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Showtime

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The Cichlids will help ring in the New Year with a New Wave concert at Sunrise. See story on Page 31.



Cichlids: 'It's beginning for real now'

By Kenny Schlager

Entertainment Writer

The first rule of rock & roll is that there are no rules. The guitarist with three chords can be as effective as the guitarist with three years at the Juilliard School. Beyond those three chords, the only real essentials are nerve, verve, ambition, imagination and a few good songs.

That was pretty much the sum of the Cichlids' resources when they made their first public appearance June 14 in a parking lot behind the Musicians Exchange in Fort Lauderdale. Mostly, it was nerve.

Just weeks before the debut, the Cichlids were a trio in search of a bassist. Debbie Mascaro, Bobby Tak and Allan Portman decided they'd found the fourth member in the person of Susan Robins. But, truth be told, Susan was more a *bass owner* than a bass player.

"I got my bass when I was 15, but I didn't do anything with it," says Susan. "It was just sitting in a closet. Then someone heard that I had a bass and misunderstood and called me up for an audition.

"They kept calling, so finally I said okay."

Tak remembers the audition: "She had red strings on her bass. We were impressed."

So Susan quit college, rehearsed the songs and became the fourth Cichlid. With her skunk-skin guitar strap, poodle-top hairdo and penchant for tight, bright clothes, she fit right in with her colorful partners. "I learned really fast, I guess."

Though they have always rejected the label, those early Cichlids were a prototypical punk band. Named for an aggressive species of tropical fish known to hatch their eggs in their mouths, the Cichlids embraced a street-tough stance that went to the very roots of rock & roll. But it was never a violent pose, just a defiant one. Defiant of club owners who demanded top-40 sameness and of the local bands that acquiesced. Defiant of the state-of-the-art rock superstars who substituted flash and finesse for imagination and innovation.

Playing on any stage that would have them, the Cichlids delivered short, fast songs in short, fast sets. There were no guitar breaks, no quiet interludes, no long, winding introductions. Tak played drums, sang and barked the names of the songs, Debbie screamed the lyrics, Portman sneered as he strummed his guitar and Susan stood by very cool, chewing her gum, pouting, posing and playing the unimposing bass lines her partners wanted. They looked outrageous in their thrift shop chic outfits and they filled dance floors with equally outrageous fans.

To the cynics in the audience, the Cichlids were a junk band entertaining a crowd of nouveau nuts; to those hungry for something fresh the Cichlids were the first indication that the spirit of bands like the Ramones and the Sex Pistols would finally be felt in South Florida.

Now, just seven months after Susan dragged her bass out of the closet, the Cichlids are a local legend. They may not have changed the face of Gold Coast rock & roll, but they have undeniably altered the underbelly. The band has nearly finished recording an album to be released in late January by South Florida's TK Records, they have played in concert in front of 1,700 people at Gusman Hall, and, if all goes as planned, they will be featured Monday night at Sunrise Musical Theater in the "New Wave New Year's" show.

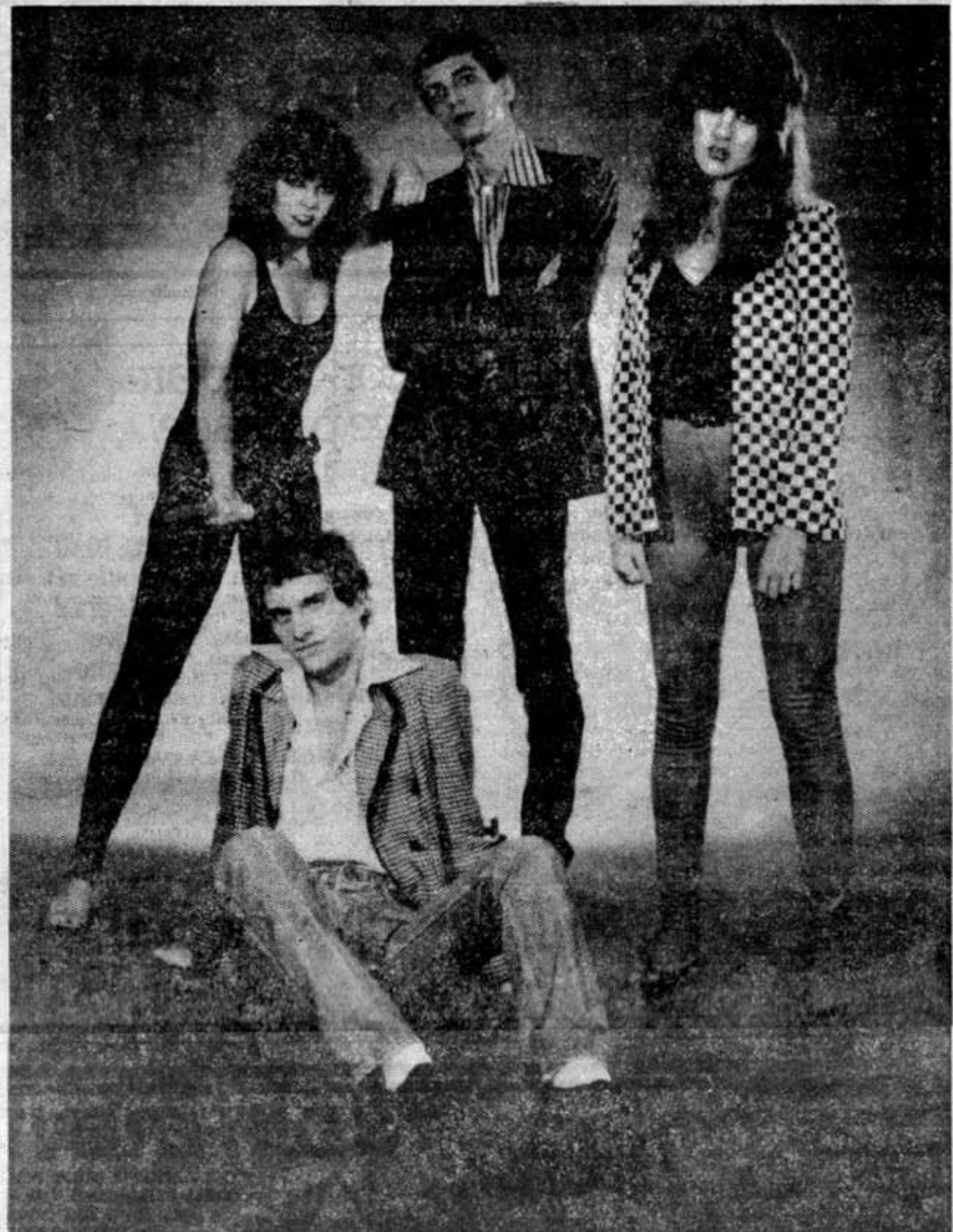
"This whole experience was a big surprise to me," says Tak. "I never thought it would go over. I was expecting to get my face stomped in the first time we played."

