
ZERO TO SIXTIES IN TEN SECONDS: Syndicate Of Sound



The legendary Cali garage band is still serving up the sounds, and on February 23 we were on hand to witness the group deliver a full tribute to 1966, the year they broke big. Pictured above, L-R: Bob Gonzalez (original SOS member – bass), Don Baskin (original SOS member – lead singer, sax, guitar), Joan Chiasera (violin), Tom Muller (keyboard), Kenn Ellner (Count V lead singer, harmonica) Patrick Hennessy (drums), Jim Sawyers (original SOS member, guitar)

BY JUD COST

Who could resist an entire evening of the best rock/pop songs, circa 1966, played superbly by a band that topped the charts, themselves, in that same era? Let's face it, one day these songs as performed by the originals will be gone as surely as vaudeville in the '20s, big band in the '30s or bebop in the '40s. Rest assured, as long as a certain San Jose combo draws breath, these hallowed melodies are in the best possible hands—as played by the Syndicate Of Sound.

Little Lou's BBQ is buzzing tonight for this rare live appearance by the garage-rock combo that put San Jose on

the map in 1966 with its Top Ten national hit “Little Girl.” The snarling tune was their passport to the big time that helped snag appearances on Dick Clark’s “Where The Action Is” and national tours headlined by no less than the Beach Boys, James Brown and the Yardbirds. While still cherishing those hi-octane gigs, bassist Bob Gonzalez, who co-founded the band along with vocalist Don Baskin, is excited to be playing Little Lou’s BBQ, a strip-mall eatery in Campbell, CA, only a few miles from San Jose’s Camden neighborhood where the two grew up. “The Syndicate played its first live show at the St. Frances Cabrini center, not far from here, in 1964,” Gonzalez reveals.



As the PA strikes up the exhilarating theme from the *Route 66* TV show, Baskin (*above*) and Gonzalez (*below*) along with veteran guitarist Jim Sawyers, drummer Pat Hennessy and “new boy” Tom Muller on assorted keyboards—all toggled out like undertakers in threads they borrowed from the Modern Jazz Quartet—plug in and belt out a savage version of the Bobby Troup chestnut “Route 66.” If you still didn’t get it, tonight is subtitled “1966” and will showcase, in addition to the band’s own great stuff, gems from the Byrds, Sir Douglas Quintet, the Knickerbockers, Question Mark & the Mysterians, the Seeds and Sam the Sham & the Pharaohs, all part of a small army of equally hirsute teenage legends from those halcyon days.



If that weren't enough, the boys have another treat in store tonight. Inspired by hugely satisfying recent tours by Ray Davies, Paul McCartney, Roger McGuinn and John Sebastian, where they spun vintage anecdotes to flesh out their career-defining songs, Baskin intends to follow suit, popping the lid off the San Jose scene of long ago with a handful of choice yarns.

The Syndicate's rollicking rundown of Wilson Pickett's "Land Of A Thousand Dances" wallpapers the room with that exciting sound from 50 years ago. It lights a fire under Marcy and Dana from the Jensen School of Performing Arts in Milpitas, attired in mini-dresses and go-go boots and ready to frug, watusi, monkey and swim until the cows come home.



Then, just as quickly as it started, it seems the evening might be over as electric power on the bandstand is extinguished. Longtime Syndicate soundman Bob Cooper and Lou's BBQ owner Lance Wagner bolt out the front door as though they've spotted a weirdo outside with weapons of mass destruction. "It was just a circuit-breaker blow-out," Cooper explains as he returns to his sound board, mission accomplished. Hennessy, a little arm weary from carrying the load while the electric instruments sat there limp, was only too happy to end what Frank Zappa used to lovingly describe as a "drum sola."

Before jumping back into the fire, Baskin tells the story of a house the Syndicate used to rent as a party pad. "It was on McGlincey Lane. We'd go there just to relax with a few friends, and it was called the Beaver Lodge," he says smugly. He insists it had nothing to do with the Beaver Patrol, a Boy Scouts-like organization whose members included Donald Duck's nephews, Huey, Louie and Dewey. Every once in a while, the Campbell police department would smuggle an operative inside the place just to monitor the situation, adds Baskin. "The house was demolished sometime after we abandoned it," he smirks. "And here's a song we used to play a lot in the Beaver Lodge."

Sam the Sham's "Wooly Bully" starts the room spinning out of control with Baskin's tenor sax honking like the bastard son of King Curtis and Arnett Cobb. "I think I jumped the curb there," Baskin apologizes afterwards. "This is the song we played a lot at the Beaver Lodge." Ian Whitcomb's explosive "You Turn Me On" finds the singer panting like a hyper-ventilating Serge Gainsbourg.

The Syndicate pays tribute to Hollywood's Sunset Strip scene next with the Seeds' mega-hit "You're Pushin' Too Hard." "Run For Your Life," a highlight from the Beatles *Rubber Soul* LP, sounds terrific. I was never lucky enough to see the Fab Four in person, but they couldn't have played it much better than this.



And then things got even better. The unexpected show-stopper of the evening (which began at a codger-friendly 5:00 pm), was “As Tears Go By,” a song Mick Jagger and Keith Richards composed for Andrew Loog Oldham’s newest discovery, vocalist Marianne Faithfull. Muller’s dazzling harpsichord intro is something the Stones might have employed in Faithfull’s version, which became her first big hit. Just when it appeared things couldn’t get any sweeter, Joan Chiasera steps forward with a brilliant, classically trained violin solo that brings down the house—a real lump-in-the-throat moment.

