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## Magazine

ISSUE #24

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MOOG-TASTIC ISSUE

# Wendy Carlos

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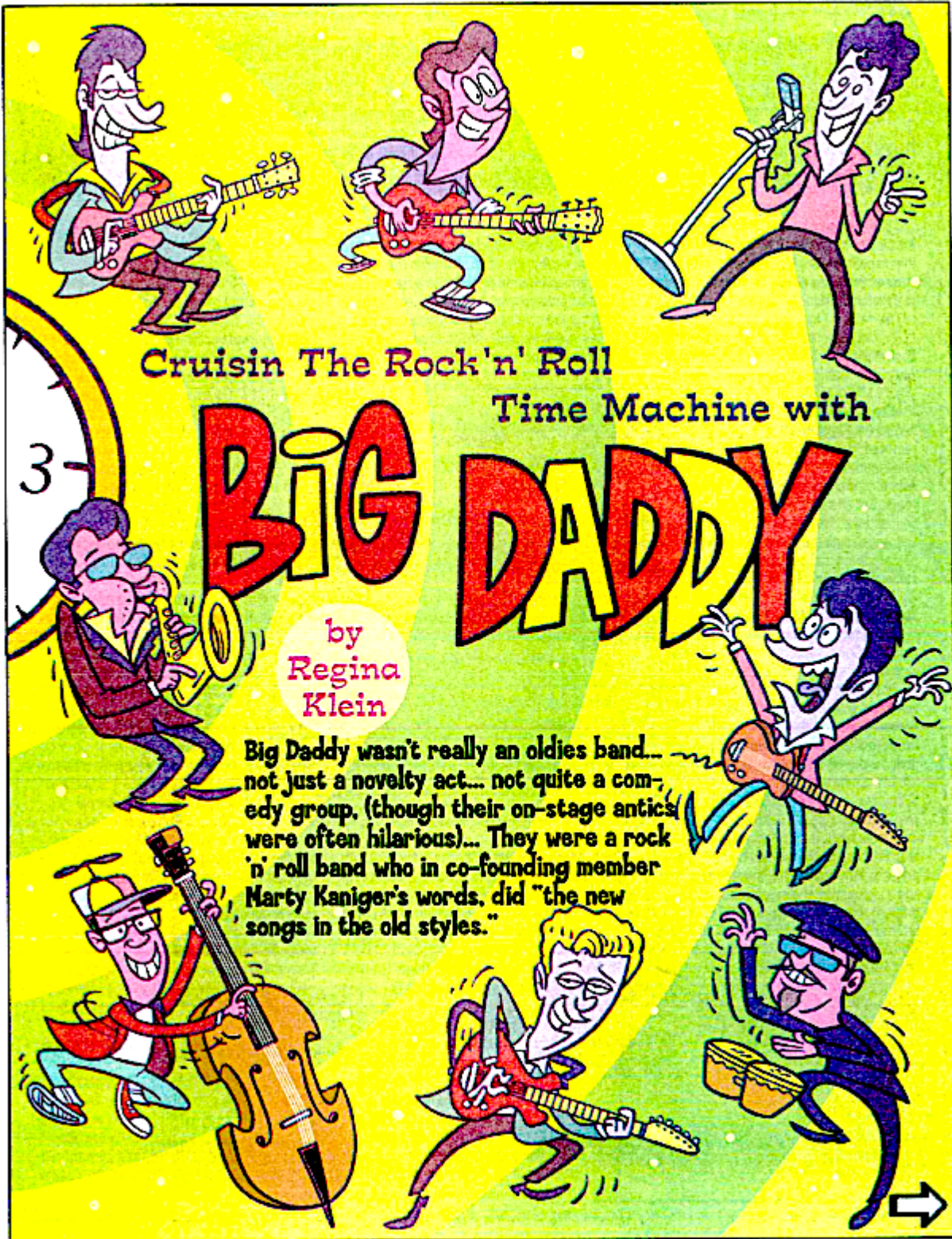
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3





In The Beginning: A 1985 shot of the first lineup

greaser style, a la Sha Na Na — it was very loose and fun. Bob was the '50s freak," Marty recalls. "He was also big on props and had a suitcase full of toys."

