# take GUVER!

COVER, TRIBUTE AND RECREATION BANDS KEEP THE MUSIC OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST ACTS ALIVE, LONG AFTER THOSE BANDS HAVE PLAYED THEIR FINAL NOTES





ho becomes a legend best? (Hint: The answer has absolutely nothing to do with midgets covering Kiss.)

From Dallas' A Hard Night's Day to Birmingham's ZZ Stop, a parallel army of cover bands delivers low-budget, up-close-and-personal "tributes" to classic rock acts living and dead. They offer a taste, however funny, of the real deal to fans who either never experienced or lack access to their inspirations, and thereby serve a not invaluable function in the musical food chain.

But as these four bands demonstrate, they don't call it "classic" rock for nothing. The Beatles, Grateful Dead, Frank Zappa and Led Zeppelin left beautiful corpuses of music behind them, each of which is ripe for intelligent reinterpretation. The Fab Faux, Project/Object, Dark Star Orchestra and Lez Zeppelin start out with the advantage of great material, of course. But what they do with the originals' work can be a powerful and frequently very entertaining experience. Whether they apply the cat whiskers or not.

# os Jeff Muller (marquee); Susan J. Weiand (DSO liv

#### WHEN THEY WAS FAB

Watching The Fab Faux play Beatles music—or, more accurately, The Beatles' *studio* music—is not unlike observing a brisk game of musical chairs. So faux there's actually five of them, the FF switch guitars, keyboards, percussion and lead vocals with dizzying virtuosity and high fidelity to what a random sampling of human beings would likely concede to be the 20th century's most generally satisfying body of popular music.

According to Fab Faux guitarist—and Beatles trivia expert—Frank Agnello, the FF approaches The Beatles' music "like a serious music recital, like an orchestra." His comment speaks to the collective chops possessed by this group of thoroughbred studio pros. Where most touring Beatlemaniacs concentrate on the quartet's early guitar raves, the Faux dig deep into the untoured studio magic of *Rubber Soul* onward.

The Fab Faux were formed in 1998, when drummer-producer Rich Pagano and bassist Will Lee found themselves jamming to Beatles tunes during a

Take "I Am the Walrus." Agnello explains that whichever band member is most jazzed about the tune usually ends up singing it; and in this case, the walrus was Rich. Upon joining the group, Agnello says, "Will got me hip right away to how percussion and a groove drive a song and let it breathe. It became plain that the 'Walrus' tambourine part was going to be much more important than the guitar part, so it laid itself out as electric piano, bass, drums, tambourine and keyboard strings."

While audiences get off on hearing the band extend a song like "Me and My Monkey" with a triple-guitar jam, Agnello says that emotionally charged musical icons such as the solos in "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" and "Something" remain sacrosanct. The Faux has performed *Rubber Soul, Revolver, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band,* the white album and *Abbey Road* in their entirety and, most recently, took on *The Beatles 1* collection of chart-toppers.

"We finally learned 'Hello Goodbye' and 'Yesterday' for the first time,"



Hiram Bullock Trio soundcheck. Lee wondered if Pagano might be interested in starting a "really accurate" Beatles band, and asked, "Who do you know who's sicker into it than we are?" Pagano immediately thought of Agnello. Lee, whose day job consists of playing bass in Paul Shaffer's CBS Orchestra, recruited Jimmy Vivino, guitarist for the Conan O'Brien show's Max Weinberg Seven, and multi-instrumentalist Jack Petruzzelli (Joan Osborne, Rufus Wainwright, Duncan Sheik, etc.). They tested their chemistry on the hardest Beatles song they could think of—the vocally challenging "Something"—and deemed the results promising.

With three guitarists, though, who gets to be John? "Oh, no," Agnello exclaims, "it was always going to be just the music. Partially because none of us looks even remotely like a Beatle, but mostly because the music was enough of a challenge."

Agnello says. "We still have about 30 songs to learn out of the 213 they recorded—if you want to count 'Free as a Bird' and 'Real Love,' that is."

#### THE MOTHERS OF RETENTION

Like countless other teenage dudes, André Cholmondely got a chuckle out of "Don't Eat the Yellow Snow," "Dancin' Fool" and the other Frank Zappa comedy hits he heard on Dr. Demento's radio show.

