

TEX RUBINOWITZ AND BOB NEWSCASTER:



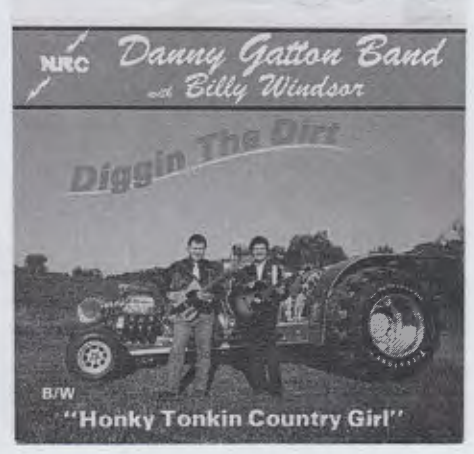
THE LAST HURRAH

BY LARRY BENICEWICZ

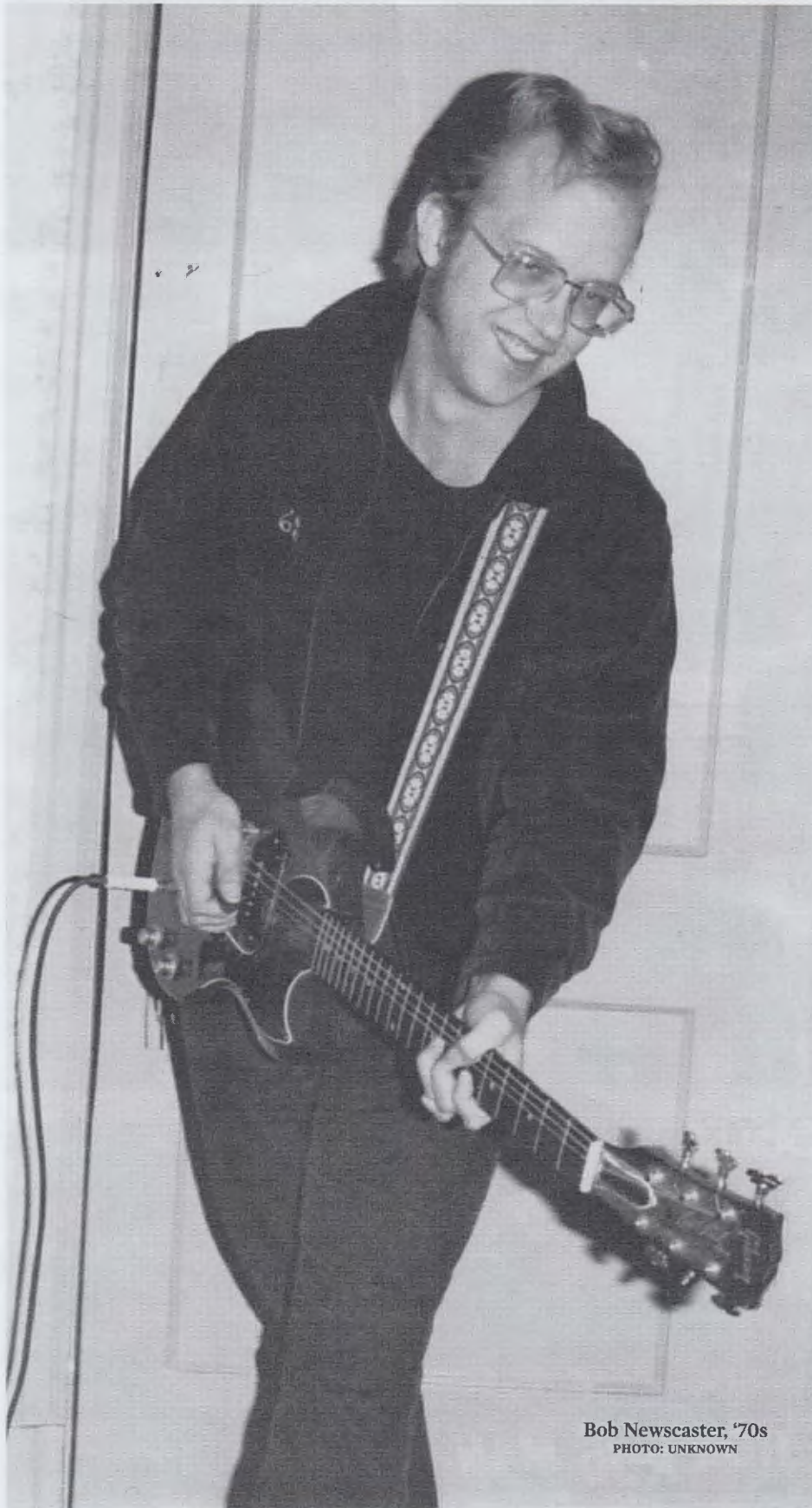
It's said when a venerable old oak tree nears its demise, it instinctively, through some sort of internal mechanism, is able to muster a last superabundance of acorns in order to ensure the perpetuity of the species. This is the image I conjured up when a few months ago I received a brand new CD in the mail by two ancient rockabilly warriors of yore, two artists who had been either in, respectively, semi-retirement or some self-imposed exile from the music business—Bob Newscaster, 67, and Tex Rubinowitz, 73. And, yes, they have showered us with unexpected “acorns,” but, after a five-year struggle with this secretive project (likened to have given birth), they

