

Geriatric Jams

Bob Fleck

1970

It was all so easy back in the '50s—Eisenhower and Dulles had learned a lesson from Korea and kept us busy smelling the reds out from under our own beds while they concentrated on sewing up the Iron Curtain with brinks-manship. And when McCarthy's purges palled, juvenile dee-linquency was off and running with your hub caps (remember, the Teenage Werewolf was just a mixed up kid who couldn't keep out of fights or the clutches of know-it-all shrinks).

At last the world was making sense to everybody, with the help of Hollywood's heroes (Jimmy Stewart bump-kinism), the local paper (will the small businessman survive?) and just a little bit of "I Love Lucy."

Furnishing the rhythm and soul for our solid citizenry (as well as our fantasies) was fledgling rock 'n' roll. Bill Haley blasted in with his Comets, driving the crew-cutted guys and real gone gals to frenzied be-bopping in the aisles of theaters for cripossakes.

But it was O.K. Mom 'n Dad kinda liked the snazzy tempos and were there at record hops with a sawed off ruler making sure their daughters and sons were keeping it clean.

After the dance, though, out by the lake in a '53 Ford, its glass-paks silent and radio whispering more rock 'n' roll, there were no chaperones and it was time to find out whether she did or didn't. The gang at the diner could spot hickeys on her neck from 20 feet away (she'd wear turtlenecks for a week, even in August).

But something happened. Little brother and sister (that's most of us reading this), products of that mass post-war baby-making, took a long, affluent, pampered look at sprouting antiseptic suburbias, and said uh unh, no thanks. For the soul was hollow by 1960. Buddy Holley and James Dean were dead, the rebel without a cause had gotten his. We wanted out.

So the style did a somersault, ending complacency and introducing why not instead of why. We got out.

For a while, pop music mused around with fantastic glittering Telstars and Four Seasons, finally getting kicked in the ass by four strange-looking limeys from Liverpool, not to mention those other sex maniacs, the Stones, who fed us back our own musical history with a nicer accent.

Meanwhile, big brother and sister sat out there in suburbia, trying to stay on the straight and narrow, growing more invisible, each year the Christmas card family photo bearing one more bland little face. Lawrence Welk and Mitch Miller became their style, occasionally stirring decade-old memories with a chorus of "Rockin Robin" or "Some Kinda Wonderful."

Since those first tentative puffs of pot and mind-dazzling acid trips, the culture of why not has gotten old enough to be curious about its musical heritage. And where there's curiosity, there's a concert.

A Rock 'N' Roll ReVival! Why Not? Gawd, everybody'll dig it.

Saturday night. Olympia's ice is thinly boarded over as the audience trickles in. Half of the crowd is mid-30s or so, often there anyway to see hockey games and drink beer. They're unused to the hairy under-30s who've come to dig the latest vogue—nostalgia for the '50s—and the air is dampened with their stiff clothes and uptight determination to have a good time.

Then off go the lights, and a promoter steps up to the mike. “If you can remember,” he intones, starting a litany of ‘50s trivia as the crowd chuckles, audibly remembers, and bursts into applause. Walk a long time ago, it all begins to come back.

A bearded, obscure group does a lifeless medley of old hits, a few vibes pick up here and there.

On come the Coasters, getting into “Searchin,” “Poison Ivy,” and “Charlie Brown.” O.K. things are warming up, even though it’s not the original group, the old songs dipping almost back to pre-Haley R&B.

Next the Shirrels do a set, wearing flowing paisley dresses and shrilling out “Yes, Baby It’s You.” But “Soldier Boy” goes flat. Things just ain’t the same. They break into a chorus line number on the following numbers with a black wildman DJ cavorting around the stage. Something’s missing, it’s a bit too frantic and forced.

Then suddenly the Drifters bounce up crackling with energy. Tune after tune their fine mellow harmony builds and builds. From “Magic Moment” to “On Broadway,” the tension mounts to an incredible blow-off number with the vocalists cutting unbelievable body riffs—splits, duck walks, flips—every spaced-out dance contortion imaginable, all done with flawless timing.

Half-time, the people buzz out and back in to get hit with an eeeeelectric Bo Diddley. The sheer force of his dynamite guitar blows out senses and gets the audience to squirming in their seats. Yeah! Streaked denims and a lawman’s badge on his Stetson hat, he plugs into our crotches and moves us with “Roadrunner” and “Can’t Judge a Book.” An incredible instrumental conversation between bassman and Bo gets us howling with laughter.

Off he goes to bring on Jackie Wilson, ex-Detroit boy made very good in his beige velvets. His voice is incredible, easily moving from lows to soaring highs. Like the others, he too gyrates and twists in incredible pirouette leaps. Exhaustion from just watching (get back, Jagger).

Finally the big moment—living, breathing, exactly preserved as if on ice for 15 years...Bill Haley and The Comets! Hollow body electric axes (trademark curl pasted on his forehead, Haley’s axe is all black), red blazers, and slicked-back hair all surging up and back in perfect unison; ripping out “Shake, Rattle and Roll.” It’s stone be-bop, geriatric rock. They looked like the warm-up band for a George Wallace rally.

The little bassman throws his big string bass up in a contest with the sax player to see who can swing heavier, finally climbing up on his axe, never missing a beat. “Rockin Robin” and “Razzle Dazzle” bring anxious crowds of cops to the exits, fearfully wondering if after all these years, bop-crazed teens might jam the aisles in wild dancing.

For a-night it was almost real again, that good-timey music and dance (now I know where R. Crumb got his truckin’ from—after watching Haley). Almost.

It was the most.

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