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The Songs Remain the Same— Over and Over Again

IT'S 11 P.M. ON A FRIDAY NIGHT, AND Bleecker St. is teeming with the high-spirited overflow from the pedestrian rock bars. Rock 'n' Roll Cafe, despite a \$10 cover and \$4 beers, is packed with enough undergrads and outer-borough townies to shoot a spring break episode of *The Grind*. Soft Parade, the Doors tribute band, is playing tonight, and there's a standing-room-only crush of people near the stage of the mid-sized club.

On any weekend night, any number of bulletproof nightbirds will inevitably end up in places like this, where a responsible designated driver would never have delivered them. Blithely mingling with the overwhelmingly white collegiate crowd swaying to piped-in ELO and Eric Clapton, there's a happy-hour clique of smartly dressed women in their 30s, one black couple, one Japanese couple and several Pakistanis. A buxom trio in a cloud of Obsession file past a queue of indignant women. Off to the side, in a little alcove, a wisp of a girl in a tight black denim ensemble, her hair a lemon-chiffon pastry puff, blocks the entrance to the ladies' room, head in hand, mascara streaming. She's furiously pounding on the door when someone shouts, "Gloria!" She staggers away, cursing, looking exasperated.

Among the audience out on the floor, a ticket-holder's line strategy is in effect. People shuffle around, dispatch emissaries with drink orders from across the room, flirt with and sucker-punch each other—careful all the while not to lose their spots. The room reeks of clove cigarette.

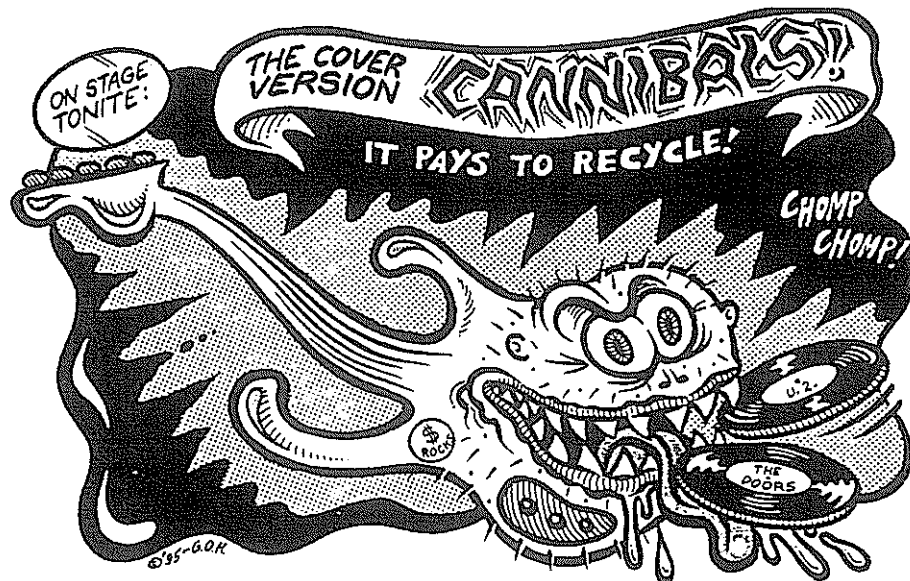
Joe Russo enters in leather and suede, snaking his way through the crowd to the stage. A guy spots him and shouts, "Hey, Jim Morrison!" There's a spray of beer still lingering in the air as he turns to his date and asks, "Do his eyes say everything?" Across the room people inch closer to the stage, craning their necks to get a glimpse of Mr. Mojo—some gamely ready for a laugh, others with the quietly reverent look of those who have covered their heads, exposed their beads and

When asked what the goals of his band are, Jordan says that most of the guys in Zoo Station have fairly lucrative jobs in sales, insurance, contracting and engineering—which suggests they won't be quitting their day jobs anytime soon.