Then In 1981, while attending Rutgers as a precocious 16-year-old, Cholmondely recalls, "a buddy and I smoked a joint and threw on *Zoot Allures*. I can still picture the room we were in. The first song, 'Wind Up Workin' in a Gas Station,' was pretty funny. But then 'Black Napkins' came on and that was it. Everything blew open and I thought, *What the hell is going on here?*" André soon had tracked down every Zappa album available and

**COVER BANDS, THAT IS.** WHETHER YOU WANNA **FILL A FLOYD VOID OR ARE IN NEED OF A PHISH** PHIX, THESE—AND **MANY MORE BANDS TOILING IN OBSCURITY** -WILL GIVE YOU THAT **SOUND YOU CRAVE** 



## UNFORGETABLE FIRE U2

Drummer George Levesanos formed Unforgettable Fire in 1995, not only to recreate U2's music, but also their live performance. Unlike other tribute bands, which tend to stay away from becoming a mirror image of the band they're covering, Unforgettable Fire not only replicates the sound but also the look and individual personas of U2. After more then ten years together, the band continues to pack them in. "We've sold out B.B. King's Blues Club twice in New York City. We had over a thousand fans wrapped around Times Square waiting to come in," says Levesanos. "We not only had a professional belly dancer but we also had a B.B. King look-a-like perform with us onstage. It was a magical experience." www.uf2.com

# TRIPPIN' BILLIES Dave Matthews Band

Trippin' Billies grew out of an acoustic duo and the Chicago Irish bar scene. "We played basically the same setlist as all the other duos on the scene but we added more and more Dave Matthews Band because we genuinely love the relatively complex music," explains Trippin' Billies singer and guitarist Bill Denny. "Before we knew it, we carved out a little niche that set us apart from all the other groups on the circuit." Trippin' Billies has since brought the music to Dave Matthews Band fans all over the country at festivals and in clubs, but to Denny the most memorable moment happened at a DMB concert in St. Louis. "We were walking to our seats and you could hear people shouting, 'Hey, it's Trippin' Billies. You guys rock!' It was strange and flattering at the same time." www.trippinbillies.com

# BADFISH Sublime

Badfish didn't start out as a tribute band, but after the incredible response they received doing a Sublime tribute show in their home state of Rhode Island, they decided to give it a try. Two years later they made it a full-time venture and have been touring the country since, recently drawing over 1,300 people to their first annual Garden Grove Festival. "Sublime didn't tour extensively due to the untimely death of Bradley [Nowell]," explains Badfish drummer Scott (first name only). "A lot of people who would have liked to see Sublime play but never got the chance still have the desire to see that music performed live." www.badfish.com

# "WE'RE TRYING TO GO FOR THE GARLIC, AS FRANK WOULD SAY. WE IMPROVISE EVERY NIGHT, JUST LIKE ZAPPA DID." André Cholmondelv, Project/Object

dropped out of school the following semester. Not to worry, though: By the end of the decade, he was back in Rutgers, hosting annual Frank Zappa birthday parties, and learning Zappa tunes with his band, Zen Pajamas. By 1993, the year Zappa died, Project/Object was playing New York clubs.

Cholmondely considers P/O far more than just another tribute band from New Jersey. In fact, he compares it to the renowned Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, who "take Bach as their repertoire and work it to death."

Not only does P/O play Zappa's music with loving verve, Cholmondely is committed to contemporizing the composer's theatricality, multimedia high jinks and equal-opportunity mockery. "Zappa was the center of a whole social movement," André says, "and we recreate as much of that as we can. I don't say anything Zappa wouldn't, though, and I've gotten into plenty of after-show arguments with liberal Republicans. Sure, Zappa made fun of hippies and the left, but I think he made it clear again and again that they're silly but not dangerous."

Project/Object shows usually include former Zappa band members such as original Mothers of Invention keyboardist Don Preston, 12-year Zappa frontman Napoleon Murphy Brock (the irrepressible highlight of the new genetically derived cover band Zappa Plays Zappa), and Ike Willis, who played guitar and sang with Zappa for 15 years. "We split the Frank energy, as it were," he says of playing with Willis. "We'll each put down our guitars and conduct."

Zappa re-arranged his music throughout his career, and P/O mixes and matches tunes and eras. Like Zappa, the band balances bluesy crowd pleasers such as "Broken Hearts Are for Assholes" with difficult, denselynoted prog-pleasers like "What's New in Baltimore?" and "The Black Page."