Certainly there has been resistance to the Cichlids. Many local rock & roll fans, accustomed to a steady diet of highly-professional musicians spewing a standard repertoire of Foreigner and Led Zeppelin songs, rejected the Cichlids at first sight. Club owners who unwittingly opened their doors to the group, have refused to rehire them after seemingly-oddball fans wreaked havoc on usually-subdued dance floors. And many bands around town loathed the idea that a clique of sneering amateurs from Dania could attract attention with a punk pose.

But no one could deny that the Cichlids were exciting, or at the very least different. And the more you watched them, the better they got. The morning after a Cichlid gig you invariably found yourself singing "Let's Go Mental" on the way to work. It altered your outlook on the day.

The most remarkable thing you noticed was the quality of the original material. It may not have been heavy social commentary, but it definitely was social complaint. Through their lyrics, Debbie and Tak take a poke at everyone from the tourists who crowded their favorite burger stands, to the minds behind a "throwaway economy." And when they fleshed out a set with cover tunes, it was a kooky assortment of gems that included *Pleasant Valley Sunday*, *Yummy, Yummy, Yummy* and the wonderfully punkish Nancy Sinatra classic, *Boots*.

Also remarkable was this matter of experience — or lack of it — working to their advantage by guaranteeing a rough-edged sound. Debbie, the band's senior member at age 22, had played guitar in a variety of Cichlids lineups and had developed a facility to write and arrange songs, but Portman's previous bands "never made it out of the garage," and Tak could never find anyone to play with. "I auditioned for bands, but they all hated me," he recalls. There was a gig playing drums



Staff photo by Nick von Staden

for a stripper at the Cheetah III, but it wasn't exactly what Tak had in mind.

"Then I saw Debbie and said, 'I wanna be in a band with this girl.'"

The bare bones sound is in many ways a thing of the past. The Cichlids freely admit they relied mostly on a manic energy to carry them through their early Tuesday night gigs at the Tight Squeeze club. Now, as Debbie explains it, the playing has improved, "but we still have the same intensity we had in the beginning."

Somewhere along the line something clicked. Maybe it was the show at Gusman or the signing of the band to the TK label or the recent trip to Tampa where they discovered they could excite a whole new crowd.

"I can feel a real change," says Tak. "It's beginning for real now. At first we couldn't believe it. We kept thinking, 'it's gotta fall through.'"

"We always had that skepticism," adds Debbie.

Now, along with growing confidence and the hints of success, comes a new fear. What happens when the Cichlids outgrow their minimalist stylings? In its current form, the Cichlids are perfect for the times. Rock & roll, and particularly danceable rock & roll, is on the rise and the Cichlids are bound to rise with it. But rock history repeatedly has shown that today's fresh face is tomorrow's dinosaur.

Or as Susan Robins puts it: "I don't want to get too good. I won't fit in."

The Cichlids, left to right, Debbie Mascaro, Bobby Tak and Susan Robins. Seated is Allan Portman. In seven months, they've gone from playing a parking lot to a record contract with TK Productions and gigs at Gusman Hall and the Sunrise Theater.