



Pylon
Pylon Box

Though initially together for a short while—only four years, 1979 until 1983—Pylon exerted an outsized impact on their hometown of Athens, Georgia, as well as on the larger American music underground. Locally, they were the first band to connect the local party-rock scene with the art school scene at the University of Georgia. Before they even picked up musical instruments, they were painters and sculptors and gallery tricksters who applied their classroom lessons to rock and roll. After the B-52's moved to New York, Pylon proved a small Southern town like Athens could maintain an active scene and produce important bands.

The band succeeded because it allowed each personality to shine through with eccentricities intact: Curtis Crowe's hyperactive and disruptive drumming; Michael Lachowski's wittily minimalist basslines; Randy Bewley's startlingly eloquent guitar exclamations; and Vanessa Briscoe Hay's whirling-dervish vocals. "We saw them very early, and they were absolutely amazing," says Mike Mills, bass player for R.E.M., a band that is by its own admission deeply indebted to Pylon. "They were melodic and driving and machinelike in a really good way. And very human. It was all so new to us. Pylon made us want to be better."

Before they were a band, they were students. Randy, Michael, Curtis, and Vanessa were all enrolled at art school at the University of Georgia: four kids invigorated by big ideas about art and creativity and society. Randy and Michael started teaching themselves to play their instruments and practiced at their studio space in downtown Athens, which they rented from Curtis. In addition to studying art, he was a budding entrepreneur who had renovated two floors of the building, sharing the top floors with a roommate. After hearing two of his tenants jamming for hours on end, he decided to offer his services on drums.

They had a band, but still needed a singer. After auditioning a few friends and even playing along to an old LP called *Train Your Bird in Stereo*, they asked their friend Vanessa to try out. On Valentine's Day 1979, she brought over a box of cookies and sang

along with some of their rough compositions. “They played a song once, and I listened to it,” she recalls. “Then they went through it again and I tried to make the lyrics fit the music. But they couldn’t hear what I was doing. It was too loud.”

It was less a band, however, than an art project, which meant they had very specific goals in mind as well as an expiration date. “Our only goal is to play in NYC at least once,” Michael wrote in a letter to his old art professor. “After we play there, we will decide on the basis of the response (esp. if the press writes a mention) whether to quit or continue. But after NY it won’t hurt me at all to sell my amp and hang my guitar on the wall... We are not musicians, we do not like to ‘jam’ or even practice, we only want to perform—we only care for the product, not the process.”

“We had never taken it seriously,” says Curtis. “And we didn’t want to take it seriously because it looked like a lot of work, learning how to notate music. We were artists, really. We were gonna be painters. Being a musician looked like a lot of fun and a great way to travel and visit people. We were just tourists. We were just passing through.”

It didn’t take them very long to accomplish their primary goal. After only a handful of shows—including a memorable live debut upstairs at Chapter Three Records in Athens where they rocked so hard they almost brought the floor crashing down—Pylon managed to book a gig in New York opening for Gang of Four. It was only their second performance outside of Athens, and their favorite music rag took no notice. However, Glenn O’Brien, who’d championed the B-52s at *Interview* magazine, was smitten. He wrote an admiring review and closed with the assertion, “These kids listen to dub for breakfast.”

Pylon were flattered but didn’t know what that meant. So they wrote a song about it. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Vanessa declares at the beginning of “Dub,” before exclaiming on the chorus, “We eat dub for breakfast.” She runs the words together violently, shifting the accent back and forth, until it becomes oddly hypnotic: a peculiarly exuberant call to arms. It became the B-side to their first single, “Cool.” As Michael draws dotted lines with his bass and Curtis creates a taut circular rhythm on his drums, Vanessa exclaims, “There are these shapes which talk to me!” With Randy’s guitar scattering the geometry, Pylon take the pieces of rock and roll and rearrange them, turning that refrain into a call to arms: “Everything is, everything is, everything is *cool!*” The single was released in 1980 on the Atlanta-based DB Records (the same label that had issued the B-52s’ first single, “Rock Lobster,” the year before) and in 2020 was named one of the “100 Greatest Debut Singles of All Time” by *Rolling Stone*.

Pylon soon scored the cover of *New York Rocker*—their favorite music rag and what they perceived as the pinnacle of success—but they were having far too much fun to make good on their promise to break up the band. So they just kept going. They recorded their debut full-length, *Gyrate*, at Stone Mountain Studios outside Atlanta, tracking live in the studio with a minimum of takes—not out of some adherence to a punk aesthetic but because that’s the only way they knew how to play the songs. As a result, the album captures the frantic urgency of their live shows and remains one of the finest records by an Athens band.

For their follow-up, they traveled up to Mitch Easter’s Drive-In Studio in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where R.E.M. had just recorded *Chronic Town*. Working with Chris Stamey and Gene Holder from the dB’s, they gleefully pulled their songs apart and put them back together in new shapes, revealing a band of self-proclaimed non-musicians who had transformed gradually but noticeably into *real* musicians. And it contains one of their finest songs, the jittery anthem “Crazy,” with Randy’s watery guitar riffs mixing with Michael’s dirty bass lines and Vanessa trying to drag herself out of the Georgia mud.

Chomp was barely off the press when Pylon were booked to open a run of dates for a hot new Irish band called U2 (after previously playing two arena shows with them in the month leading to the album release). Most bands would have jumped at the opportunity, but Pylon were skeptical. At a critical point in the life of Pylon, they opted to become a cult band rather than stretch their defining philosophy too far. “There were a lot of people putting pressure on us about what we were supposed to do or what we had to do,” says Vanessa. “It wasn’t sitting well with us. We don’t have to do anything. It was a good life decision. And it was our decision. We made it together and we went out at the top of our game.” Pylon played their final show at the Mad Hatter on December 1, 1983.

By then they had already helped shape the Athens scene, inspiring a new wave of bands like Love Tractor and Oh-Ok (featuring Michael Stipe’s sister Lynda). R.E.M. continued singing Pylon’s praises in interviews and even covered “Crazy” for the B-side of “Driver 8.” That, along with their appearance in the 1987 documentary *Athens, Ga.: Inside/Out*, fed the band’s legend as local heroes even after they had split. As the four friends went about their lives—Vanessa as a nurse, Michael as an artist and magazine publisher, Curtis as the founder of the legendary venue the 40 Watt and later as a construction coordinator in the film industry, and Randy as an elementary school art teacher—they would reunite their band a handful of times over the next few decades.

A teenager named Corin Tucker traveled all the way from the Pacific Northwest and caught one of those shows: “Vanessa was so lively onstage, and she gave this really visceral, physical performance that was different from anything I’d ever seen before. Seeing this band that was fronted by a woman who was such a protagonist onstage was so exciting to me.” She went home and immediately formed her own band, and a few years later launched Sleater-Kinney with Carrie Brownstein (who’s also a huge Pylon fan).

When Randy died suddenly in 2009, the band didn’t even consider going on without him. They all understood Pylon was the sum of its four distinctive parts. But Vanessa continues to front Pylon Reenactment Society, which uses Pylon as a guiding star to perform old songs and write new ones for a new generations of fans. “A lot of younger fans have discovered the band either on their own or through friends or maybe even through their parents. When we play shows, there’s a much younger audience and then there’s the audience that’s my age.”

“We fully intended Pylon to be an almost seasonal thing that we were gonna do for a minute and then get on with our lives,” says Curtis. “But it just never went away. It still doesn’t go away. There’s a new subterranean class of kids that are coming into this kind of music, and they’re just now discovering Pylon. That blows my mind. We didn’t see that coming.”