls much of its interest. Similar sprawlers like the *White Album*, the Magnetic Fields' *69 Love Songs*, and Tierra Whack's *Whack World* work because each song conjures its own little world rather than representing a slightly different facet of the same one. The world of *The Commercial Album* isn't a place where most sane people would want to spend a lot of time, anyway. The sound palate consists mostly of screechy detuned synth and cult chants delivered mostly in iambic heptameter. There's none of the leering atmosphere of *Eskimo* or 1977's fantastic *Duck Stab/Buster & Glen*. And the concept is even deader in the water than *Eskimo*, for two reasons. One: few pop songs are actually the same thing repeated three times. Two: few of these are particularly good songs. If you're going to make an album criticizing how pop is written, do it by writing good pop.

These are the albums most new Residents fans will hear for the first time. But I would direct anyone trying to get a grasp on what the Residents do best to *Duck Stab/Buster & Glen* or 1984's *George & James*, a tribute-cum-piss-take to *George Gershwin and James Brown complete with a side-splitting 2-D approximation of Live at the Apollo* ("everybody say 'ow,'" their budget Brown groans arthritically). The pREServed releases aren't really for new fans, anyway, and while some of the *Eskimo* extras expand beautifully on that album's frozen world, only hardcore eyeball-heads would be willing to suffer through the inexplicable suite of songs based on nursery rhymes buried deep in the outtakes. Likewise, the late-career live performances bundled with *The Commercial Album* show just the kind of havoc the Residents' pivot towards theatrical spectacle wreaked on their art. The Southern-accented "singing Resident" sounds like a carnival barker, entirely the wrong approach for "Loss of Innocence" but in keeping with the sub-Juggalo aesthetic of their work over the last three decades. What went wrong? Thinking back, it probably had a lot to do with those damn eyeball masks.



<https://youtu.be/8evrOsIFGaE>