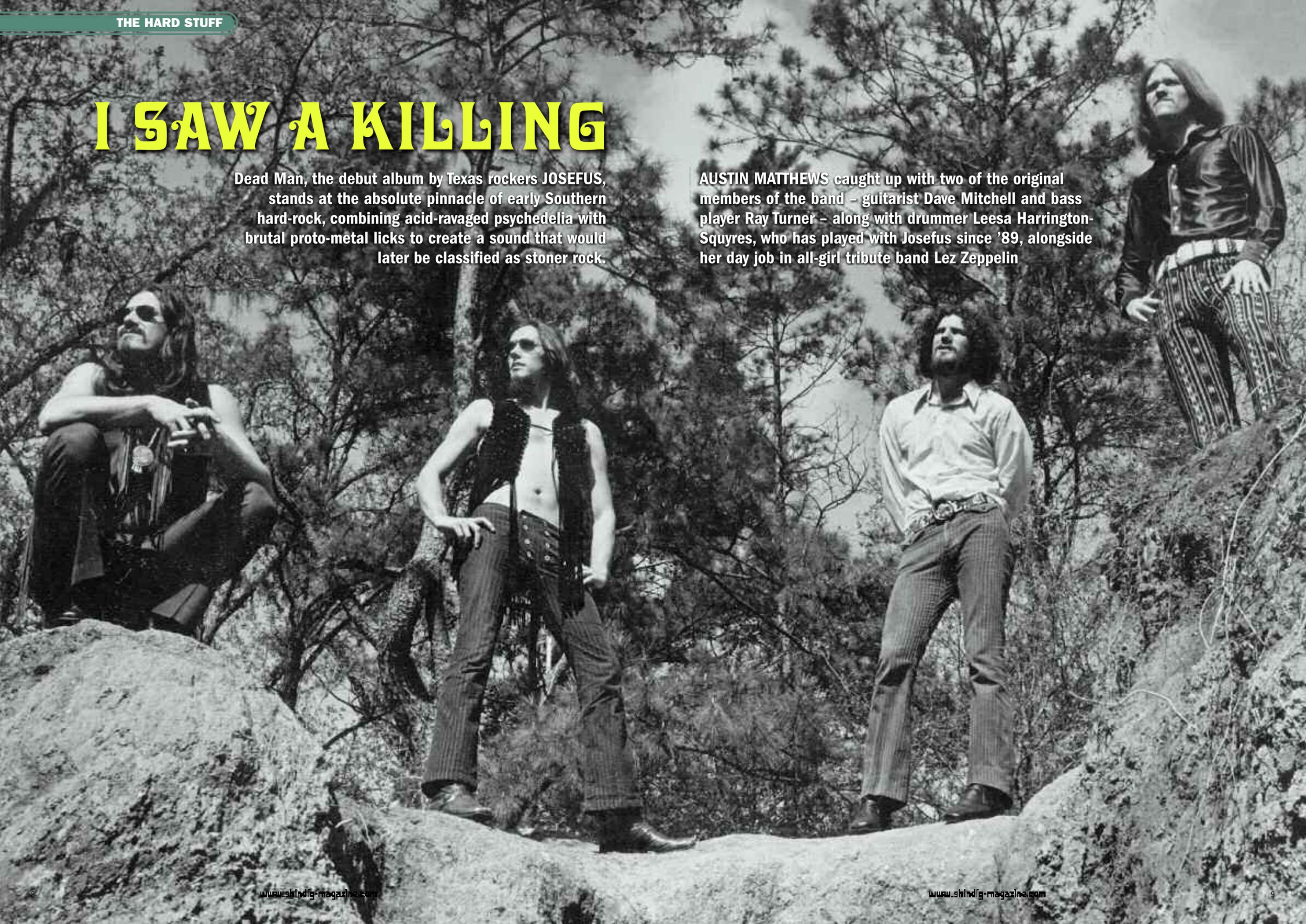


I SAW A KILLING

Dead Man, the debut album by Texas rockers JOSEFUS, stands at the absolute pinnacle of early Southern hard-rock, combining acid-ravaged psychedelia with brutal proto-metal licks to create a sound that would later be classified as stoner rock.

AUSTIN MATTHEWS caught up with two of the original members of the band – guitarist Dave Mitchell and bass player Ray Turner – along with drummer Leesa Harrington-Squyres, who has played with Josefus since '89, alongside her day job in all-girl tribute band Lez Zeppelin





Ray Turner and Dave Mitchell first played together in a band called Rip West, before joining United Gas where they first encountered future Josefus drummer Doug Tull (some of this often excellent material is released on the *Dead Man aLive* CD). Doug had moved to California with a band called Christopher who went on to release a memorable album on Metromedia, but returned to Houston after drug troubles and a rumoured suicide attempt. Throughout their brief career, the band was tuned in to the underground music scene in Houston, playing at Love Street and The Vulcan Gas Company and hanging out with The 13th Floor Elevators,

Bubble Puppy, American Blues and The Moving Sidewalks (members of the last two bands would go on to form ZZ Top).

"When Doug got back to Houston in '69 he wanted us to form a rock 'n' roll band. Original music was really happening in H-town back in the day," recalls Ray today. Dave continues, "It was probably two to three years after Rip West and I'd played in several other bands before he asked me to audition for Doug to play lead in United Gas. That night we jammed for a while and then Doug took us straight to a club where we played live on stage. We were being booked at some of Texas's best rock clubs within the first couple of months." A couple of line-up changes and the band was complete. "Doug and I started shopping around for another singer and found Pete Bailey, a great lyricist and performer. We hired Pete because he had such a bizarre stage act." Finally came the name change: "Doug Tull sprung the name Josefus on us one night on stage," remembers Dave. Doug claimed that the local gas company had threatened to sue, though more than likely the ever-persuasive drummer wanted to change the name and was lying to get his own way.