were too beset by health issues and exhaustion to even promote it properly. And I wasn't about to let this excruciating labor of love wither on the vine by going unnoticed, especially since another local legend and esteemed colleague of theirs passed recently, Billy Hancock, with only a brief, belated acknowledgement.

Well, you say, why is a blues writer so interested in rockabilly performers? You've heard of the expression, “the blues had a baby and they called it rock 'n' roll?” In fact, some of the greatest hits of the 50s, indeed, had their origins in hitherto standard 12-bar blues, like Carl Perkins' transformation of the classic “Matchbox,” or



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Bob Newscaster, '70s
PHOTO: UNKNOWN

Elvis Presley's interpretation of Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog," or Bill Haley's personal take on Big Joe Turner's "Shake Rattle and Roll." I could go on and on.

Both Tex Rubinowitz and Bob Newscaster belonged to a movement that can best be labeled new wave rockabilly. I tend to categorize them with more popular and mainstream exemplars such as Robert Gordon and the Stray Cats who burst on the scene in the late 70s and early 80s like a breath of fresh air when the vapid, mechanized rhythms of disco were all the rage. Much like the Beatles (and the rest of the British invasion) when they arrived during a period of stagnation brought on by the homogenization of pop music via teen idols, these daring individuals, too, went against the grain, remaining true to their roots and their adoring fans embraced this dynamic alternative. And there were other local young Turks of that period that took the road less traveled, including Danny Gatton, Eddie Angel, Johnny Seaton, Bob E. Rock, The Dootz (David Johns, billed as "the coolest man in white buck shoes"), Bobby Smith, and groups such as the Wanktones and Goin' Goin' Gone. And on the distaff side, as well, there were a whole host of Wanda Jackson wannabes such as Martha Hull, Virginia (Veatch) and the Blue Dots, and Ruthie and the Wranglers. Among these gifted musicians, lead guitarist, Bob Newscaster, could more than hold his own and was at the top of everyone's list as a sought after sideman, and on many occasion was part of the supporting cast of a visiting, former rockabilly idol such as Jack Scott or Vernon Taylor, who profited from such a revival.

But among these distinguished individuals, no one could hold a candle to the long and lean Tex Rubinowitz as far as recreating the whole rockabilly persona was concerned. He had all the requisite accessories—the shades, string ties, the black leather jacket, the embroidered shirt, the sideburns and the shit kickers. And, obviously relishing this role, drove around town in a black, 1964 Cadillac El Dorado convertible with the big fins. Musically, his style was slick and fluid like the Vitalis in his perfectly coiffed "D.A." of a haircut; his band a well-oiled perpetual motion machine. In addition, he had the vocal delivery down pat—the measured growl, the insinuating leer, the sidelong snarl, and the well placed hic-cough. In the 80s, I had the opportunity to interview the illustrious Charlie Feathers (whom Rubinowitz most magnanimously

