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Making a case for musician-turned-lawyer Charlie Pickett

For this Broward-bred, self-styled guitarist turned lawyer, musical success came on his terms.

By Sean Piccoli

Pop Music Writer

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One of the more important albums in Charlie Pickett's musical life is *Live at CBGB's*, a 1976 compilation of bands from New York's embryonic punk scene.

At the time, Pickett lived in Dania Beach and played in a band with his buddies — "mostly in my garage," he says. Real gigs in clubs hadn't yet come their way; they entertained each other covering blues and vintage rock 'n' roll tunes. The mid-'70s mega-rock on the radio — Peter Frampton, Bad Company, Boston — didn't hold their interest.

But Pickett, a guitarist and singer, was also wary of this obscure New York punk record that his friend kept waving at him — until he put it on. Up popped a trashy, retro-sounding combo called Tuff Darts, playing *All for the Love of Rock 'N' Roll*. "And in 90 seconds I realized why I didn't like Boston," says Pickett, "and why it was better to play jacked-up Chuck Berry."

He carried that thought into the '80s, when people across the country got to know Charlie Pickett and the Eggs, a gang of skewed revivalists with a singing, cowboy-looking slide guitarist out front. Pickett never won a rock star-size following, but he still has fans and, two decades later, a legacy that's being committed to CD.

On Tuesday, the 55-year-old musician-turned-lawyer will perform at Fort Lauderdale's Radio-Active Records. The occasion is the release of *Bar Band Americanus: The Best of Charlie Pickett and*, a 19-track anthology from Chicago-based Bloodshot Records.

The label's specialty is hip roots music — a tradition-minded antidote to Top 40. Pickett's old-school leanings have always set him apart, even from the punks and new-wavers who embraced him as one of theirs. To Pickett, according to his biography at the online encyclopedia All Music Guide, "punk rock meant old Rolling Stones and mid-'60s garage rock more than the Ramones and Sex Pistols."

Pickett and his bandmates put out a handful of CDs and EPs in the '80s, including *Cowboy Junkie Au-Go-Go* (1984) and *The Wilderness* (1988), the latter produced by R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck. The

Pickett song *If This Is Love, Can I Get My Money Back?* — written by his cousin — achieved something resembling cult-hit status.

The group (later called the MC3) toured nationally, winning hearts and minds with scorching live shows. Among the quartet was lead guitarist Johnny Salton, who would also develop a following well beyond Florida for his work with Pickett and later with a band called Psycho Daisies.

The more Pickett toured with Salton and the other Eggs, the more he believed in his band's talent and uniqueness, he says. "Because I went all over this country from '83 to '88 ... and you know what I didn't see? Something like us."

He continues, "I saw a lot of bands playing *I Wanna Be Your Dog* with enthusiasm. But ... I didn't see them playing what we do." Pickett was looking, he says, for a band "that [knew] how to swing a blues in a punk-rock club."

Having world-famous R.E.M. as an ally might have helped to raise Pickett's profile. But, as the *Bar Band Americanus* liner notes point out, "not too much attention was paid to something dismissed as a cowpunk Peter Buck side project."

"He was one or two big breaks away from getting up there with guys like George Thorogood, Steve Wynn, Mike Watt, Henry Rollins," writes Jeff Schwier, Pickett's Tampa-based manager (and author of those liner notes), in an e-mail.

Pickett walked away from music not long after *The Wilderness*. He got his college degree in Florida and went on to law school in Michigan, where he met and married his wife, Penny. They have a 12-year-old son, Ty, who's been encouraged to take up guitar but, according to his father, is presently more interested in skateboarding.

Pickett practices law, and plays out now and then. He still writes music. A new track about his wife, called *Penny Instead*, appears on *Bar Band Americanus*.

"We've known each other 16 years; I only had to wait 14 years for a song," Penny jokes.

If one assumes Pickett should have become a midlevel rock star, like Thorogood or Rollins, instead of a lawyer, then his story has a near-miss quality. Pickett offers a different view.

"We did make it," he says of the band. "We did everything but get the money."

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If you go

Charlie Pickett performs at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Radio-Active Records, 1930B E. Sunrise Blvd., Fort Lauderdale, in Gateway Plaza. Free; 954-762-9488 or myspace.com/radio_active_records

Watch and listen

Charlie Pickett performs at SunSentinel.com/pickettsings

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