

View From the Brass Section

I joined Duck Soup as a roadie in the early 70's. The first job I recall working was Billie Richie's, in Chester. Jimmy was a friend of mine and when he told me how much he loved playing with the band and what big things were down the road for them, I said "Well, if you're going to be a big name band, you'll need a road crew." I had an old Pontiac station wagon that held more than 1 amplifier, which made me eminently qualified and I was in.

The band at that time was Richard on bass, Bill on drums, Dave Mason on lead and Jimmy "the kid" on rhythm guitars. Jimmy had to jump through some hoops because he was only about 16 and the ABC wasn't too keen on youngsters in bars, even to play. I believe both Jimmy and I had to go outside in between sets, as neither of us was 21! The band had a great version of "Cobra", by Quicksilver back then. The biker clientele loved it.

It seems even in those early days, we were always able to pick up college gigs, frat parties, weddings and being the Main Line, debutante parties. I remember going to watch Pabs and Haywards old band, Dingo, play a job at Haverford College. They had a talented drummer, as well, (Heltner?), but for some reason, I think they broke up shortly thereafter. Duck Soup was always quick to pick up on talented musicians and landed Pabs and Bill for the "Soup". This allowed Richard to go back to the keyboards, which was his natural instrument.

This incarnation of the band lasted for quite a few years and saw the first level of success that was to follow. Several studio recordings and a lot more jobs tightened things up and the band, primarily Richard, and later, Hayne, began to compose more of our own songs. The band was swinging more from a "cover band", playing other people's songs, to performing almost exclusively our own material. Performance/auditions in New York at the Bottom Line and the Bitter End, added to the Duck Soup mystique, but didn't lead to the recording contract we so desired.

It was about this time, I purchased a trumpet and began taking weekly lessons. I had played trumpet for a year in the elementary school band, but due to a mishap with some common household ingredients, lost a few fingers and didn't play again until switching to left hand and taking up the brass in earnest. I felt truly fortunate to be permitted to play with the band, as these were all, to a man, serious, dedicated, talented musicians. I felt a bit like window dressing compared to the other guys, but I was in great shape back then and didn't mind much. I worked at it and was in the right place at the right time for what came next.

Things were moving forward as we were starting to get a decent following, but success never came fast enough to keep the band happy; a theme that would greatly affect our future more than once. Pabs was finished college and had begun his relationship with Eleanor and decided law school might lead to a better career than the music business. Of course, we all felt he was throwing away the chance of a lifetime, but we moved on.

Enter Kirk. Kirk Wilson was a talented vocalist, who fit right in with the eclectic mix of personalities in Duck Soup. This was at the time Fleetwood Mac was topping the charts with Stevie Nicks; a comparison not lost on some record execs. Rich was a true pro at writing music designed to maximize the abilities of the various singers in the band. Looking back at the "Kirk" Soup and the years that followed until the end, I believe this was our pinnacle of getting close to the success we all yearned for.

Kirk had a tremendous set of pipes on her and could really belt out a song. That, combined with her attractive features led to us getting a few nibbles from recording companies and the songs Rich was writing for Kirk were getting better and better. None of us were prepared for the news that Kirk had fallen off a horse while taking riding lessons and was hospitalized in a coma. The choir in heaven sang a little sweeter a few days later, as Kirk passed away. Just as it seemed we were getting the ball rolling, we were once again, without a singer.

It was just before her passing that another drastic change was made to our lineup. I don't recall the particulars, but longtime bassist Bill Hayward was replaced with Tony Waldman. I believe Kirk knew of Tony from somewhere and once onboard, Tony knew of a smoking hot sax player. Sam Dipietroantonio, joined the band with a musical background that would rival all of us, except Richard. He played alto, tenor and soprano saxes, flute and clarinet. He even played 2 saxes at once on occasion! Needless to say, our horn section really began to take off, as I learned so much from Sammy. As we perfected phrasings and intonations, our horns became rather tight and were a lot of fun to be a part of.

Richard and Jimmy took over the lead vocals for the band and Rich began writing material for this newest formulation of Duck Soup. Once again, success was knocking on our door, as we were working 3-4 nights a week and had also formed a relationship with Doug Fearn at Veritable Recording Studio. We recorded quite a bit of material there and began to get a bit more airplay.

While most of us had day jobs, Rich and Jimmy did not. I was a tree surgeon/lumberjack, Bill worked at a shop downstairs from our apartment in Bryn Mawr, and Tony and Sam had jobs. The money we made playing live gigs was nothing more than beer money to me, but Rich, his wife Dottie and Jimmy always tried to live off such meager stipends and were always broke. It is understandable that they grew impatient.

Rich and Dottie had been in the San Francisco Bay area during 1967's "Summer of Love". Things were happening musically there, so fast that if you had a band and could fumble your way through a song, you could get a recording contract. Rich, with Jimmy a strong second, pushed for us to move to California to "hit it big". It turned out they were half right, but not before another change was made. Sammy wouldn't go, so we set out in search for another sax player.

