

Rock ^{UK} & Roll

MAGAZINE

Sonny George: The Rocker From Planet Nashville

ISSUE 246 October 2024 £4.49



SILVERBACK
PUBLISHING



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What's the connection between Boz Boorer and Laura Palmer of Screaming Rebel Angels? None other than New York's finest, the Rover Boys Trio, who've previously played with both artists. Comprising Bobby Moller (drums), 'Gentle' Ben Bair (upright bass), and Brian 'Bobo' Hack (guitar/vocals/songwriter), their latest EP, 'Hand-Me Down Heart' is hillbilly-tinged slice of the finest, authentic-sounding rockabilly.

"Our sound is evolving as we write more songs and determine what kind of band we want to be," explains Hack. "We lean towards traditional rockabilly and what we loosely refer to as hillbilly bop. But we're not strict historicists and we're not psychobilly, although by the end of our live sets we get loud and rowdy and out of control. And we're open to going wherever the songs we create take us. To be honest, I'd say we're less about trying to get a particular sound and more about finding the right sound for the particular song. We each have diverse musical interests and influences, and the dilemma, as most bands know, is infusing those influences without copying them verbatim or being so diverse in material that the group doesn't have a cohesive sound. Nevertheless, we're generally going for a

traditional rockabilly or country sound, and hopefully we have something to say and say it in a lyrically or emotionally unique way. I believe for most people rockabilly is a sound-based genre rather than a words-based one, and I say this from a place of deep love and reverence. If the beat and rhythm are compelling, the words can be about virtually anything or about nothing at all. This is true of many genres. As a band we continue to strive for a sound that is dynamic both in sound and substance. Which is elusive, of course."

Drawing on everything and anything, there's a strong presence created in every strum of Hack's guitar. "As I mentioned, our influences are diverse," he says. "Bobby loves everything from big band swing to '50s rhythm and blues, to The Polecats and The Damned and everything in between. Gentle Ben (bass) goes for rockabilly, bluegrass, Americana, and some hard rock stuff. I grew up in a little town in central Pennsylvania, and the only records we had around the house were country and western LPs from the 50s and 60s—Buck Owens, Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, George Jones, Roy Acuff, Lefty Frizzell. I played those records so often you could hear both sides at once. On rare occasions, if we twisted the radio antenna in the right

direction on Saturday nights, WSM in Nashville—950 kilometers away—faintly came in if the skies were clear. Not a strong signal, but audible enough that you could hear Roy Acuff start off the Grand Ole Opry with "Wabash Cannonball" or Hank Snow do "I'm Movin' On." As a kid this was like channeling another world." Of course, the English influence was never too far away. "Like everyone else, Bobby and I grew up listening to the Beatles; I think secretly we pretend during our sets that we're leather-clad rockers playing the Star-Club in Hamburg in 1962. And, of course, when Stray Cats hit America, they introduced us to Johnny Burnette, Gene Vincent, and Eddie Cochran. Blues have always been a passion—Son House, Howlin' Wolf, Magic Sam, Muddy Waters, Otis Rush, Big Bill Broonzy. I seem to be the only one in the band with a Smiths and Morrissey fixation, but perhaps that's for the best. As far as traditional rockabilly, we love Carl Perkins, Hayden Thompson... anyone with a unique and distinctly different vocal style. But as far as biggest influences lyrically, I think Robert Williams (Big Sandy) and Joey Simeone (The Bellfuries) revolutionised songwriting in our genre, redefining the subject matter, perimeters, and style of rockabilly. Just Plain Lonesome is the Sgt. Pepper's of rockabilly. And every new Big Sandy record was like an air drop from the heavens to a desert isle."

While 'Hand-Me-Down Heart' might be the Rover Boys Trio's first EP in their current form, they've been around for far longer, as Hack shares. "Bobby and I have been in the NYC rockabilly scene for some time. He was the drummer for Little Lesley and the Bloodshots (as well as for the psychobilly band The

Spastiks). I often call Bobby "The Backbeat of New York" as he has played with or subbed in many local or visiting bands. I started in Rhythm Bound (a NYC band that still plays occasionally) in the late 1990s. From 2011 to early 2020 I was the lead guitarist in Screamin' Rebel Angels, where I wrote lyrics and music for about half of the songs on the EP and two albums we recorded during that period (Pounce Like a Tiger, Hitch Hike, and Heel Grinder).

After a few bassists we found Gentle Ben, who is versatile in a variety of styles and has played with a few groups here and in Hong Kong, where he lived for a time." It's a passion for music that spurs Hack onwards. "Throughout I had this driving urge to perform my songs as I envisioned them, so in 2018 I finally got up enough nerve—and eventually overcame massive stage fright—to front a group. For a hot minute we were Max Jukes and the mp3, then for an equally brief time we were Bobo and the Blue and Lonesome Two (a play on Bill Monroe's "I'm Blue, I'm Lonesome Too"). Eventually at the end of 2022 I settled on The Rover Boys Trio, which referred to a casual remark by a young woman at the Million Dollar Quartet session at Sun Studios who jokingly called Elvis, Carl, and Jerry Lee 'the Rover Boys Trio.' I may have overestimated the general familiarity with this quote, even within the rockabilly crowd, but at the time I imagined it to be quite clever. Who knows, next week we could be the Dungaree Dans or the Rusholme Ruffians."