Derek Lathrop is rhythm guitarist for a Toronto Pearl Jam tribute band called Vitalogy. He takes a pragmatic view similar to Jordan's. "People can see us for a lot less than it would cost them to see Pearl Jam. And if you're out at a club and you're really into hearing some tunes with the Seattle sound, you're pretty much guaranteed it with us."

For Lathrop and Vitalogy, who tribute Pearl Jam primarily in the "Golden Horseshoe" between Kingston and Niagara Falls, it's a decidedly part-time endeavor. "It's not our lifelong ambition to be the world's greatest tribute band. We all have original projects we're working on. We do it for fun—that and to keep playing. I'd rather play than not play, and there's a lot more opportunity for bands that play covers as opposed to original material. It also pays a lot better."

Unlike, say, Soft Parade, Lathrop says Vitalogy doesn't have to look as well as sound like Pearl Jam, because the real Pearl Jam no longer promotes a visual image. "They haven't made a video or appeared on their records for years. That's why we didn't do publicity photos—figured we didn't need 'em."



THE FLATTERY IS SINCERE.

are fully prepared to hear the scream of the butterfly.

Onstage, the bespectacled keyboard player—a ringer for Ray Manzarek, in a mod suit and severe blond part—focuses intently on his Fender piano bass. The guitar player, a plump Robbie Krieger, noodles around the peripheries, where he and an unobtrusive John Densmore type act as thrill-seeker enablers. They keep the rhythm steady so the singer can swagger ethereally around the stage and make his Delphic pronouncements.

Which Russo, a stocky Alexander-the-Great-period Morrison, does perfectly. Boozily hanging on the mic stand, rolling his hips, flailing his arms, tripping over his boot tips, cupping his ear with one hand and shaking a pair of maracas in the other, Russo's got the crooner pitch and diction—wavering somewhere between Southern California Mysterious and bayou evangelist—impeccably Morrison. A small group of NYU business majors near the stage cheers, plays air drums and solemnly recites the lyrics to "Spanish Caravan" and "Not to Touch the Earth."

As a unit, the band generates great *deja-vu* charisma. Around the room, a lot of people look like they're feeling vindicated in their conviction that if Jim Morrison were still

At the very least, going to a tribute show can make you feel like a McClub consumer, provided with a menu of choices ranging from classic standbys to lite novelties, all moderately sized for moderate budgets and appetites. Think about this: a professional musician can learn an entire record note for note over a weekend, and a sizable audience—already familiar with the material and interested in how close to the original a tribute will be—will go out to a nightclub to see it performed that Monday.

It does make you ponder the state of popular culture when rock 'n' roll, long the sole link between suburbia and bohemia, is applauded for cannibalizing itself in this way. Hundreds of bands plugging away across the metropolitan area are unable to attract decent-sized audiences unless they perform some successful mainstream artist's songs note for note.

Caught between arena rock and a hard place, all the bands I spoke with use tribute shows to stay in practice and earn some money. The career musicians among them were motivated by the ultimate goal of one day quitting their day jobs and having more time to focus on original projects.

Only one of the bands had reached this day-job-quitting pinnacle—and they were the one band who didn't seem to have an interest in making it with their own, original songs.

For the members of Soft Parade, tributing has become a full-time gig. It has enabled them to spread the good news of the Doors to

around today, he'd blow Trent Reznor away.

For years now, facsimiles of the Doors, Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones have been playing colleges and clubs just off the highway. They have names like Soft Parade, Physical Graffiti and Sticky Fingers, and they're major draws along the neon promenades of the Jersey shore, Sayreville's Club Bene (a high-70s-style venue where performers ranging from Dion to the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band appear in a supper-club setting) and the Wave, which bills itself as "Staten Island's largest professional nightclub—dollar beers, dollar shots all night, every night." You can catch them at any number of Long Island bars running ads in *The Aquarian*, and in Manhattan clubs like Wetlands and Rock 'n' Roll Cafe.

Until recently, the scene consisted primarily of lovingly detailed tributes to the glory days of rock bands who either don't exist anymore or have aged beyond recognition and rarely tour. Now a new generation of bands has begun to crop up, doing tributes to currently touring acts. All in all, it's now possible for some clubs to devote much of their booking schedules to these supergroup facsimile acts.