Dagmar and the Seductones, 2004, L-R: Newscaster, Bryan Smith, Dave Elliott, Andrea Swenson



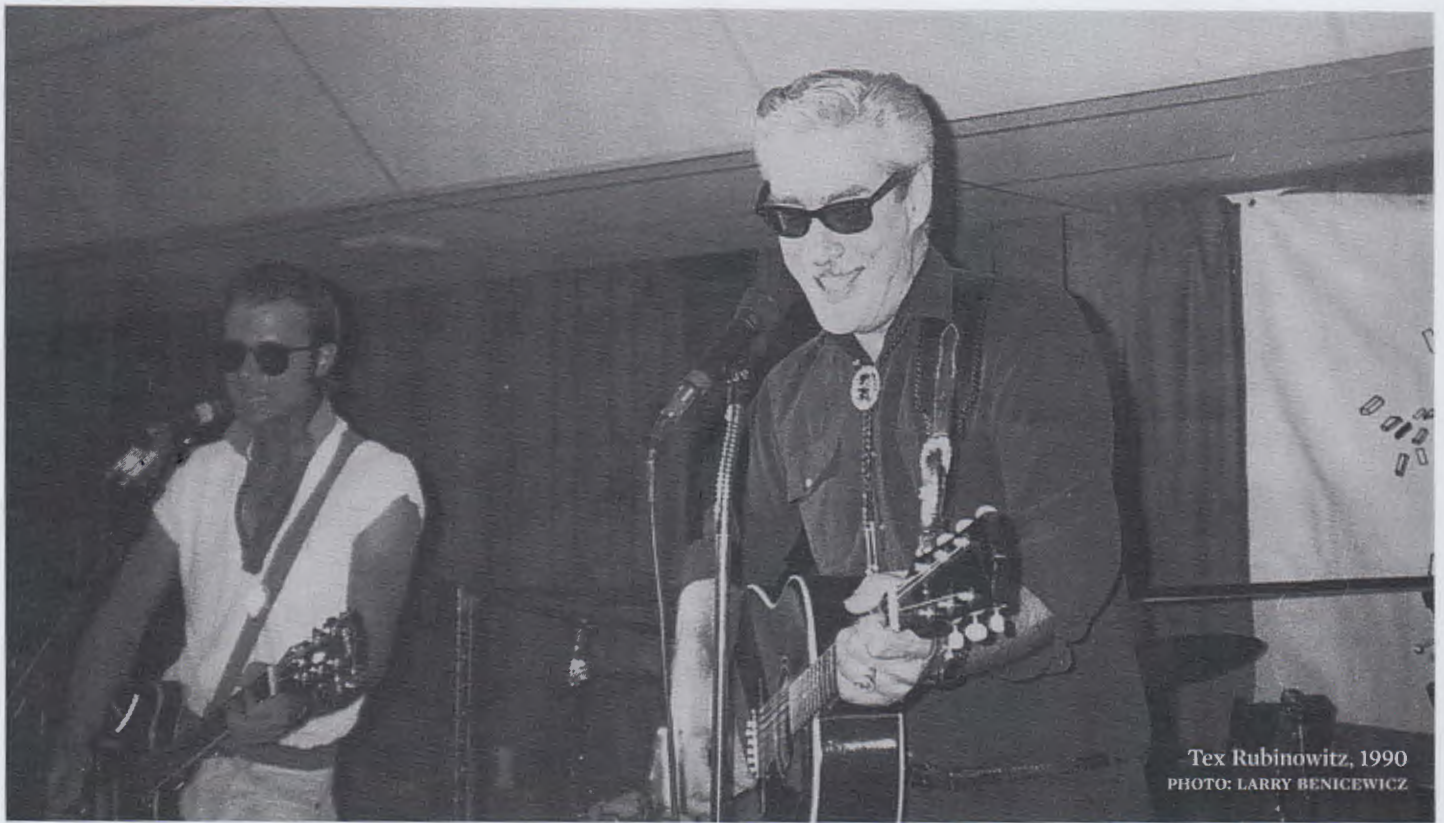
aided and sponsored) in the twilight of his career at Baltimore's long defunct venue, No Fish Today, on Eutaw St and he paid Mr. Rubinowitz the ultimate compliment when he said his approach most closely conveyed the ideal rockabilly methodology of unhurriedness and restraint. In short, Mr. Rubinowitz had the whole package down to a "T" and by the late 80s had become the toast of the town, selling out shows at Marc Gretschel's Twist & Shout in at 4800 Auburn Ave. in Bethesda, the Psyche Delly at 4844 Cordell Ave also in Bethesda, the former 9:30 Club at 930 F St., N.W., the Wax Museum at 4th and E Sts, S.W., and the Gentry in S.E. Washington on Capitol Hill,

