

## ALEX'S BAR ANNIVERSARY SHOW: THE RIVERBOAT GAMBLERS THE SULTANS THE DAYS END

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By Brian Spiegel

A wise man once told me that punk rock has been destroyed by today's modern bands, who value image over classic punk values. Well, actually, it wasn't really a wise man, it was some drunk guy at a party who took offense to my Green Day pin. I nodded my head and went my merry way, ending up on a living-room couch, where I talked politics with a bunch of stoned people. He ended up throwing up in the bathroom. Ah, I miss college. In any case, the idea that image has nothing to do with "punk rock" is not only shortsighted but just plain wrong. These claims are usually propagated by youths who wear safety pins and patched jackets (not that they are trying to live an image or anything). The problem with trying to propagate a list of ideals for something such as "punk rock" is that "punk rock" really doesn't exist as a living, breathing, tangible entity: it's more of an idea (like communism) that is a great surface ideal but doesn't really work outside of a vacuum. If anything, "punk rock" is a scene that heavily relies on image, especially a stage image that can be either natural or artificial. And the good thing about punk is that artificiality is detectable from a mile away—especially on stage. What am I getting at? If stage presence and good music is everything, then The Riverboat Gamblers might just be the best live "punk rock" band

walking god's green Earth right now.

Whether or not you follow me, The Riverboat Gamblers performance at Long Beach's Alex's Bar anniversary show in late January should not only be a manual for young garage bands on how to conduct a live show in a small club, it was a study on how to make a live show so seamless that thinking seems less important than just enjoying the spectacle of it all. The band's 16-song/50-minute set was so smooth and fast-moving that it didn't give you a chance to diligently study any chords or lyrics; rather, you just sat back and became enthralled with the band's onstage intensity, especially lead singer "Rookie Sensation" Mike Wiebe's (formerly known as Teko) split-second decisions to enter the crowd, climb on the bar, and (of course) breakdance a paper-mâché doll on a door overhang (an obvious ode to Andre Rieu's live shows). Even more impressive than the band's ability to take over every single wide eye in a venue is how surprisingly mature the band's new songs sounded. They debuted several new tracks from their soon-to-be-released new album *TO THE CONFUSION OF OUR ENEMIES* (due April 26), songs that match every single breakdown power chord with a melody that takes you not only by surprise but smashes anything the band did previously to pieces. The three new songs they previewed not only sounded more substantial (lush, even) but also drove the catchiness quotient up a three-fold. "Walk Around Me" might be the best new song I've heard so far this year. If their upcoming release and subsequent Warped Tour appearances don't make them stars on at least an underground level, then America's resistance to last year's "Crazy Frog" phase will be for naught.

The great thing that about Alex's Bar is that the venue's cozy yet non-abrasive atmo-

sphere (you know, the opposite of, say, the Roxy or the Viper Room) allows you to focus on sweaty guys on stage and not so much the fat, sweaty guy wobbling next to you. This makes you more likely to have a likeable impression of the opening bands—in the present case, the impressive simplicity of The Sultans and the all-too-short and underappreciated set of by The Days End.

The Sultans are the newest band from John Reis, former lead singer of Hot Snakes and quite possibly the most underappreciated American band of all time, Rocket from the Crypt. The band's sound is best described as simplistic garage rockabilly with a chaser of punk and an olive of Reis's onstage patter (which fluctuates between charming and excessive).

This year's Alex's Bar "Low Self-Confidence Award" (last year the title went to Tijuana Knife Fight) goes to The Days End, who, frankly, didn't get any help from a shockingly uninterested audience (never mind the equipment problems). The band never seemed to give themselves a chance, as was evident from the second they walked on the stage. The funny thing was that their two-song, Mars Volta-meets-Sonic Youth set was very, very good—and not just good in a "dive-bar opening act" way. The music was complex (in a good way), and the band was reserved in one of those cool, introspective ways. With very, very little in the way of vocals, the sound wasn't cluttered by emoish lyrical longings. This is not only a band to watch, but a band to go out and discover right now. Seriously, get off the fucking couch. To comment on this or any other review you see in SKRATCH, feel free to e-mail us at [speakup@skratmagazine.com](mailto:speakup@skratmagazine.com).