

La Station Service presents



James Chance and The Contortions

James Chance is a legend: the free form playing of Albert Ayler with the solid funk rhythm of James Brown, though filtered through a punk rock lens.

It would have been easy to be fooled by James Chance in late '70s New York, just looking at him. His greased pompadour, ski-jump nose, plus the lounge lizard attire he favored, gave him more than a passing resemblance to the movie brats of decades previous. But if you happened to see him onstage blowing his horn or getting in a fistfight with a fan in a club, you saw him for who he really was : one of the preeminent avant-garde provocateurs of his age.

Chance arrived in New York from his native Milwaukee in the mid '70s, hauling his saxophone and his given surname, Sigfried. He soon hooked up with Lydia Lunch and her crew of downtown adolescent artists/mischief-makers, playing briefly in the seminal Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, but he left in 1977 to form his own band, The Contortions. Maybe more than anyone else in the so-called No Wave set, Chance was fascinated with black music of the era, and with The Contortions, sought to integrate the horn-spiked stop-on-a-dime rhythms of funk and the heady freedom of Ornette Coleman's sax playing with the confrontational and political theatricality of punk.

A tight rhythm section provided the band's funky skeleton, while open-tuned slide guitar, lurching organ, squawking sax, and all manner of groans and yells gave The Contortions their wild dissonance. Even today, with numerous bands in the post-punk renaissance acknowledging their indebtedness to No Wave in general and Chance in particular, The Contortions' blend of organized twitchiness and raw anarchy sounds remarkably unique. But like the scene to which they were so central, The Contortions burned out quickly, releasing only one album, Buy the Contortions, along with the four songs they contributed to Brian Eno's legendary No New York comp. Chance soon resurfaced as James White (in honor of James Brown) with a new band called The Whites which actually featured almost the same personnel as The Contortions.

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