not to mention festivals like the Blue Bayou in Upper Marlboro, MD. And just as suddenly, tastes changed and the gigs dried up prompting his withdrawal from the public arena. But while it lasted, it was a great ride.

Tex Rubinowitz (by the way raised Southern Baptist, not Jewish) was born Arthur Lee Rubinowitz in Abilene, TX, on October 10, 1944 to Stanley, an Army officer, and Arthurea Rubinowitz. Ten years later, his father moved the family, including his brother, Ben, to Springfield, VA. After retiring from the Army as a colonel, the elder Mr. Rubinowitz began working for the U.S. government about the time his wife was commencing her vocation as teacher in

the Fairfax County school system. While still a student at Lee High School there in 1962, he began playing the guitar. And the next year, he was attending the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, wherein he participated in small concerts making a name for himself. By 1970, he was performing professionally in local clubs. After returning to the Washington, D.C., area in 1972, he formed his own band, Tex Rubinowitz and the Casaloma Cowboys which specialized in mostly C&W related fare. Evidently, his musicianship impressed another local, Alexandria's Billy Hancock, who in the mid-70s agreed to produce and record his first single (and original com-





Tex Rubinowitz, 1990
PHOTO: LARRY BENICEWICZ

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position), “That Old Patchwork Quilt” bw “South of the Border (Down Mexico Way),” on Hancock’s and his brother Dale’s label, the resuscitated R&B indie, Aladdin (#5561). Although it proved to be a short lived affair, Hancock and his imprint managed to corral the best of area talent, including the first efforts of the Nighthawks, Little Bobby Radcliff, Tom Principato’s Powerhouse, and Danny (Gatton) and the Fat Boys (including Billy on bass and vocals and Dave Elliott on Drums).

Although Hancock still ran his Aladdin logo during this time frame, both he and Mr. Rubinowitz signed with fledgling independent roots label, Ripsaw, at 121 N. 4th St in Easton, PA in 1978, an imprint operated by Jon “Spider” Strong and Jim Kirkoff, a venture which would eventually attract locals Martha Hull, Bobby Smith, and the Uptown Rhythm Kings. At that juncture, Hancock had switched from bass to guitar and renamed this outfit, Billy Hancock and the Tennessee Rockets; whereas the other charter member, Tex Rubinowitz, christened his new ensemble, Tex Rubinowitz and the Bad Boys. And Rubinowitz’s touring band of the late 70s consisted of bassist

Johnny Castle (later with Bill Kirchen [of Commander Cody] & Too Much Fun and the Nighthawks), drummer Scotty Flowers, and lead guitarist, Eddie Angel, who still now fronts the masked, neo-surf aggregate, Los Straightjackets. Also in December of 1978, Mr. Rubinowitz would go into Bias Studio in Springfield, VA, and lay down four tracks which would jump start his career--Marty Wilde’s “Bad Boy” bw his own “Feelin’ Right Tonight” (Ripsaw #212) and two more original numbers, “Hot Rod Man” bw “Ain’t It Wrong” (Ripsaw #214). These rockabilly recordings produced by his mother, Authurea and Billy Hancock, featured a different set of session musicians, including Billy Hancock on guitar, Bob Newscaster on guitar, Brian Smith on acoustic bass and Jeff Lodsun on drums. Although neither single had a dramatic impact nationally, they both received much regional airplay; so much so, that the latter, “Hot Rod Man,” was released in England in 1980 and eventually made its way onto the soundtrack of the 1984 film *Roadhouse 66* starring Willem Dafoe and Judge Reinhold. No doubt that this one-two punch of a debut on Ripsaw led to an invitation to perform