However, the Big Daddy that emerged with the release of *What Really Happened...* saw the transformation of members into their '50s personifications, and a show with a lot of surprises. By their first official show, band members had shaved their beards off and Dippity Doo'd their hair (Marty confirms it was actually Spritz Forte and Dep). They had a home base at a local club, *At My Place*, in Santa Monica, and performed regularly for die-hard fans that would climb mountains (or at least drive several hours on the 405 freeway) to make it to each and every show. I asked fan and former commuter, Shirley Peterson, what drew her to that kind of dedication. "What those guys did to the songs was perfect and cracked me up every time," says Shirley, a self-confessed "groupie," who "would have loved to have been in their road crew."

#### More Than a One-Shot Wonder

By the second album, *"Meanwhile... Back in the States,"* (referencing a Cadets' 45) full-blown characters had emerged: "Marty the K" as the straight man (and mother hen) of the group; "Lightnin' Bob," energetic, unpredictable and sporting lightning bolt lamé; Tom Lee as the irrepressible but lovable "Bubba"; Dave as the "Collegiate"; John Hatton, "Spazz," and the nerd (stand-up bass); Gary as "Cubby"—the Mickey Mouse drummer; Vince Claverella, "The Beatnik" (piano & organ); and Jim Reeves as "The Hoodlum" (sax & flute). The show was non-stop zaniness with visual parody upon musical parody as was the case with the Big Daddy version of "Chariots of Fire." To a Ventures'-style instrumental, Marty, "the K," would come running in from the background wearing white gym shorts three sizes too big (making his pipe-cleaner legs and frame look all the more thin), proudly

carrying the Olympic torch (which in this case was a brightly lit toilet plunger). "Eye of the Tiger" was sung a cappella around a trash can lit-up as if it were a bonfire on the streets of New York City, circa the 1950s, followed by Tom "Bubba" Lee singing "Ebony and Ivory" as a sermonizing Little Richard-gone-awry.

What started as a one-off recording project blossomed into radio, TV and concert tours in the U.S., the U.K. (even opening for Gary Glitter at Wembley Arena), Germany, Australia, and a total of four records on Rhino — all recorded at Sunburst. Songs were chosen based on their potential to be familiar for years to come and conduciveness for quirky ambiguity. The process was a democratic one; the records were, in the words of Gary Hoffman, "gang-produced."



Big Daddy's brilliant 1992 "Sgt. Pepper's" album

#### British Chartmakers (1985)

The band was already working on the second album when the British label Making Waves wanted to release a 4-song EP with a bonus cut. "Dancing in the Dark" (a la Pat Boone's '61 hit, "Moody River"), from the yet to be released *Meanwhile... Back in the States*, was chosen because the Springsteen original was then on the charts. Trevor Dann, the producer of the successful BBC TV show *Old Grey Whistle Test*, made the choice to have the band perform "Dancing in the Dark" (along with "Ebony and Ivory") live on the show. The response was huge and immediate, and

"Dancing..." became a hit single on the British charts. A video was quickly produced, with disastrous results, causing Godley and Creme of the band 10cc to critique that "Stevie Wonder could have done a better job directing."

Those hit record days and the month-long tour of England are fondly remembered. Dave recalls a shoe salesman, who, while helping him and John, heard Big Daddy's version of "Dancing..." on the store's radio and exclaimed "Imagine that, they've taken a decent song and ruined it!" Dave also recalls the excitement when Big Daddy's version of "Dancing..." jumped ahead of Springsteen's version on the charts. "You could hear our version playing on three radio stations simultaneously," Gary recalls. And Marty

remembers hearing the clanging of trashcans below their hotel window, and the trash man whistling the song, as if it was "helping him get through his day."

