

MC5

MC5 was an American rock band from Lincoln Park, Michigan, formed in 1964. The original band line-up consisted of vocalist Rob Tyner, guitarists Wayne Kramer and Fred "Sonic" Smith, bassist Michael Davis, and drummer Dennis Thompson. "Crystallizing the counterculture movement at its most volatile and threatening", according to *AllMusic* critic Stephen Thomas Erlewine, the MC5's leftist political ties and anti-establishment lyrics and music positioned them as emerging innovators of the punk movement in the United States. Their loud, energetic style of back-to-basics rock and roll included elements of garage rock, hard rock, blues rock, and psychedelic rock.

MC5 had a promising beginning which earned them a January 1969 cover appearance in *Rolling Stone* and a story written by Eric Ehrmann before their debut album was released. They developed a reputation for energetic and polemical live performances, one of which was recorded as their 1969 debut album *Kick Out the Jams*. Their initial run was short-lived, though. In 1972, just three years after their debut record, the band came to an end. MC5 was often cited as one of the most important American hard rock groups of their era. Their three albums are regarded by many as classics, and their song "Kick Out the Jams" is widely covered.

Tyner died of a heart attack in late 1991 at the age of 46. Smith also died of a heart attack, in 1994 at the age of 45. The remaining three members of the band reformed in 2003 with The Dictators' singer Handsome Dick Manitoba as its new vocalist, and this reformed line-up occasionally performed live over the next nine years until Davis died of liver failure in February 2012 at the age of 68. MC5 were nominated for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, in 2002, 2016 and 2018.

First incarnation

Early years

The origins of MC5 can be traced to the friendship between guitarists Wayne Kramer and Fred Smith. Friends since their teen years, they were both fans of R&B music, blues, Chuck Berry, Dick Dale, The Ventures, and what would later be called garage rock: they adored any music with speed, energy and a rebellious attitude. Each guitarist/singer formed and led a rock group (Smith's Vibratones and Kramer's Bounty Hunters). As members of both groups left for college or straight jobs, the most committed members eventually united (under Kramer's leadership and the "Bounty Hunters" name) with Billy Vargo on guitar and Leo LeDuc on drums (at this point Smith played bass),^[7] and were popular and successful enough in and around Detroit that the musicians were able to quit their day jobs and make a living from the group.

Kramer felt they needed a manager, which led him to Rob Derminer, a few years older than the others, and deeply involved in Detroit's hipster and left-wing political scenes. Derminer originally auditioned as a bass guitarist (a role which he held briefly in 1964, with Smith switching to guitar to replace Vargo and with Bob Gaspar replacing LeDuc), though they quickly realized that his talents could be better used as a lead singer: Though not conventionally attractive and rather paunchy by traditional frontman standards, he nonetheless had a commanding stage presence, and a booming baritone voice that evidenced his abiding love of American soul and gospel music. Derminer renamed himself Rob Tyner (after

Coltrane's pianist McCoy Tyner). Tyner also invented their new name, MC5: it reflected their Detroit roots (it was short for "Motor City Five"). In some ways the group was similar to other garage bands of the period, composing soon-to-be historic workouts such as "Black to Comm" during their mid-teens in the basement of the home of Kramer's mother. Upon Tyner's switch from bassist to vocalist, he was initially replaced by Patrick Burrows, however the line-up was stabilised in 1965 by the arrival of Michael Davis and Dennis Thompson to replace Burrows and Gaspar respectively.

The music also reflected Smith and Kramer's increasing interest in free jazz—the guitarists were inspired by the likes of Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra and late period John Coltrane, and tried to imitate the ecstatic sounds of the squealing, high-pitched saxophonists they adored. MC5 even later opened for a few U.S. midwest shows for Sun Ra, whose influence is obvious in "Starship". Kramer and Smith were also deeply inspired by Sonny Sharrock, one of the few electric guitarists working in free jazz, and they eventually developed a unique interlocking style that was like little heard before: Kramer's solos often used a heavy, irregular vibrato, while Smith's rhythms contained an uncommon explosive energy, including patterns that conveyed great excitement, as evidenced in "Black to Comm" and many other songs.