in France in June 1981 at Le Grand Festival de la Porte de Pantin, wherein he followed onstage rockabilly demi-gods from the 50s like Jack Scott, Gene Summers, and Sonny Fisher, as well as UK legend Crazy Cavan and the Rhythm Rockers. As impressive as these two 45 rpms were, they would be his only releases for Ripsaw, aside from an Everly Brothers type collaboration with Hancock, under the pseudonym of Artie & Curt & Their Classmates. Yet, they, along with a solitary eponymous album issued in 1985, would be a significant enough of an achievement to ensure his legendary status.

And when someone documents Tex Rubinowitz’s life in music, it would be impossible to separate that of another kindred spirit, Bob Newscaster, so entwined are their histories. In fact, they are more like blood brothers in their mutual respect. “If anyone else would have called and asked me to do this CD, I would have refused,” wrote Newscaster recently. Evidently, citing health concerns, he only reluctantly agreed to accompany pianist Daryl Davis at the Creative Alliance in Baltimore when the latter arranged an homage to his own mentor, Chuck Berry. Let’s just say that, for the most part, Newscaster’s performing days are few and far between, except when he answers the call of such a cherished individual, someone with whom he has a special bond.

Bob "Newscaster" Swenson was born on September 10, 1950 in Alexandria, VA, and took up both the piano and clarinet as a youth. He recalled that during his formative years, the British Invasion had a profound effect on his eventual choice of instruments. "When the Beatles came along, I knew I had to switch to the guitar. Or else how was I going to meet the girls?" he said. But he wanted to learn to play it correctly and received lessons in order to be classically trained. But after listening to Black stations like Washington's WUST-1120 AM, he developed a penchant for the repertoire of R&B oriented UK outfits like the Rolling Stones, who borrowed heavily from Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, and Muddy Waters. "I guess the most significant event of my adolescence was sneaking in to see Muddy Waters at the Bohemian Caverns on U Street when I was just sixteen," he added. This "discovery" led him to collect blues records in earnest so that he could follow along on the guitar parts. Also by then he had formed his first "garage" band, the Missing Links who accepted gigs at private parties, being yet "too young" to perform in clubs.

In the late 60s, he attended college at NYU, continuing his studies in classical guitar under the tutelage of a disciple of the Spanish virtuoso, Andres Segovia. But his Manhattan education was of short duration, as he transferred to be closer to home--American University. There, it wasn't long before he was recruited by a campus heavy metal type band--Taylor Park, which subsequently released a 45rpm during Newscaster's tenure, "Apocalypse Waltz." But when the government rescinded his student deferment during the height of the Vietnam conflict, he summarily quit this institution of higher learning.

Perhaps inspired by the Little Walter instrumental hit of 1952, Mr. Newscaster and three other like-minded musicians, including Jeff Lodsun on drums (then of the group Babe, which also recorded for the Hancocks' Aladdin), inaugurated the Jukes and began living in a communal situation in Alexandria in the early 70s. "We were constantly fooling around with a reel to reel tape machine in order to improve our sound," said Mr. Newscaster, who practiced the guitar licks of Delta blues giants like Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson, and Mississippi John Hurt. In addition, he also toyed with the notion of broadcasting satirical sketches of the news, and, in the process, create his own programs; hence the origin of his colorful moniker.

RUBINOWITZ'S TOURING BAND OF THE LATE 70S CONSISTED OF BASSIST JOHNNY CASTLE (LATER WITH BILL KIRCHEN & TOO MUCH FUN, AND THE NIGHTHAWKS), DRUMMER SCOTTY FLOWERS, AND LEAD GUITARIST, EDDIE ANGEL, WHO STILL NOW FRONTS THE MASKED, NEO-SURF AGGREGATE, LOS STRAIGHTJACKETS.