"We're trying to go for the garlic, as Frank would say. We improvise every night, just like Zappa did. Last fall in Rochester, we played right before Bob Marley night at the club, so we did everything as reggae. It was ridiculous." P/O has also played complete versions of Apostrophe('), One Size Fits All, Joe's Garage and Sheik Yerbouti, as well as an entire evening of complex instrumentals arranged for four acoustic guitars and longtime Zappa percussionist Ed Mann.

Not everyone is delighted with Project/Object's way of keeping Zappa's music alive, however. Frank's widow, Gail Zappa, has tried unsuccessfully to get P/O shows canceled on the grounds that musicians who perform her late husband's music owe his estate performance royalties in addition to the American Society of Composers, Authors And Publishers' (ASCAP) standard venue license fees.

"We get tons of love and endorsement from Bob and Candy Zappa, Frank's brother and sister," André says ruefully. "But we get a lot of animus from the other side of the family."

#### THE OTHER OTHER ONES

Not the Grateful Dead but an incredible simulation, The Dark Star Orchestra uncannily echoes the lilting sonic magic—and, if you squint your eyes in just

# PHIX Phish

Phish may not have been gone long, but fans still need their Phix and, pun intended, that's how the Colorado-based band started. "Phish's fans are some of the most amazing, interesting and loving people and for the most part they have been really great to us," says drummer Chris Sheldon. Phix occasionally plays "phantasy setlists" sent in through their website, "...or we end up playing whatever people are yelling the loudest," says Sheldon. "It's not like the music is dead and we are trying to bring life back to it. It's very much alive and out there and we are just a different outlet for it at the moment." www.phixband.com

THE KNOT Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan, Allman Brothers, Traffic, etc.

Started in 1977 and originally called Slipknot, The Knot decided to play "live music inspired by improvisational bands like The Grateful Dead and The Allman Brothers," explains keyboardist Mark Munzer. "We never try to be a 'tribute' act or strictly a 'cover band.' We love playing Grateful Dead songs, but we always try to inject our own songs, styles and ideas into everything

we do." Much more then a carbon copy of their inspirations, The Knot is a study of the music and how it all can be made to flow seamlessly together. www.knotbuzz.com

### THE MACHINE Pink Floyd

"The Machine was formed out of the love for playing music live," explains drummer Todd Cohen. "When we first started we weren't playing exclusively Pink Floyd. We had other artists' music in there, too, but the more we played Floyd the more the crowd wanted it." The Machine began in the mid-'80s, before the label "tribute band" had been coined, and have since played all over the United States and Europe, including an appearance at Bonnaroo. Their sets range from early Barrett-era Floyd up to the post-Waters years. "Each show's setlist has a unique choice of songs and order," says Cohen. "It's fun to see the looks on peoples' faces when you play a Syd Barrett song." www.themachinelive.com



# **MORE BANDS UNCOVERED:**

The Blushing Brides—Rolling Stones The Who Show—The Who Bhoys From The County Hell—The Pogues Cash'd Out—Johnny Cash The Thin White Duke—David Bowie Hammer of the Gods—Led Zeppelin Harvest—Neil Young & Crazy Horse Phantom Fears—Rush Combat Rock—The Clash Live Killers—Queen Warped—Red Hot Chili Peppers Southern Comfort Blues Band—Janis Joplin

the right way, the very sight—of the group's post-1972 incarnation(s).

Since 1997, the Orchestra has famously specialized in recreating specific Dead shows right down to setlist, arrangement, lineup and gear. Moreover, guitarists Rob Eaton and John Kadlecik bear an almost eerie vocal, instrumental and physical similarity to Bob Weir and Jerry Garcia, respectively—from the former's lunging rhythm attacks to the latter's firmly grounded lyricism and haunting voice.

Is it a concert, conceptual art or a séance? Eaton describes it as an almost ritualistic reenactment of the Grateful Dead "experience," comparing the DSO playing the Dead to saxophonist Kenny Garrett performing the music of John Coltrane.

"The only role playing we do is that I sing the songs Weir sang and John sings the songs Jerry sang," Eaton explains. "There's never been any conversation of any kind—either backstage before a show or during band meetings—about trying to look like them, act like them or imitate them. And I think the music would suffer greatly by trying to do that."

In short, Eaton says the DSO sounds like the Dead because they really don't know any other way to play. Eaton himself started playing guitar after hearing *Europe '72*. That album's version of "Morning Dew" opened his young ears to what he describes as Weir's "lead rhythm" style. "Weir was making all these incredibly melodic runs using more than one note at a time. That was much more interesting to me than the single-note stuff."

