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Jack Vartoogian, 1990

Screamin' Jay Hawkins in full character and full cry, in Central Park.

Screamin' Jay Hawkins, 70, Rock's Wild Man

By JON PARELES

Screamin' Jay Hawkins, who howled, whooped, gurgled and shrieked his way through some of the most unhinged performances in rock history, died on Saturday in Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris. He was 70 and lived near Paris.

The cause was multiple organ failure following emergency surgery to treat an aneurysm, The Associated Press reported.

Mr. Hawkins's 1956 hit, "I Put a Spell on You," defined a career built on vocal dementia, imagery lifted from voodoo folklore and B-movies, an anarchic sense of humor and a stage show that raised the stakes on rock 'n' roll theatricality. He took stereotypes of black savagery —

cannibals, witch doctors — and mocked them with gleeful hyperbole. He would arrive on stage in a flaming coffin, wearing a black satin cape and, sometimes, a bone in his nose, clutching a cane topped by a flaming, cigarette-smoking skull named Henry. Snakes, tarantulas, shrunken heads and a crawling hand were also part of the act.

Whether he was singing his own songs or tearing into a sentimental standard, Mr. Hawkins might at any moment jettison the melody for shouts, moans or bursts of gibberish. "I don't sing them," he once said of his songs. "I destroy them."

He was part of a tradition of rhythm-and-blues wild men that also included Little Richard, and he was the precursor of rock showmen like Jimi Hendrix, Alice Cooper, Marilyn Manson and White Zombie.

Jalacy J. Hawkins was born on July 18, 1929, in Cleveland. His mother had seven children, each with a different father. He grew up in foster homes.

"My mama said that out of all the men, my father was the hardest, the meanest and the rottenest," he once said. "She would look at me and say, 'You're no good, you're gonna be just like your father.' I said: 'I'm gonna fool you. I'm gonna make something of myself.'"

He began playing piano as a child and studied opera at the Ohio Conservatory of Music. He was also a boxer and won a Golden Gloves championship in 1943. When he returned to the United States after military service, he wanted a career in opera. "I had hopes that someday I could become a black Mario Lanza or Enrico Caruso," he said.

But to make a living he turned to the jazz and rhythm-and-blues circuit, stretching his voice to imitate the sounds of honking tenor saxophonists. He began working for the jazz guitarist Tiny Grimes as valet and pianist, and in 1951 he made his first single, "Why Did You Waste My Time," backed by Mr. Grimes and his Rockin' Highlanders.

He recorded for Timely and Wing Records, and joined Fats Domino's road band for a short time. In 1956 he planned to record a plaintive ballad, "I Put a Spell on You" for Okeh Records. The producer, Mr. Hawkins said, "bought gin and whiskey, a lot of booze, baby, and got us all drunk in the recording studio."

The unruly, unforgettable results became a hit that was banned by many radio stations for its moans

and grunts. Reveling in his untamed image, he followed up with songs like "Feast of the Mau-Mau" and "Alligator Wine."

The disc jockey and promoter Alan Freed got the idea of bringing Mr. Hawkins onstage in a coffin for a Cleveland concert. Mr. Hawkins once said Freed paid him \$5,000 to persuade him to go through with it, although other accounts say the bonus was \$300. It thrilled the crowd, and the coffin became a regular part of the show. On one multiple bill the Drifters locked Mr. Hawkins inside the coffin; he wriggled until it fell off its stand.

Mr. Hawkins grew tired of having to play what he called "that weird, voodoo, black, screaming Vincent Price image," and in the early 1960's

Operatic ambitions gave way to another musical genre.

he moved to Hawaii, where he bought a bar and tried to settle down. But by the late 60's Mr. Hawkins had resumed performing, playing up his bogeyman image even as he protested that he still hoped to sing opera.

Mr. Hawkins toured regularly in the United States and Europe. He opened the 1980 concert by the Rolling Stones at Madison Square Garden, and Keith Richards produced a remake of "I Put a Spell on You." Movie appearances periodically stoked Mr. Hawkins's career. He was seen in "American Hot Wax" in 1978, "Mystery Train" in 1989 and in "A Rage in Harlem" in 1991. In 1998 he received the Pioneer Award from the Rhythm-and-Blues Foundation.

Unlike many early rock performers, Mr. Hawkins owned the copyright to his songs, including "I Put a Spell on You," which brought royalties when it was recorded by performers including Nina Simone and Creedence Clearwater Revival. In 1997 "I Put a Spell on You" was sampled by the Notorious B.I.G. for "Kick in the Door" on his million-selling album "Life After Death."

"I wrote in my will to cremate me," Mr. Hawkins said. "Fly over the ocean and scatter the dust, so I can be little particles in everybody's eyes, drive everybody crazy the rest of their lives."