With confidence abounding, the Jukes in 1973 pooled their resources, acquiring an old bus with a generator on board in order to embark on a grand picaresque adventure discovering America a la *Easy Rider* or Jack Kerouac in the anticipation of randomly picking up gigs along the way. It proved to be an ill-advised foray, a complete fiasco, wherein the transportation and all the equipment suddenly disappeared. Returning home, he was forced by economic circumstances to lodge with his parents and drove a cab and worked construction for a spell to make ends meet. Disgusted with the music scene in general, he remained out of the entertainment sector for a few years.

It was Jeff Lodsun, then of Swing Shift (along with Billy Hancock and bassist Bob Coleman, later of the J St Jumpers with guitarist Rusty Bogart) who succeeded in coaxing Mr. Newscaster out of his musical retreat by introducing him to the long sadly closed Childe Harold (on Connecticut Ave near Dupont Circle) blues jam on Monday nights. "I figured that if the owner, Bill Hurd, was nice enough to buy Jeff a new drum kit, he must be on the level," said Mr. Newscaster, who thereafter joined the house band. During its heyday from 1978-81, he also recalled that many budding musicians first cut their teeth there, including guitarist Cathy Ponton (now Cathy King) and pianists Deanna Bogart and Daryl Davis. In fact, it seemed that on any given occasion, an all star cast of characters might assemble, creating a steady pool of native talent from which any prospective bandleader might select his future sidemen. Indeed, at times, each evening seemed like an audition. In addition, new wave rockabilly artists like Tex Rubinowitz and Billy Hancock in the audience were also taking a keen interest in the superior abilities of the supporting crew, including bassist, Bryan Smith, Mr. Lodsun, and Mr. Newscaster, who, as a unit, would soon be summoned into the studio to ably assist both rockers with their initial efforts for the Ripsaw label.

As a result of this collaboration, Mr. Newscaster was invited on this aforementioned rockabilly assemblage to France in 1981. And it was on this tour that he really cemented his relationship with Mr. Rubinowitz. "Ironically, I began the trip with Billy and ended up back in Tex's outfit," he said. From his description, the routing of this unwieldy contingent (which also included bassist/guitarist, Evan Johns) was atrocious, with stops virtually all over the "Hexagon," beginning in Paris, then to Lyon, Toulon, and Rouen. "We were supposed to go to Champagne country but the franc suddenly got devalued, so our junket was suddenly curtailed, since we were all paid in their currency," added Bob.

Stateside, Mr. Newscaster was doing quite a balancing act. He was back with Hancock who toured heavily and while on the home front, he was regularly packing them in at the then familiar hot spots, like the Takoma Tap Room, Danny Gatton's Beneath It All (located in the basement of the Crazy Horse in Georgetown), and the aforementioned Psyche Delly. And on top of this commitment, Newscaster was lending a helping hand to erstwhile folk guitarist, Andrea Dagmar Brown (whom he had met at Childe Harold), to launch two "roots" groups, the Kokomo Mojos and the first incarnation of Dagmar and the Seductones. By 1983, the gigging and relentless traveling had taken their toll and Mr. Newscaster, again, at least temporarily, threw in the proverbial towel.

Mr. Newscaster claimed to have been "out of work for five minutes" when another needy and native rockabilly ace rang. Bob E. Rock (real name Robert Peterson) then an upright bassist and who also was a former singer and roadie for Tex Rubinowitz. Glad to stay anchored on his home turf, he signed on and remained two years. Aside from these two players, this group was most noted for drummer Bob Berberich, former percussionist in a string of legendary Washington, DC, outfits, including Tom Guernsey's

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Virginia Veath, 1988
PHOTO: LARRY BENICEWICZ

Reekers and Hangmen, Grin (fronted by Nils Lofgren), and Cathy Ponton King's blues band. Berberich, too, had a Ripsaw connection, being married to Martha Hull.

