

Play Rock 'n Roll History 101

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At Home with the Cichlids

Story by Gaye Nemeti

Debbie

Mascaro, singer, guitarist with the Cichlids, opens the door with a lipstick smile. Inside, the small red-carpeted living room is stacked with albums, singles and books. "Killer", a grey cat named after Jerry Lee Lewis, darts out the door.

Bassist Susan Robins emerges slowly from another room and wanders somewhat sleepily over to the couch. In a few more minutes, drummer-singer Bobby Tak and newly added guitarist Barry Tak and newly added guitarist Barry Elliott knock and enter with an eight-pack of small cans of Budweiser.

Barry properly shakes everyone's hand, and Debbie retreats into the kitchen. Manager Robert Mascaro is on the phone constantly and Bobby sinks into a leopard covered chair intent on a box of popcorn snacks. At home with the Cichlids.

PHOTO BY JIM JOHNSON

For over a month, rumors have been buffeted around town that the Cichlids were splintering and some of them were regrouping with new personnel. The Cichlids were neither seen or heard from.

Bobby Tak and Robert Mascaro were drinking beer together in a bar one night having a grand old time when someone approached them and announced that Mascaro and Tak were not speaking. Imagine their surprise.

"Supposedly, we were not even talking to each other and here we're sitting getting drunk together", Bobby laughed, "and this guy didn't even know who he was talking to".

The group has worked well over a year, seven days a week at being the Cichlids, as well as holding second jobs driving taxis, parking cars, clerking in drug stores and with one Cichlid even working as a temporary legal aide.

"A band takes a little time off and look how the rumors start to fly", said Debbie about the mysterious time off.

Debbie and Bobby are especially amazed to hear the rumor that the band was considering some L.A. musicians to fill vacancies left by departing members. Everyone knows they are a South Florida band.

"We have integrity. What would we want L.A. musicians

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for?" Bobby asks.

As it was, guitarist Allan Portman was the only one to leave over what Debbie simply termed as "differences". Barry Elliott, who at one time played with Charlie Pickett and the Eggs, replaced him on guitar.

Mystery solved; Cichlids intact.

The Cichlids choose their own turf to have photos shot, and give a tour of Dania streets looking for likely spots. They spy a local ice cream parlor and pose around brightly lit games while Bobby digs up a quarter and climbs into a booth to watch cartoons. Meanwhile tourists are coming out of the parlor, staring and grabbing for their children. Jaded waitresses in straw hats wonder what is going on. This is Dania, home of the Cichlids.

Next door at the grocery store, while Robert clears it with the store manager, the Cichlids pout in front of rows of salad dressings. Debbie hopes for shopping cart, but settles for climbing onto the freezer holding turkeys and upsets the thermostat. The Cichlids decide this is a likely spot and pose some more while Debbie is frostbitten and Bobby actually grins.

This grows old quickly for the band, and it is back out on the streets to look for something more stark and they head for some dilapidated steps they remember a few blocks away.

Debbie and Susan spot a local bar on the next corner and everyone wants a beer, but Susan and Debbie come out faster than they went in, as catcalls and jock types in University of Miami t-shirts, skinny guys in hip-hugger bell bottoms and bandannas come tumbling out after them.

The band scurries on to be photographed in front of a wall of electric meters. Ironically, after this is done and they walk the streets back to the house, the power goes out. Dania is without electricity.

"Cichlids do not cause blackouts", Debbie said. "I can't believe this".

The Cichlids as they are not known started to happen about a year and three months ago. There were two previous line-ups before this one, including one all-girl band that never appeared live, and one that wanted to cover other people's songs and stay away from original tunes. Debbie became "disillusioned", but attributes the return of Bobby Tak from Boston and points, with the "magic" of the current Cichlids.

"Robert called me and told me to come down and take a look at Debbie's band", said Bobby. "I did, and she knocked me out. I never considered joining until I saw her."

"Then Susan came in and sewed it all up. Susan at the time just had her bass and couldn't play a thing but maybe a little bit, a note or two", said Debbie. "But she came in and quickly picked it up."

Debbie says Bobby was the only member with any previous experience. Bobby will only admit to a stint with Tempest Storm, whom he calls "maybe the second most famous burlesque performer this nation has ever known". Debbie calls her own experience at the "elementary".

The band's first gig was at Musician's Exchange on June 17, 1979. By all accounts, they were surprised at the reaction they got. They were prepared for anything except for what happened.

"People down where had never seen anything like this", Bobby said. "They didn't applaud and they didn't boo, but nobody turned their backs. It was strange. There were all these hippies out there and one thing freaked me out. We did 'Search and Destroy' and there's this one hippie out there with hair down to his ass singing along."

The rest is history. Cichlid ads appeared. Cichlids were spray-painted on highway overpasses. Cichlids played local clubs. The band opened for almost every major act that came into town recently; twice for the Ramones, twice for Iggy Pop and twice for the Pretenders while these groups were in Florida.

The Cichlids released an album, "Be True to Your School", produced by Ann Holloway, covered photographed by rock photographer Lynn Goldsmith, and released on TK's label. A Florida band on a Florida label.

Debbie designed the logo during a previous Cichlids incarnation never expecting things to develop as they did.

"One day I took some paper and Indian ink and said 'Let's scrawl and not it's on the cover of the album', Debbie said.

In memory of days when they played Tight Squeeze Club, the Cichlids are releasing a single in July that includes versions of "Bubble Gum" and "Tourists Are Pink" cut back when the band was not as sophisticated or musical as they are presently, as well as "Lifeguard Dan".

"The fans would write or say to us, 'we like what you're doing now, but we would like a memento of the old days' back when the band was playing the Squeeze", manager

Robert says. "This single is history, it's a memento."

The Cichlids are preparing to go on a national tour in the middle or latter part of July. Although a definite itinerary is not yet set, the band does expect to play Hurrah's in New York City. This is when they expect to push "Be True to Your School" nationwide.

While they are still in town, the Cichlids are introducing give new songs in their set. Two are covers of songs. One is "Tell Him" originally done by a group called the Exciters. The other is "Beach Party", an old song from an Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon beach party movie.

The new originals include "Beetlemania" a short song about Volkswagens.

"You don't have a big back seat
But you sure got a cute beep beep
My Volkswagen does, it, yeah, my Volkswagen does it"
Debbie and Bobby laugh, recalling the one Bobby owned while they attended Ft. Lauderdale high, one that was light blue "with the smashed-in back end".

The Cichlids go a bit political and against some of mellow rock's heavies with a pro-nuke song (Bobby's favorite in the new set) called "Sitting Ducks":

"You can run your lights
You can warm your shower
But you can't fight Russia
With solar power"

Bobby and Debbie do all the writing for band except for the numbers they choose to cover.

Debbie designs and sews all her clothes, some which can be found on any member of the band. She has to discipline herself between writing and sewing because both of them are so "addicting".

As Bobby leaves for the night talking about sleeping with the lights on after having seen "The Shining" because "psychos with axes" scare him and monsters do not, Debbie pulls out a cat brain in Alcohol kept in a cabinet, left over from the days she was a pre-med student in college.

"We could have easily been doctors or lawyers," said Debbie. "I was into science, I wanted to be a doctor. I would rather chop up cats than get onstage because I had horrible stagefright."

I love The Cichlids. "Pirahna are cichlids, angel fish are cichlids. Most interesting aquarium fish are cichlids."