

Even intermediate students of proto-punk know that Rocket from the Tombs was a band whose influence far outstripped its sales: a Cleveland, Ohio, combo that split to create art-rockers Pere Ubu (formed by Rocket vocalist David Thomas and guitarist Peter Laughner) and CBGB pioneers the Dead Boys (featuring guitarist Cheetah Chrome and drummer Johnny Blitz). To add to the mythos, Laughner is remembered for his untimely death at age 24; an evocative body of unreleased work; and a eulogy by his friend, seminal rock critic Lester Bangs.

One member of RFTT is mentioned less often than the rest: bassist **Craig Bell**. However, Bell's trajectory helped catalyze the Cleveland scene before Rocket ever started, then sparked an indie music movement 500 miles east in New Haven, Connecticut.

Follow Craig Bell's path to learn about five bands you should know about:

Mirrors. Long before Rocket from the Tombs, Bell formed Mirrors in 1971 with fellow Lakewood High School alumni Michael Weldon (drums) and Jamie Klimek (guitar, vocals) as well as Jim Crook (keyboards, guitar). The band staked a claim as Cleveland's first to emulate edgy groups like the Velvet Underground, who had captured the town's attention with memorable shows at La Cave on Euclid Ave. According to Bell, "To my knowledge, I can't think of any other band in the Cleveland area that was doing that kind of stuff at the time we started doing it," Bell said in an interview. "I thought we were the only people in the world doing it." Bell started a stint in the Army in 1972 but returned in 1974 to rejoin Mirrors — where he was spotted by Laughner and invited to join RFTT.

Electric Eels. Mirrors guitarist Paul Marotta — who'd joined the group to cover for Bell on bass, then stuck around to replace Crook on keyboards and guitar — simultaneously played with Electric Eels, a Cleveland band that launched in 1972 and played only a handful of highly influential gigs thanks to its formidable reputation for confrontation with the audience, the police and each other. Both Mirrors and Electric Eels joined RFFT onstage for a Dec. 22, 1974, showcase at the Viking Saloon that locals regard as a watershed for Cleveland punk. After Mirrors and Electric Eels both broke up in 1975, members of both bands teamed up to form the Styrenes, which continues to perform in Cleveland 40 years later.

Saucers. Nineteen seventy-five was a tough year for Cleveland's first-wave punk bands. Like Mirrors and Eels, Rocket from the Tombs split in 1975, and in 1976, Craig Bell took a job with Amtrak and moved to New Haven. There he formed Saucers, which set the table for an alternative music scene in the shadow of Yale University. Bell gathered a formidable array of young musicians in Saucers — who would in turn go on to new musical adventures — and energized gigs at New Haven clubs like Toad's Place, the Shandy Gaff and the Oxford Ale House. In an interview to publicize Saucers' 2011 reunion, Bell recalled that the center of the action was Ron's Place, located right next to Yale. "Bands were playing there every night of the week, and on the weekend, you couldn't get into the place. It was a time of total, absolute joy. It was our own little CBGBs." Singer-songwriter Spike Priggen, another New Haven vet, seconds Bell's emotion: "Ron's Place" was THE Punk Rock club in New Haven in the late 70's/early 80's. I saw alotta great local bands there (Hot Bodies, Saucers, October Days, The Fixations, The Snotz etc) as well as national acts including Human Switchboard, G.G. Allin and R.E.M, on a Tuesday night, back when all they had out was the 'Radio Free Europe' single and Pete Buck was using my guitar as his had just been stolen."

The Furors. Among the bands that played often with Saucers at Ron's Place and other local venues, the drum-and-guitar duo of Tom Dans and Derek Holcomb has been a New Haven fixture for almost 40 years. In 2003, a tribute album "Let's Get Furious" featured 38 Furors songs covered by 38 local musicians and groups. (Personal footnote: Under the name "The Modern Roses," I supported Saucers guitarist Malcolm Marsden's cover of "Shake Yourself Loose.")

Miracle Legion. Spinning off from the Saucers and into the '80s, drummer and vocalist Mark Mulcahy switched to guitar co-founded Miracle Legion in 1983. The band toured with the Sugarcubes, recorded at Prince's Paisley Park studios — and released a track entitled “Closer to the Wall” on its 1988 LP Glad that featured Craig Bell's old Cleveland colleagues, Pere Ubu.