You can't "cover" improvisation, of course, and the DSO conveys the GD spirit most faithfully when they're in full-on jam mode. And the exact show setlist thing? That solved the problem of what to play next when Kadlecik formed the band in the Chicago area with DSO's late keyboardist, Scott Larned\*, bassist Kevin Rosen and singer Lisa Mackey.

"The band is a byproduct of us all being pretty hardcore Deadheads," Eaton says. "People come to see us and get off on what we do because the essence of the music is still there and inherent in the experience."

In recent years, DSO has been performing "original"—as opposed to "classic"—setlists about a third of the time, conceiving them on the fly.

"It's the purest form of the GD thing for me," says Eaton. "Because we're so deeply into arrangements, we could play 'Viola Lee Blues' and 'Foolish Heart' back-to-back, which the Dead were never able to do. And we can do songs like 'Cosmic Charlie' and 'Attics [of My Life]' as they might have done them at a later point in their career."

\*Scott Larned (keyboards, vocals) passed away on tour April 24, 2005. Donations to benefit Larned's daughter's College Fund may be sent to The G. Larned Port Education Fund, c/o Bank One, 400 Central Ave., Northfield, IL 60093

#### **HOUSES OF THE HOLEY**

Lez Zeppelin would be a significant band even if they didn't rock their uteruses off.

Although they dress, play and move like Led Zeppelin, the New York-based girl group transcends the fundamentally trivial notion of "tribute bands." They rock immaculately and dominate the stage as seductively as the originals—taking as their primary texts *The Song Remains the Same* and the group's era-spanning 2003 DVD. Best of all, they toss the whole tarot deck into the air by pulling off one of the most entertaining gender bends in rock history.

"Robert Plant and Jimmy Page put forth their male power in a female sort of way," explains bandleader-guitarist Steph Paynes. "Even though they were very male, they both looked like girls. Some of their music was very delicate, and there was a great feminine aspect to what they were doing. Everyone calls it 'cock rock,' but it really wasn't. They idolized Joni Mitchell!"

And in case you're wondering, and of course you are, Paynes answers the inevitable stupid question concerning her group's collective sexuality thusly: "All or some of what we do is definitely maybe gay."

For the Lez, it all comes down to the music in all its awesome crunch and grandeur, which makes room for theater, sensuality and even m-m-magick. "They had this whole world around them," Paynes explains with widening eyes. "The 'hobbit world,' or whatever you want to call it, of fairies and Celtic lore and magic and post-hippie freedom."

All these bands' particular genius lies in interpretation; and the aptly named Helen Destroy interprets the fuck out of John Bonham's drums. Singer Sarah McLellan sounds more than looks like Robert Plant, to her credit, while bass-mandolin-keyboardist Lisa Brigantino is as much the allaround musician as John Paul Jones.

Having performed with the infamous Psychic TV at one time, this counts

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as Paynes' second round of satanic rock. She was a guitar-playing Ronette with Ronnie Spector's touring band prior to forming Lez Zep, which has been her full-time avocation for the past two years. Having replaced the group's original drummer and vocalist, she marvels at how closely her band mirrors the originals. "I don't want to sound pretentious or ridiculous, but when you're that heavy into somebody's music, and you've really spent time with it and studied every note somebody's played, you do take on an essence of that person's artistic personality."

Be careful what you channel, however. "We've played shows where it's become Dionysian out there," Paynes says. "In Montreal, during the part of 'Kashmir' where it goes back into the big riff, Sarah and I were at the lip of the stage and each of us must have had 20 sets of groping hands on our legs, getting higher and higher. And the more it happened, the more turned on everyone got until there was a point where I was like, 'If I don't step back now, it's gonna get really interesting."

Beyond the gender-bending lemon squeezing, though, these cover girls deliver the epic scope of tunes like "Dazed and Confused," which is where Payne says she gets her real guitar-bowing kicks. And while she dreams of playing Physical Graffiti in its entirety sometime, she says the group avoids "Stairway to Heaven" because "it's so good, it's a cliché."

"I'm still groping around for whatever it is exactly we're doing," Paynes admits. "I feel as if we're reinventing something, as if we're using this music to express ourselves."

Some smart dudes should try the same thing with the Sleater-Kinney catalog. ★