During Newscaster's stint with Bob E. Rock, there were two 1986 singles released; one, an Elvis tribute, penned by Rubinowitz and Angel, "Humes High [the King's alma mater]," NCP 002, which excluded the guitarist, since it originated from a five-year-old session, and a holiday novelty item, "Santa's Saturday Night," by Jimmy the Kid, which showcased Newscaster on lead and Rock on bass. Jimmy the Kid was in reality the aforementioned Jimmy Kirkoff, later Jim Kirk, former associate of Ripsaw

records, who now exclusively headed NCP, No Club Productions. "The relationships between bandmates back then were incestuous," said Mr. Newscaster, as he remembered fondly the venues of that era, like Friendship Station, Columbia Station in Adams Morgan (often home to Billy Price), and Desperado's in Georgetown on M Street, across from the celebrated Cellar Door.

But by the late 80s, Tex Rubinowitz, again, was seeking competent replacements, and both Newscaster and Rock (along with drummer Buddy Grandell) were more than willing to come to his rescue. One memorable engagement during his second tour of duty with Mr. Rubinowitz was supplying

the backup to 50s rockabilly superstar, Jack Scott, in Glen Burnie, MD.

When not onstage with Rubinowitz during this time frame, he was also commuting to Baltimore to the Cat's Eye Pub in Fell's Point on Sunday afternoons wherein he provided the hot lead guitar licks to pianist Steve Kraemer's Bluesicians of that vintage, which featured Glenn Moomau on harp, Bryan Smith on bass, and Jeff Lodsun on drums. Kraemer, by the way, was also a charter member of Childe Harold's house band and still holds court after three decades plus at this Charm City institution. Nevertheless, deep friendship notwithstanding, Mr. Newscaster had to give it up, since the round trip, coupled with the meager earnings of passing the hat, finally exacted its price.

He stayed loyal to Mr. Rubinowitz until the latter's abrupt retirement in the early 90s from the entertainment business, after which, as a "hired gun," he hooked up for a spell with the aforementioned Daryl Davis, harmonica ace, Larry Wise (another Childe Harold habitue), and finally, in 2000 revived Dagmar and the Seductones, a group which quickly, like Davis, became a darling of the popular swing dance circuit. In 2004, they released a CD, *Little Bitta Love*, which garnered three nominations in the Roots Rock Category of the annual Wammie (Washington Area Music Association) awards in the same year.

It's hard to believe that I last talked to Tex Rubinowitz nearly 25 years ago at his guitar repair shop in Springfield when he was just on the verge of quitting the music business. I got the sense that he felt some bitterness that the public had turned its back on him. Names like the then recently late Danny Gatton (dubbed "The world's greatest unknown guitarist") and Roy Buchanan, both suicides, were brought up, who, despite their universally recognized virtuosity, could never reach the next level because they were taken for granted. At that point, he, too, claimed to be "spinning his wheels," with little in the way of renown to show for it. Always ever enigmatic and inscrutable, maybe he also thought that he had painted himself into a proverbial corner with his rockabilly act and that there was nothing more to prove. Whatever his motivation was to withdraw from performing, his decision seemed to be oh so final. In fact, he was adamant. And it didn't help that he also became caregiver to his aging father which consumed a great portion of his time. That's why it was so surprising that



Bobby Smith, 1990
PHOTO: LARRY BENICEWICZ

he made a belated comeback, coming out of nowhere like a bolt out of the blue.

It's probably no accident that the album *The Old Man Mississippi* (Patuxent/No Club CD 304) is also authored by the Original Dixieland Rock 'N' Roll Band (a name prominently displayed on a bass drum on its cover), because both Rubinowitz and Newscaster want to show the world that they are conversant with not only rockabilly but also all genres of music uniquely American. Listening to this new departure of an album, I got the feeling that they huddled at the beginning of this undertaking with the attitude of "let's show 'em we're more than one dimensional before they put us out to pasture." And I have to admit that it is strange to hear both musicians, normally comfortable in four piece configurations, be immersed in a big band milieu, with horn sections and woodwinds. In fact, the majority of the cuts on this album are such hybrids. As Mr. Rubinowitz explains in "Dixieland Bop" (one of ten new compositions in collaboration with Newscaster on this generous 16-track affair), "We got a little something old and a little something new" with "Dixieland horns and a rock 'n' roll backbeat." This novelty of a Dixieland treatment is their invention, but it works.

