

PELL MELL

Rhyming Guitars EP (Indoor) 1982 (SST) 1990
The Live Cassette [tape] (no label) 1982
For Years We Stood Clearly as One Thing [tape] (K) 1985
The Bumper Crop (SST) 1988
Flow (SST) 1992
Interstate (DGC) 1995

STEVE FISK

Kiss This Day Goodbye [tape] (A.R.P.H.) 1982
'Til the Night Closes In [tape] (K) 1986
448 Deathless Days (SST) 1987
One More Valley [tape] (K) 1988
Over and Thru the Night: A 10-Year Retrospective
1980-1987 (K) 1993

Pell Mell has often been compared to such early rock instrumental figures as Link Wray and Duane Eddy, even though the band's shimmering keyboards and guitar sound owe little stylistic allegiance to such supposed forebears. In one respect, however, the comparison is apt: while most modern- or prog-rock instrumental groups favor abstract composition over articulated songwriting, Pell Mell's best material—like that of Wray and Eddy—sounds like genuine *songs*, songs that swing and move, songs that build, peak and fall, songs that just happen to not have lyrics or vocals.

Since the group first coalesced in Portland, Oregon, around 1980, Pell Mell's members—the most nationally prominent of whom is keyboard player Steve Fisk, who joined in 1983—have come and gone over the years, with most of the lineups scattered around various northwestern and California cities. (Founding drummer Bob Beerman and bassist Greg Freeman have been in place the longest; both they and Fisk are on **The Bumper Crop**, a collection of tracks from '83 and '84 that overlaps, song-wise, **For Years We Stood Clearly as One Thing**.) Geographical impediment has led the group to write its songs by mail—someone will get an idea, lay it down on tape and mail the tape to a bandmate, who in turn overdubs his ideas and so on, until the tune is completed. When enough material has been compiled in this manner, Pell Mell convenes, finishes the songs and records them.

Pell Mell's 1980s sound, interesting but inconsistent, received a bit of a makeover when guitarist Dave Spalding joined the band in time for 1992's **Flow** album. Spalding not only recharged the group's songwriting batteries (he's credited with seven of the album's eleven tunes), he also redirected their instrumental focus from keyboards to guitars. The result is an album full of songs that are crisp and sharp where some previous Pell Mell efforts had meandered and dragged. Highly recommended.

The success of **Flow** helped make Pell Mell one of the more intriguing major-label signings of the 1990s—who could have imagined Geffen being interested in an all-instrumental group? The resulting album, 1995's **Interstate**, is a solid continuation of **Flow**'s sound, although it has less consistently stellar material.

Beyond the intermittent confines of Pell Mell, the Louisiana-born, Los Angeles-bred and Seattle-based Fisk has had an enormous, influential and inconspicuous career. His long list of credits includes production of records by Soundgarden, Screaming Trees, Beat Happening and many others, scores for independent films, the music for Steven Jesse Bernstein's album, the band Pigeonhed and collaborations with early Pell Mell guitarist Bill Owen (as Duck Hunt), Negativland and Greg Ginn.

The retrospective **Over and Thru the Night**, a meandering collection of small-scale weirdness compiled from Fisk's cassette albums, displays several hinged sides of his studio mind: layers of cinematic and political found-sound loops, effects, music, electronic beats, tape manipulation, uncleared song samples (A Flock of Seagulls' "I Ran" on 1981's "X Mass," the Beatles' "Taxman" on 1986's "Taxman," Creedence's "Keep on Chooglin'" on 1987's "You Used Me"). Intriguing, occasionally amusing and good for use in answering-machine and party tapes, this short decade is not exactly an artistic achievement for the ages. [pl/i]

See also *Steven Jesse Bernstein, Brad*.