"Tribute bands are much bigger than origi-

Germany, France, Israel, Holland and Italy over the last five years. They're one of the most successful tribute bands on the East Coast, partly because they're among the most authentic in sound and appearance, partly because they're recreating a band that no longer exists.

Of course, this means there are extreme restrictions on the range and execution of their performances. I ask if they ever get tired of doing the same show several times a week, week after week, year after year.

"Never," Joe Russo claims. It was Russo, the heroically coiffed frontman, who conceived the idea of a Doors tribute band back in the early 80s, when interest in the Doors had its first resurgence. He says he's never felt the urge to move on to original material since putting Soft Parade together six years ago.

"I feel no connection to contemporary pop music. It's too loud. I can't understand the words. It's too hard and cynical for me."

Though his affinities are with the 60s, he insists that a revival is not Soft Parade's objective—and that, despite the considerable effort in recreating the visual aspect of a Doors show, neither is impersonation. "The point," he says, "is to tap into a mood that the combination of the Doors' music and Jim Morrison's personality created." Russo describes this as a spirit of freedom and honesty he finds sadly absent from contemporary popular music.

Does recreating this mood require an intimate relationship with Jim Morrison's spirit? "Yeah. I think there has to be for it to be

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nal bands on Staten Island," explains Mike Campbell, who does booking for the Wave, "because audiences know the songs and they can sing along. If they get the sound and the image right, the bands build up a following and the audience comes back—not an easy thing for an original band to do. In a good club, people can get close to the stage, sit down, have a beer and enjoy." Campbell counts Doors, Pink Floyd and Black Sabbath tribute bands among the Wave's biggest draws, bringing anywhere from 500 to 800 into the club on a weekend night.

Given the ready audience, receptive venues and a wealth of material to choose from, lots of previously original bands put together tribute shows and take them on the road. Despite a steady source of income and an occasional cult following, however, these bands face a number of se-

rious impediments to their musical careers. Recording is pretty much out of the question, as are any hopes of attaining the kind of recognition the bands they tribute enjoy. You have to wonder about the aspirations of these musicians behind the rants and feedback.

Take Zoo Station, a U2 tribute band from Springfield, MA. They played their first show on St. Patrick's Day, 1993, and have since been touring colleges and nightclubs all over the Northeast. When I ask them why they pursue this essentially gloryless path rather than their own stardom, they offer three reasons.

First, they say they share an ideological affinity with the Dublin band. "We like what U2 stands for politically," Shaun Jordan, the band's bassist and manager, tells me over the phone from his home in suburban Westfield. Second, they're answering a demand. "We started out doing both originals and covers," he explains. "People really liked the covers and it just progressed from there."

Finally, doing a tribute show simply pays a lot better than doing original shows. An original band can make \$700-\$800 a show in a club—if they're well-connected enough to get booked. A tribute band can make up to \$2000 a night at the same club, and nearly twice that at colleges.

convincing and genuine," Russo agrees. "It's a natural element of a similar spirit that comes through and makes it successful. An aspect of my personality comes to the fore on stage with the music, and it just kind of takes over." As a result, he says, "What we do is very similar in effect [to what the Doors did] on stage."

Given that both the band and its audiences are too young to have seen the original Doors play live, Soft Parade's performances are necessarily based on a mythology of Morrison and the Doors. Even Russo is occasionally surprised by the reach and staying power that myth has had.

"As soon as we leave the United States—where our audiences are between 21 and 31, because of the legal drinking age in most of the places we play—you'd be shocked at how many kids in their teens turn up."

Despite his general optimism, Russo fully recognizes the built-in limits to this tribute scene. I ask about his plans for the band.

"I guess Broadway would be the ultimate. But considering how the Doors movie bombed, I don't know who would sink that kind of money into it."

For the time being, Russo and the band seem content to continue putting on shows that, at best, celebrate something a lot of people still love but can no longer have.

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