Success in Detroit

Playing almost nightly any place they could in and around Detroit, MC5 quickly earned a reputation for their high-energy live performances and had a sizeable local following, regularly drawing sellout audiences of 1000 or more. Contemporary rock writer Robert Bixby stated that the sound of MC5 was like "a catastrophic force of nature the band was barely able to control", while Don McLeese notes that fans compared the aftermath of an MC5 performance to the delirious exhaustion experienced after "a street rumble or an orgy". (McLeese, 57)

Having released a cover of Them's "I Can Only Give You Everything" backed with original composition "One of the Guys" on the tiny AMG label over a year earlier, in early 1968 their second single was released by Trans-Love Energies on A-Square records (though without the knowledge of that label's owner Jeep Holland). Housed in a striking picture sleeve, it comprised two original songs: "Borderline" and "Looking at You". The first pressing sold out in a few weeks, and by year's end it had gone through more pressings totaling several thousand copies. A third single that coupled "I Can Only Give You Everything" with the original "I Just Don't Know" appeared at about the same time on the AMG label, as well.

That summer MC5 toured the U.S. east coast, which generated an enormous response, with the group often overshadowing the more famous acts they opened up for: McLeese writes that when opening for Big Brother and the Holding Company audiences regularly demanded multiple encores of MC5, and at a memorable series of concerts, Cream — one of the leading hard rock groups of the era — "left the stage vanquished". (McLeese, 65) This same east coast tour led to the rapturous aforementioned *Rolling Stone* cover story that praised MC5 with nearly evangelistic zeal, and also to an association with the radical group Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers.

MC5 became the leading band in a burgeoning hard rock scene, serving as mentors to fellow South-Eastern Michigan bands The Stooges and The Up, and major record labels expressed an interest in the group. As related in the notes for reissued editions of the Stooges' debut album, Danny Fields of Elektra Records came to Detroit to see MC5. At Kramer's

recommendation, he went to see The Stooges. Fields was so impressed that he ended up offering contracts to both bands in September 1968. They were the first hard rock groups signed to the fledgling Elektra.

Radical political affiliations

According to Kramer, MC5 of this period was politically influenced by the Marxism of the Black Panther Party and Fred Hampton, and poets of the Beat Generation such as Allen Ginsberg and Ed Sanders, or Modernist poets like Charles Olson. Black Panther Party founder Huey P. Newton prompted John Sinclair to found the White Panthers, a militant leftist organization of white people working to assist the Black Panthers. Shortly after, Sinclair was arrested for possession of marijuana.

Under the "guidance" of John Sinclair (who dubbed his enterprise "Trans-Love Energies" and refused to be categorized as a traditional manager), MC5 were soon involved in left-wing politics: Sinclair was active with the White Panther Party and *Fifth Estate*. In their early career, MC5 had a politically provocative stage show: they would appear onstage toting unloaded rifles, and at the climax of the performance, an unseen "sniper" would shoot down Tyner. The band members were also all using the drugs LSD and marijuana.

The band performed as part of the protests against the Vietnam War at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago that were broken up by a police riot. The group's appearance at the convention is also notable for their lengthy performance. In an interview featured in the documentary *Get Up, Stand Up*, Kramer reported that while many musicians were scheduled to perform at a day-long concert, only the MC5 initially appeared. The MC5 played for over eight hours straight. Of the other scheduled performers, Kramer stated in *Get Up, Stand Up* that only Neil Young actually arrived, though due to the chaos at the convention, Young didn't perform. Dennis Thompson asserted years later that "Country Joe" McDonald (Country Joe and the Fish) was also present at the scene (Thompson, 2000). Other performers at the convention included the protest folk singer Phil Ochs.

Recordings

Kick Out the Jams

MC5 earned national attention with their first album, *Kick Out the Jams*, recorded live on October 30 and 31, 1968, at Detroit's Grande Ballroom. Elektra executive Jac Holzman and producer Bruce Botnick recognized that MC5 were at their best when playing for a receptive audience. Containing such songs as the proto-punk classics "Kick Out the Jams" and "Rama Lama Fa Fa Fa", the spaced-out "Starship" (co-credited to Sun Ra because the lyrics were partly cribbed from one of Ra's poems), and an extended cover of John Lee Hooker's "Motor City is Burning" wherein Tyner praises the role of Black Panther snipers during the Detroit Insurrection of 1967. Critic Mark Deming writes that *Kick out the Jams* "is one of the most powerfully energetic live albums ever made ... this is an album that refuses to be played quietly."

The album caused some controversy due to Sinclair's inflammatory liner notes and the title track's rallying cry of "Kick out the jams, motherfucker!" According to Kramer, the band recorded this as "Kick out the jams, brothers and sisters!" for the single released for radio play; Tyner claimed this was done without group consensus (Thompson, 2000). The edited version also appeared in some LP copies, which also withdrew Sinclair's excitable comments.