At a live show the band caught the attention of a promoter who managed to get them a deal for Jim Musil to produce an album in Phoenix (in December '69). Never released at the time, this material eventually surfaced as *Get Off My Case* in the '90s and features many of the same

songs that make up *Dead Man*. Explains Ray, "Musil tried to get us on Frank Zappa's Straight label, but they didn't want us." However, Dave and Doug wouldn't leave Musil alone. "We called Jim in Phoenix constantly asking for news and when things weren't happening fast enough for us, he released a 45 on his Dandelion label, which we immediately got on the radio in Houston." Musil had also renamed the band Come, which may or may not have been to their detriment. "I still wonder if a band named Come wasn't part of what turned the major labels off," muses Dave. "The album we recorded for him wasn't all that much different from our Hookah album (*Dead Man*), but we finally got tired of waiting for him to get us a deal and went back to the same studio on our own dime to record the newer Hookah version."

Indeed, frustrated by the lack of action from Musil and wanting to capitalise on the favourable reaction to the single, the band pushed on and re-recorded the album themselves and put it out on their own Hookah label, thus creating one of the most desirable private press albums of the era. "We were probably one of the first bands ever to do an indie album," states Dave. "Our families put up the money for us to go back to the same studio in Phoenix and record the album again." The result was the *Dead Man* album released in a press of 3,000, which contained re-recorded versions of four of the *Get Off My Case* tracks. Jam-packed with dirty

Southern psychedelic rockers, simply check out that awesome power on 'Crazy Man', the outlaw blues on 'Situation' or the creepy Echoplex freak-out that starts 'Dead Man' to sample a band at its peak. The break had given Josefus additional time to mature, "When we returned to Phoenix in March to record again, we had been playing those songs live for three extra months and knew exactly what we were going to record. It was wham, bam and outta there," enthuses Dave.

The band knew they were onto something special. "It was a top seller in Houston right there with The Beatles' *Abbey Road*," recalls Ray. "With national exposure on a major label we could've been a household name." Dave is amazed that the reputation has held up: "We thought we had some good music, but we certainly never thought of *Dead Man* having fans 40 years later. We were too young to be thinking of anything 40 years ahead."

Hopes for the album were high and it caught on almost instantaneously in Houston and the surrounding areas, becoming a #1 seller in Texas. Dave recalls a lot of fun as the band got on the road to promote the release. "Even the rough times seem like they were fun now that we look back on them. When we played our first major concert in Austin, we slept at some crash pad with mattresses all around the floor. Dinky motels were an improvement after that. But things eventually got better. On the road we had to deal with a lot of people who didn't think much of our long hair, but the fans at our shows were great!" It was not long after that their deal with Mainstream Records came about. "We kept playing all around Texas, selling our album, and improving our stage show. It was a sudden announcement when we

heard we had a deal with Mainstream." Ray recalls hopes were sky high, "That was the original label of Janis Joplin and The Amboy Dukes, so we thought everything was going to be great."

However, what happened next perhaps ripped the heart out of the band, as Dave explains. "We were blowing people away with our live concerts, which were mainly music from the *Dead Man* album. We were initially thrilled to get the deal with Mainstream but we thought we were going to record a better version of *Dead Man*. When they said they wanted all new material, we had to scramble to throw

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together an album's worth of songs from various ideas that we hadn't really spent much time on at all." The self-titled second album has a few stand-out tracks, such as 'I Saw A Killing' and the stunning guitar work of 'I'm Getting On', as well as a re-recording of an early track, 'Feeling Good', but there were several weaker moments on the LP upon which the band appears to be completely neutered. Dave ruminates over what went wrong. "Doug had become so busy with our manager trying to run things that he was a lot less interested in playing the drums. We were playing shows all the time and didn't need to rehearse for that, but we weren't developing new material. That's what hurt us with the Mainstream sessions. It was depressing to

have our second album be so weak in comparison to *Dead Man*."

It was not long after that the band split up. Pete and Ray formed a band called Stone Axe that recorded one 45. This would be the end of the story were it not for the band getting back together some 10 years later. Dave explains, "I was organizing a musicians' co-op to produce our own records and concerts. At one of these co-op produced shows, Pete and Ray showed up and we got on stage for an impromptu set of a few songs. That led to a serious effort to put the band back together again. We had Jerry (from Stone Axe) on drums. We resurrected the Hookah label and put out two 45s (in '79)." The band have regrouped in '89 for the *Son Of Dead Man* album as well as reunion shows since then and their legend shows little sign of abating. "It's always been flattering that so many people enjoy our music. I was surprised when the first bootlegs of Josefus appeared in the '80s, but that served to keep the band in front of more people through the years," muses Dave. "The continued reissues of *Dead Man* show how well that music stands the test of time." Leesa is similarly impressed, "When I heard the *Dead Man* LP for the first time it reminded me of the music I'd grown up listening to. I've always been a huge Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin and Cream fan. Josefus fit right in with them. The heaviness of the music, mixed with the blues, really sucked me in. I wanted to keep the heavy acid-rock style alive."

Ray sums up why he's loved every minute of his time with Josefus. "Just the love of music which came naturally for me. And all the women were pretty nice, too."

Visit www.josefusmusic.com for more about the band's history and recent projects.