"Our EP Hand-Me-Down Heart contains five originals that reflect both our rockabilly and hillbilly sides. Four of the songs we made available on two 7" vinyl singles, with another track ("Hand-Me-Down Heart") available digitally. We recorded the tracks at Mighty Toad Studios

in Brooklyn, a homey sort of place with lots of old-timey equipment. Essentially, the EP is a cry in the wilderness to the rockabilly world that we are here, a message beamed into interstellar space. It's much different than my guitar work in Screamin' Rebel Angels, but who knows, our music could get wilder and more fierce now that we have those five songs out of our system and out into the ether.

It's difficult to choose a favourite, as they're all our little children. I like 'Stop That Boogie' as it's a rockabilly song about how the conservative forces of morality and racism tried to squelch rock and roll, replacing it with sickeningly sweet teen idols and string quartets...but even the strict segregation of the south couldn't keep African-American fans from jumping from the balcony and dancing with the rest of the crowd at the rock and roll revues. It's a bit of an experiment in expanding the subject matter of rockabilly songs. As much as I love them, aren't there enough songs about hot rods and racing with the Devil? It's more than even Henry Ford or Satan could stomach. In such a vast and mysterious universe, we still feel the most salient and pressing expression of Being is yet another ode to the V-8 combustion engine. Perhaps I'm just jealous—as I couldn't write a believable or honest car song if I tried. 'No Way to Love' and 'Hand-Me-Down Heart' are more country-flavoured numbers that delve into miserable, ill-fated relationships and fickle-hearted partners. 'Real Gone Yvonne' is just a fun romp through Paris (Yvonne is my wife's middle name, so it's a little ode to her). But the last song on the EP, 'Angelina' was the most ambitious and difficult track to record, as it's not quite rockabilly. It's its own thing, and probably the one of which I'm most proud for that reason. The intent was to convey a kind of haunted

longing. I'd like to believe the audience for the EP is not just miserable, ill-fated, fickle-hearted people haunted by longing, but that may very well be the case."

Interestingly, the Rover Boys Trio have taken the plunge and only included originals on their EP, a deliberate decision that Hack backs wholeheartedly. "It was a conscious choice to let the focus be on the songs; our photos aren't even on the jacket sleeve—for which some may be thankful. Part of my interest in forming the band was to perform originals, as I have a good number of tunes that haven't been recorded and more in various stages of completion. Twenty or so of them were recorded by Rhythm Bound and Screamin' Rebel Angels over the years, and we do a handful of those songs as well during our gigs. That said, we do perform covers by Hayden Thompson, Narvel Felts, Etta James and Baker Knight. When the night gets going, we might throw in some classics by Joe Clay or Bobby Roberts or Billy Lee Riley. We have even been known to cover a song by one of your realm's more interesting characters, Alvin Stardust. So, our sets are mainly originals with some hopefully well-chosen covers tossed in the mix. I'm always torn on the old argument whether to lure in the audience with popular covers or risk disinterest with originals or obscure material they've never heard. I suppose the answer is to be so dynamic that they forget they haven't heard the song before, rather than pour Shake, Rattle and Roll into the trough for the ten millionth time."

Wasting no time, the Trio getting out there and playing as many shows as they can, with Hack enjoying some shows more than others. "Our best shows have been in small, intimate spaces like Otto's Shrunk Head—where we can fully interact with the

audience. While I really enjoy performing, and try to give it my all, I'm actually pretty reserved and introverted most of the time and with most people. So I'm as happy with a crowd of three as a crowd of thirty or three hundred, and I give the same show regardless. The goal is hopefully to reach whoever might be in the audience, to move them in some way—physically or emotionally, hopefully both. I believe our best show to date hasn't occurred yet." In between the bar shows, they've got a fair few appearances at classic car meet-ups on the cards. "We enjoy playing car shows. There is a general sense that car show audiences are more interested in the vintage cars on display than they are in the bands, but those with ears tend to listen and they'll come to find the music. Car shows are odd venues in that way—the band can be just background music for some folks as they mill around the vendor tables looking at rusty tie rods and used timing chains. I like looking at vintage cars and appreciate the aesthetics, the history, and the aura that surrounds them—but I wouldn't by any stretch call myself a car guy. Car culture, like burlesque, is an artform and lifestyle that seems to overlap well with rockabilly. Cars and women are ubiquitous tropes in

rockabilly songs, so it's no surprise. Add alcohol and some gabardine loop collar shirts and there you have it. I always joke that we're going to give up all these twee and lofty aspirations and just write a song where the only lyrics are "Beer, Girls, Hot Rods," repeated over and over to a single droning guitar note with a whammy bar. A hit song, that."

"We'd like to record more, for sure," Hack tells, when asked about his upcoming plans. "The EP was just a warm hello to the world. We have a number of car shows coming up in Maryland and Connecticut, and a trip to Toronto to play with our friends Bad Fortunes in November. Our dream would be to tour the UK and Europe, and play the big festivals. I'd also like to meet and share the bill with the many artists and bands we admire from across the United States." Considering they were named one of the 'Must See Acts in NYC in 2023' by Manhattan Beat Magazine, it's safe to say wherever they end up playing, it's going to be a real treat.

Kate Allvey