It's not by chance that *Old Man Mississippi* commences with Jimmie Rodgers' "Blue Yodel Number Nine," in which Mr. Rubinowitz can give late C&W giants,

THIS COULD BE THE LAST HURRAH FOR BOTH TEX RUBINOWITZ AND BOB NEWSCASTER, BUT WITH THE RELEASE OF OLD MAN MISSISSIPPI, THEY CAN NOW LOOK BACK WITH NO REGRETS BECAUSE THEY GAVE IT THEIR ALL.

Ernest Tubb and Hank Snow, a run for their money as the best "Singing Brakeman" interpreters. It's set in Memphis, the beginning of the album's musical journey down the Mississippi which terminates in the Crescent City with what else but the classic "St. James Infirmary." Off course, Memphis can justifiably lay claim to be the birthplace of rockabilly (another hybrid of blues and rock and roll) courtesy of its most famous musical export, Elvis Presley. And the next track on this endeavor, another original, is the autobiographical "Bebopalula Stole My Heart," which is the quintessence of the rockabilly style. Moreover, during a break in "Blue Yodel," Mr. Rubinowitz exhorts Mr. Newscaster to "drive the train," which is just another means of transportation downstream to reach the Big Easy, like the steamboat in "The Old Man Mississippi." This train/railroad motif is found throughout, including Rodgers' standard, "Brakeman's Blues" and "All Night Long," and symbolizes here artistic freedom much in the same way as Steve Goodman's "City of New Orleans." And I don't think that Elvis' early "Trying to Get to You" was randomly selected either, since it contains the line "I've been traveling over mountains, even through the valleys, too." Just substitute New Orleans for his lady love. In short, Mr. Rubinowitz and Mr. Newscaster in this CD are going to take us on a trip downriver, all the while paying tribute to all the great musical traditions lying between these two great musical capitals.

Along the way, on this musical excursion, there are at least three blues classics encountered, the aforementioned "Blue Yodel Number Nine," "Corrina Corrina," and another of Rodgers' signature tunes, "Brakeman's Blues," the latter which again reinforces the idea of attaining that goal near the mouth of the mighty river---"It's good times here but it's better on down the road."

But, once and for all, Newscaster and Rubinowitz really show their versatility with memorable compositions encompassing all genres of music, including C&W ballads like "The Old Man Mississippi" and "Honky Tonk Masterpiece," the Tex-Mex flavored "One Night Stand" (reminiscent of the Texas Tornadoes sans accordion), the gospel infused "The Sweetest Sound," and a syncopated rhumba--like "Make A Deal With The Devil." Their New Orleans inspired "I Dreamed I Heard Buddy Bolden Play" is a tour de force and captures the true essence of Dixieland in all its complexity (some refer to this interplay of instruments as "organized chaos").

Throughout this undertaking, I've never heard Tex Rubinowitz's voice sound better and Bob Newscaster's guitar work is, as usual, flawless. But my kudos go out to the background musicians as well (with whom I'm not familiar except for a cameo by Bob Margolin) and I give this duo much credit for selecting la crème de la crème of local players for their sympathetic, not to mention brilliant, accompaniment. But all this superb musicianship would probably have gone for naught had it not been for the formidable recording staffs at both Bias and Patuxent studios who saw to it that this production was impeccable, especially as far as mixing was concerned. Could it really be that forty years had passed at Bias since this twosome first recorded here together?

Yes, this could be the last hurrah for both Tex Rubinowitz and Bob Newscaster, but with the release of *Old Man Mississippi*, they can now look back with no regrets because they gave it their all, while staggering to the finish. For both, even if it's the last round-up, this CD will serve as a fitting exclamation point to a long life in music. And it proved very well worth the wait. But I still hold out the hope that they, like "old man Mississippi," can maintain this momentum and keep rolling along. ■