I used to spend a fair amount of evenings in the Coatesville/Downingtown area where my sister lives. I believe I saw Paul Biondi the first time at Mickey Rooney's club there just off the Downingtown bypass and I was impressed. He played all 3 saxes, flute, clarinet and double saxes. Paul was also a serious musician who worked hard at his craft and I knew he would fit right in. The problem was, he was already in a band, although they didn't do much for me. I spoke with they guys, who said "See if you can get him to come to a practice". It may not have hurt that I told them his name was Paul "Beyond".

When I approached Paul about the Soup, his band was playing at a dinky dive that may have been a bowling alley. To this day, that place reminds me of "The Blues Brothers", when Jake and Elwood go after Murph and the Magictones who were playing in some lame band doing "Don't Go Changing". Luckily for us, Paul was open to change and soon joined the newest and last version of Duck Soup. Paul and his wife Debbie, Rich and Dottie, Tony and his girlfriend Eileen joined Bill, Jimmy and I, who "loaded up the bus and moved to Berk-e-ley".

Actually it was up the hill, above Berkeley and El Cerrito, in Kensington, where we rented a huge multi million dollar home where we all lived. It was quite a nice neighborhood and we had Tilden Park for a backyard. Deer would come into our yard during the evenings and we soon found out why each house had plywood boxes in the front; the raccoons there were humongous and traveled in ravenous packs, like suburban street gangs. Unless you wanted to sweep up all your garbage on trash day, we had to adjust. We soundproofed a room and practiced there and tried to find gigs to play.

The problem was, we left Philly where we had a following, were getting airplay and playing 3-4 nights a week, to go to someplace where we had no following and no one knew us. We were literally starting all over. I was able to find work as they have trees up in the Bay and I got Paul a job there, who soon learned just how "special" date palms are, while climbing through a brush pile. I believe the natives use them for dart tips and they were able to dig it out at the hospital. At least we were working, but no one else was.

Our salvation ended up arriving from back east, as Don Winstel showed up with a bunch of money and talk of making a master tape. We had met Don while playing a bar out toward Lancaster and he truly believed in us. After we moved, he followed us out and we began the next, (and it turned out, the last), chapter together. We hooked up with the folks at Different Fur Music, which was a state of the art 24 track studio in San Francisco. (Don't laugh; that was big time then!) We found more investors and began work on a master tape and beat the bushes to find places to play live.

Keep in mind, this was late 70's; truly the disco era and our blend of jazz, rock, funk, whatever, didn't exactly fit in with the white suit, white belt crowd. We did though, as we all bought white satin suits, (except Rich, who wore black), and changed our name to "White Heat". This helped confuse the locals, who were surely anti-disco, as were we, but the combination of our appearance and east coast attitude was a bit much for some. There was a string of good-sized live music clubs in the Bay Area called the Keystone. (Catchy huh?) There was one in Palo Alto, where we played to no one, another in Berkeley and I think one more. We really wanted to play the Berkeley club, but Jimmy went in there and didn't exactly hit it off with the manager.

So they sent me. The guy says to me, "Who was that other guy? I told him not to come on strong to me and he came on strong to me!" I said, "Oh, he's a bit of a wild Indian", (we did call him Tonto, or Apache, then), "and he meant nothing by it". I schmoozed with him and we were able to get a gig there..... to play for free. Our east coast attitudes were not quite what they were used to out west.

Regardless, we finished the Different Fur recordings, but this was not the Summer of Love and no recording companies were buying and our salvation proved temporary.

Jim and I were thumbing through stacks of records in Berkeley one day when a bomb hit us. I picked up an album by a new band produced by Barry White called, "White Heat". We dejectedly drove home to tell the guys, who set about finding a new name. We came up with the catchy, (we thought), Jack Rozz. Get it? Jazz Rock? It mattered little.

At our wits' ends, Don, who was now our manager, decided we should move to LA. We did, but we never played together again and everyone went their separate ways. Some personal problems led to a falling out that we could not overcome. I have to believe in hindsight, our biggest mistake was leaving Philly, where we had so much going for us. The time and energy expended in simply making the move west, was wasted time and we were much tighter when playing regularly back east. That move put us a solid three months behind. No songs were written and we could only practice; not play. Worse still, when living in Philly, we all had our own places to live. The difficulties of living together while things were going badly, ended up doing what none of the hardships we endured in years past, could do; they cost us the band.

I must admit, we had a lot of fun playing while it lasted. It was a time in my life I would never give back, although apparently not one I would repeat. I haven't played in a band since. I have spent the last 30 years raising a family, coaching youth hockey, hunting the Sierras and (yes, I hate to say, still), doing tree work. Although part time now, I must surely be, a monkey man. It's been fun bringing back those days and I am most appreciative of Bill Hayward, John Senior, Jim Pabarue and Bill Keopnick in putting this reincarnation together. I hope you enjoy their efforts and I hope this prompts those who I have fallen apart from over the years, to look me up and say hi.

Bicey Ferguson