The album was released in January 1969; reviews were mixed, but the album was relatively successful, quickly selling over 100,000 copies and peaking at #30 on the *Billboard* album chart in May 1969 during a 23-week stay.

When Hudson's, a Detroit-based department store chain, refused to stock *Kick Out the Jams* due to the obscenity, MC5 responded with a full page advertisement in the local underground magazine *Fifth Estate* saying "Stick Alive with the MC5, and Fuck Hudson's!", prominently including the logo of MC5's label, Elektra Records, in the ad. Hudson's pulled all Elektra records from their stores, and in the ensuing controversy, Jac Holzman, the head of Elektra, dropped the band from their contract. MC5 then signed with Atlantic Records.

Back in the USA

Their second album, *Back in the USA*, produced by future Bruce Springsteen mentor Jon Landau, virtually provided a prototype for punk rock with its short, fast, hard-edged angry guitar rock. This record was released on Atlantic label, also explaining a vastly different production and marketing effort. The band sounded radically different from *Kick*, and McLeese writes that except for Tyner's vocals, they were "barely recognizable as the same band." (McLeese, 96) The second album also featured very different production from the first — MC5 now sounded compressed and somewhat limited in their sonic palette compared to their earlier era — band members later said that Landau was overbearing and heavy-handed in production, trying to shape the group to his own liking.

Reviews were again mixed; however, sales were mediocre (it only peaked at #137 in the American charts in March 1970 during a seven-week stay) and the band's tours were not as well-received as before. Exhaustion was partly to blame, from the band's heavy touring schedule and increasingly heavy drug use.

They had fallen out with Sinclair, as well, and were conspicuous by not being allowed to play at the December, 1971 John Sinclair Freedom Rally to protest his incarceration on marijuana possession, even though they were at the gig.

High Time

Their third album, *High Time*, produced by Geoffrey Haslam and recorded by Artie Fields, would also prove influential on 1970s hard rock bands. The album was poorly promoted, and sales were worse than ever, but *High Time* was the best-reviewed of the band's original records upon its initial release. The group had much more creative control, and were very satisfied with the results. This release saw the band stretch out with longer, more experimental pieces like "Future/Now" and the Sun Ra-influenced "Skunk (Sonically Speaking)".

Late career and disbandment

Both *Back in the USA* and *High Time* lost money for Atlantic Records, which dropped the band. Early in 1972, the band toured Europe, playing dates in England including Cambridge with Syd Barrett's band Stars and Canterbury with former Tyrannosaurus Rex percussionist Steve Peregrin Took, as well as a TV session in Bremen, Germany for *Beat Club*.

On February 13, 1972, Michael Davis left the band (he was using heroin and was all but forced out by the others), and was replaced by a series of bassists (Steve Moorhouse, Derek Hughes, and Ray Craig). The remaining members recorded two new songs — "Gold Rush"

(also known as "Gold" and "Train Music") and "Inside Out" — in London shortly afterwards for the soundtrack of a film called *Gold*. This would be the band's final recording session.

The group limped along a while longer, eventually reduced to Kramer and Smith touring and playing with Ritchie Dharma on drums and Derek Hughes on bass, playing R&B covers as much as their original material.

MC5 reunited for a farewell show on December 31, 1972 at the Grande Ballroom. The venue that had only a few years before hosted over a thousand eager fans now had a few dozen people, and, distraught, Kramer left the stage after a few songs. The band dissolved not long after the event.

Post-break up

Fred "Sonic" Smith formed a new group called Ascension, consisting of Smith on guitar, Thompson on drums, Davis on piano, and to replace Davis on bass a local working bass player, John Hefty, was brought in. They assembled a set of mostly original music and a few R&B and rock covers. Smith said the name Ascension symbolized the music and the band ascending to new heights and in new directions. They brought in a new manager, Chato Hill. They played only a few live performances and disbanded after less than a year. One live recording was made but never edited or released.

After this, Smith formed a new group called Sonic's Rendezvous Band, married singer Patti Smith, retired from music to raise a family, and died in 1994. Sonic's Rendezvous Band released only the "City Slang" single during their initial time as a group, though later recordings were released posthumously, and a reconstituted Rendezvous Band (including original member Scott Morgan, of The Rationals and a newly added Deniz Tek of Radio Birdman) reunited in tribute years afterward.