Comic relief comes in the form of Baskin’s Arthur Lee story. Blessed with one of the loveliest voices in the history of rock—he admitted he loved the haunting vocal sound of Johnny Mathis—Arthur could also have his erratic moments. He once phoned me at 4:00 in the morning to do a magazine interview, then told me he used to walk up and down Sunset Strip with one shoe on and one shoe off, just so people would notice him. Baskin recalls the day he saw Arthur at the opening of a new Ralph’s supermarket in Hollywood, wielding a cattle-prod. “He was dressed only in a see-through raincoat and a jockstrap, and he was ‘moo’-ing like a cow,” recalls Baskin. The LAPD wasted no time returning the great man to his barn.



Immediately, the level-headed Kenn Ellner (*above*) appears, the frontman of another famed San Jose rock outfit, Count Five, for a robust cameo of his band's smash, "Psychotic Reaction." Dressed in a fire-engine red shirt, he's also wearing one of the five original doomsday black (lined in blood red) Count Dracula capes his band once wore onstage. "We bought them at Victoria's Costumes on San Carlos Ave.," he'd told me earlier. Ellner's raw vocals and blistering harmonica brings just the right touch of psychosis to the reaction in question. Ellner stays on-board for a scintillating take of "Baby Please Don't Go," made famous by Van Morrison's original Irish band, Them. An ancient *Ready Steady Go* video of Them flickers behind on the wall as Sawyers' razor-sharp electric guitar sounds like it could peel the skin from a rattlesnake.

Muller's bar-room piano, flopping on somebody's new-mown lawn, introduces the Lovin' Spoonful's classic nap-time testament, "Daydream." Then Sawyers summons up a grinding, sitar-like sound from his guitar for a trippy look back at Donovan's psychedelic anthem "Sunshine Superman."

The old yarn-spinner returns to describe taking the red-eye from San Jose to play a gig in Detroit. They were booked into a local motel with absolutely no cars in the parking lot. But when they awoke from a nap, the place was buzzing with "residents" who stuck around for only about 15 minutes, or so. Levi Stubbs, lead singer for the 4 Tops, was down at the office (turned out, he owned the joint) and was happy to give them the VIP tour of Motown headquarters, the next day. "He also told us 'Little Girl' had been number one in Detroit for the past three weeks," says Baskin. "It's only recently I've realized the song I wrote when we returned home, 'Keep It Up,' had something of a Motown feel. Too bad they couldn't have given it that special 4 Tops treatment they brought to the Left Banke's 'Walk Away Renee,'" he sighs.

Doing a cannonball into the Tex-Mex hot tub, the band grinds out the Sir Douglas Quintet's "She's About A Mover," with Muller's nod to Augie Meyers' signature Vox Continental organ doing most of the heavy lifting. "Lies" by New York's Knickerbockers is the song that sounded so good to many radio DJs back in the day, they ID'ed it on-air as the Beatles recording under an assumed name.

With the finish line in sight, Gonzalez and Baskin thank a pair of vital cogs in their machinery: Larry Ray, their very first guitar player; local “make it happen” guy Dan Orloff and especially Gary Thompson, the man who produced “Little Girl” for them. “Gary had enough faith in us to book us into the best recording studio in San Francisco,” says Gonzalez.

Baskin’s final anecdote of this glorious evening found the band arriving late in Baltimore without their amps. “We thought we’d borrow the three amps of the opening act, the Cyrkle, a band Brian Epstein had just signed to a management deal,” recalls Baskin. “They agreed to loan us the amps for a thousand dollars each.” An unidentified pair from the Syndicate entourage was so incensed at the very idea, they burrowed their way underneath the Cyrkle’s drum throne, carrying a pair of borrowed mop handles. “All their drummer could hear,” laughs Baskin, “was, ‘The morning sun (BAM) is shining (BAM) like a red (BAM) rubber ball.’ He got completely out of sync and messed the whole thing up.”

And then, in all of its talk-singing, circle of fifths glory, here it comes, the Syndicate of Sound’s major opus, “Little Girl.” What more can be said of a true garage-rock cornerstone! Baskin snarls and laughs derisively in all the right places; Gonzalez’ booming bass pushes the singer, yes, like a cattle prod; if there were any justice, Sawyers should be mentioned among the bay area’s best rock guitarists; Muller’s keyboards are an essential new addition; and Hennessy’s drums bring thunder yet retain the military-like precision the music requires.

A blazing “Shotgun” glances back at Baskin and Gonzalez’ R&B roots, planted by their pre-Syndicate combo the Pharaohs. Then a rip-snorting version of what may be the Byrds’ best song, “I’ll Feel A Whole Lot Better,” penned by Gene Clark, gives Sawyers the chance to display his slippery-fingered 12-string prowess. Sprinkle a little “Shakin’ All Over” confetti on the folks as they prepare to head for the exits, and that brings one very memorable night to a mighty conclusion.

The verdict is just in: This was not only the very best I've ever seen the Syndicate Of Sound play over the past 25 years, it was the most fun I've had listening to music since I don't remember when. As Steve Allen, the finest late-night TV host ever, once wrote in the lyrics to a hit song, "This could be the start of something big."

Photos courtesy Dan Orloff/Bay Area Rocks: www.bayarearocks.org

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