

## Addicted to Peter Lorre (That Voice, Those Eyes)



Damon Winter/The New York Times

Jack Terricloth, center, and his band, World/Inferno Friendship Society.

By [BEN SISARIO](#)

Published: January 7, 2009

Jack Terricloth was practicing his [Peter Lorre](#) impression.

### Multimedia

Sitting at a darkened video booth one recent afternoon at the [Paley Center for Media](#) (the former Museum of Television and Radio) in Midtown, he watched a series of obscure television appearances by Lorre from the 1950s and '60s, carefully observing every whine and snivel.

“Oh, *yesss*,” he muttered in a mousy Germanic accent, hunching over and twiddling his fingers anxiously. “I am *hee-dee-ous!*”

Lorre’s craven characters in films like “M” and “Casablanca” have been fodder for comedians for decades, but Jack Terricloth’s aims are more ambitious. As leader of the World/Inferno Friendship Society, a Brooklyn band that mixes Weimar-style cabaret and roisterous ska-punk, he is the driving force behind “Addicted to Bad Ideas: Peter Lorre’s 20th Century,” a self-described punk songspiel that is part of the [Public Theater](#)’s Under the Radar festival, including a performance at Webster Hall in the East Village on Friday.

Tall and slim, fond both of dandyish dark suits and heavy, mosh-pit-ready boots, Jack Terricloth looks nothing like the doughy and goggle-eyed Lorre. And despite how much he enjoys imitating Lorre’s voice — he says he sometimes falls asleep listening to recordings of Lorre on the radio — his performance in “Addicted to Bad Ideas” is less impersonation than sympathetic interpretation.

“I find Peter Lorre a strangely charismatic, extremely creepy person, which I think most punk rockers can identify with,” said Jack Terricloth, 38, who was born Peter Ventantonio and grew up in Bridgewater, N.J. “It’s the lure of the other. He’s the underdog, the outsider.”

Emphasizing that outsider status, the show portrays Lorre as a misunderstood antihero whose life reflected broad political and social tumult. Born in 1904 in what is now Slovakia, Lorre, who was Jewish, had a promising early career in Germany working with [Bertolt Brecht](#) and [Fritz Lang](#), but fled Nazi Germany for London and eventually Hollywood, where he was unable to escape typecasting as a sinister, usually foreign,

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Jack Terricloth, the driving force behind “Addicted to Bad Ideas: Peter Lorre’s 20th Century.”



The Museum of Film and Television, Berlin

Peter Lorre in Fritz Lang’s 1931 movie, “M.”

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villain. By the time of those 1950s television gigs he often seemed a caricature of himself. He died in 1964.

“Lorre is an excellent way to examine the 20th century historically,” Jack Terricloth said, “and the concerns and problems of every artist who works in the culture wars.”

Directed by Jay Scheib, “Addicted to Bad Ideas: Peter Lorre’s 20th Century” is based on the band’s 2007 album of the same title, on Chunksaah Records. The music veers from piano- and guitar-driven rock to tense chamber arrangements, and the lyrics draw from Lorre’s films and Stephen D. Youngkin’s 2005 biography, “The Lost One: A Life of Peter Lorre.” (“I don’t act, I just make faces,” goes one song.)

But Mr. Scheib, a theater professor at [M.I.T.](#) whose multimedia work “This Place Is a Desert” was in Under the Radar two years ago, said the show was not strictly biographical. “It ended up being more about how the band’s live show is influenced by Lorre’s life and times than any kind of a biopic,” he said.

World/Inferno Friendship Society exists almost completely outside the mainstream but has a following that many bands would envy, with devoted fans (they call themselves Infernites) communicating through an active forum on the band’s Web site ([worldinferno.com](#)).

“Addicted to Bad Ideas” has quickly raised the group’s profile, however, adding highbrow arts institutions to its usually unglamorous tour itinerary of bars and clubs. In the fall the show opened the Peak Performances series at [Montclair State University](#) in New Jersey, and in May it will have a short run at the [Spoleto Festival U.S.A.](#) in Charleston, S.C.

If the idea of a raucous rock band performing a semiclassical song cycle in a proscenium theater sounds somewhat incongruous, that is exactly the kind of challenge that World/Inferno Friendship Society has been cultivating for more than a decade. The group’s eight current players — membership has been somewhat fluid — play saxophones and accordion in addition to guitar and drums, and dress in suits and gowns. Jack Terricloth sings in a smarmy slur and maintains a constant devilish smirk.

“We are a punk-rock band, and we play punk-rock shows, but our music couldn’t be more different,” he said. “Kids see us and think: ‘Guys in suits and makeup at a hardcore show? Come on.’ But we always have them by the third song, and then we’re something they have to accept about the punk rock scene and about the world. We’ve now entered into the great dialogue that is our culture, which is what any artist should do. I was going to say ‘any good artist,’ but any bad artist too.”

At Montclair State culture clash was part of the idea. The touring contract for “Addicted to Bad Ideas” stipulates that a presenter must make room for a mosh pit, and when fans began tossing themselves around it on the first night, Jedediah Wheeler, the executive director of the series, was at first horrified.

“I thought, ‘Oh my God, this is dangerous,’ ” he said. “But the more I watched, the more I realized that they had tremendous physical respect for each other. It became a dance. I could not believe how beautiful it was.”

The band first performed “Addicted to Bad Ideas” as a cycle at the Spiegel tent in Lower Manhattan in 2006, encouraged by Thomas Kriegsman, who booked the summer music series there and is now the producer of the show. Montclair State gave Mr. Scheib and the band money and space to develop the show, which was first performed at the Live Arts Festival in Philadelphia in 2007.

In conversation Jack Terricloth comes across as a stubborn idealist and a wry cynic. He dropped out of high school to live the itinerant punk life, playing in the band Sticks and Stones before founding the World/Inferno Friendship Society, whose name he will only explain in riddles that he says may not be true. He wrote a chapbook novella, “Bakshish,” and said that although he had no formal experience in acting, “just acting out,” the band could well have ended up a theater troupe. Its first album, “The True Story of the Bridgewater Astral League” (1997), was in the style of a musical.

“There was a point where we could have gone really theater or gone really punk rock,” he said. “We just started touring all the time, and theater seems kind of fey, so we put the theater world aside for a good number of years.”

Now it is becoming a greater part of the band’s repertory, and he said there was more theatrical work to come. The band’s next project, he said, is a punk version of “A Prairie Home Companion.”