Wayne Kramer made scattered appearances on other people's records before being incarcerated for drug offenses. While in prison in Kentucky, Kramer was unexpectedly reunited with MC5 bassist Michael Davis, also behind bars on a drug charge. After his parole, Kramer worked straight jobs for several years and focused on kicking drugs. He played with Johnny Thunders for a time in the band Gang War; in the early 1990s, he returned to the music industry, and has released several well-received albums.

Rob Tyner performed under his own name for many years but also performed under "The MC5" for some live gigs for a brief period, though he was the only active original member involved. He also collaborated with Eddie and the Hot Rods, releasing a 7" with them in 1979. During the mid-1980s, Tyner produced a single for Detroit band Vertical Pillows, and occasionally made brief guest appearances during some of their live shows, singing MC5 covers. Tyner became a successful producer, manager and promoter in Detroit, and released the warmly-reviewed *Blood Brothers* album in 1990, a year before his death in September, 1991.

Michael Davis joined Detroit band Destroy All Monsters for several years in the late 70s /early 80s; the band broke up in 1983. Dennis Thompson played with various bands, including The New Order, New Race, The Motor City Bad Boys, and The Secrets.

Second incarnation

First reunions

The first real public reunion of the band after their recording years as a group was as a four-piece, at a performance celebrating the life of the late Rob Tyner, a concert event at the State Theater in Detroit MI on February 22, 1992. The event was heavily attended, and included The Rationals, Scott Richardson (SRC), The Romantics, Dee Dee Ramone, The Cult, and other musicians. The band on this evening was unbilled, but their appearance had been rumored—Wayne Kramer was the only group member advertised—and the set lasted about thirty minutes. The recording of this show remains unreleased.

2003 saw the three surviving members of MC5 — Kramer, bassist Michael Davis, and drummer Dennis Thompson (Smith had died in 1994) — performing as the MC5 at the 100 Club in London^[19] with Fred "Sonic" Smith's place temporarily being taken by Nicke Andersson of The Hellacopters, vocals at that time being taken variously by David Vanian of The Damned, Lemmy of Motörhead, Ian Astbury of The Cult, and singer Kate O'Brien, as well as seeing Charles Moore and Buzzy Jones reprise their roles in the brass section from the *High Time* album.

In 2004, the band set out on an extensive world tour using the name DKT/MC5. As with the 100 Club concert, a host of special guests joined them on tour such as Mark Arm of Mudhoney, Nicke Royale of The Hellacopters, Evan Dando of The Lemonheads, Marshall Crenshaw, Deniz Tek of Radio Birdman, Lisa Kekaula of the Bellrays, and others.

Reformation

After February 2005, MC5 stabilized into a new lineup, consisting of Kramer, Thompson, and Davis, with Handsome Dick Manitoba, vocalist of the 1970s New York punk band The Dictators, singing lead for the band. This lineup continued to exist until Michael Davis' death in February 2012, upon which the band dissolved.

In May 2006, Davis injured his back in a motorcycle accident. In August 2007, Davis joined the Lords of Altamont on bass. He also founded and led the Michael H. Davis Music Is Revolution Foundation, dedicated to supporting music education programs in public schools. Davis died of liver failure in February 2012 at the age of 68.

In May 2018, Wayne Kramer announced an MC5 tour to celebrate the 50h anniversary of *Kick Out the Jams*, with a line-up including himself, plus rock stalwarts Kim Thayil, Brendan Canty, Doug Pinnick, Marcus Durant, Don Was and Matt Cameron.

Personnel

Members[edit]

Classic line-up

- Wayne Kramer - guitars, vocals (1963-December 1972, 1992, 2003–2012)
- Fred "Sonic" Smith - guitars, vocals (1964-December 1972, 1992), bass (1963-1964; died 1994)
- Rob Tyner - vocals (1965-November

Other members

- Leo LeDuc - drums (1963-1964)
- Billy Vargo - guitars (1963-1964)
- Bob Gaspar - drums (1964–1965)
- Patrick Burrows - bass (1964–1965)
- Steve "Annapurna" Moorhouse - bass

- 1972), bass (1964; died 1991)
- **Michael Davis** - bass (1965-February 1972, 1992, 2003-2012; died 2012)
 - **Dennis Thompson** - drums (1965-November 1972, 1992, 2003–2012)

- (February 1972-March 1972)
- **Derek Hughes** - bass (March 1972-April 1972, June 1972-December 1972)
 - **Ray Craig** - bass (April 1972-June 1972)
 - **Ritchie Dharma** - drums (November 1972-December 1972)
 - **Handsome Dick Manitoba** - vocals