"That's when I felt that we had done something, given a little something to the world, performed a service." In excess of 80,000 units of the EP were sold, and the record peaked at Number 21 on the British national charts.

#### "Stranded in the Jungle" (1991)

"Stranded in the Jungle" (that Cadets' song again), written and directed by Ira Hefler, was based on the band's story of emergence and assimilation after their long Laotian captivity. Meant to promote the release of their CD, *Cutting Their Own Groove*, the play featured all eight Big Daddy members and had a successful 8-week run at *The Groundlings Theatre* in LA.

#### "Sgt. Peppers" (1992)

Recognizing that the '50s influence which inspired a rendition often outlived the shelf life of a pop hit, Big Daddy decided to tackle a classic album in its



The Big Daddy boys head off to entertain our troops in 1991

## BIG DADDY (Cont. from Pg. 7)

entirety, and *Sgt. Peppers* was released twenty-five years to the day (June 2nd) after the Beatles' release. The songs — all in their original order — are reinterpreted in the style of the '50s artists that the Beatles credit for their own inspiration — resulting in a "tribute upon a tribute."

Among the highlights are Don Raymond, (who replaced Dave Starns in late '86) singing a rendition of "With a Little Help From My Friends," reminiscent of Johnny Mathis' "Chances Are" with a Ray Conniff Orchestra-styled string and flute arrangement by Big Daddy's own John Hutton; "Within You, Without You" featuring Tom Lee as beat poet, and finally, "A Day in the Life," with Marty paying tribute to Buddy Holly — (complete with sustained end note and backward message). Oddly, the album wasn't released in England — it could only be found as an import — which was a major disappointment to the band. Though critically acclaimed, Big Daddy's *Sgt. Peppers* sold only 20,000 units and was their last record on Rhino.

### Accolades and not (1983-1992)

Amidst consistently positive press, often commenting that the band's renditions were better than the hitmakers', it was also reassuring that they were appreciated by artists themselves. David Byrne, when interviewed for *Details* magazine (March, 1992), was asked about other people's versions of his *Talking Heads* material, and replied, "...Big Daddy did a really funny version of *Once in a Lifetime* — it was like doo-wop calypso." Albert Lee, guitarist for the Everly Brothers while they were recording at Sunburst, is noted to have said that Don and Phil Everly loved hearing their influence on "Supertreak." Richard Pryor, John Candy, members of the Eagles and Van Halen were also reportedly among the group's fans.

However, Big Daddy's renditions could stir up controversy. Such as with "In the Living Years," (*Cutting Their Own Groove*) which was removed from the CD lineup in some countries — as the "Leader of the Pack" treatment, (including references to "Deadman's Curve," and not wearing a helmet), seemed insensitive to the moving tribute that artist Mike Rutherford had meant for his late father. "Jump" (*Meanwhile... Back in the States*) introduced a "Summertime Blues" riff which prompted Eddie Cochran's mother to seek and receive a

settlement with Rhino.

### The Sun Also Sets (1994)

1984-1993 were years of heavy performing that took a toll on members' family life and other career pursuits. Dave left the group in late '86, moving his family back to his hometown, Hammond, Louisiana. Tom Lee followed suit in '94, moving back to Detroit, Michigan. *At My Place* closed in the early '90s. Marty recalls that concept gigs dwindled, while corporate 'theme-parties' and shows at Nevada casinos (though more lucrative)



The final Big Daddy lineup in 1994: L to R: Tom Lee, Damon DeGrigoren, Don Raymond, Bob Wayne, Bob Sandman, John Hutton and Marty Kaniger

became the routine.

Finally, "it was too many years of playing 'Rock Around the Clock.' Radio's lack of reception and an endless run of ineffectual managers contributed to flat record sales and frustrated both the group and Rhino. Richard Foos laments, "It was difficult to market Big Daddy, and a disappointment that they never achieved the success they deserved."

### "Chantmania" (1994), "Grease" (1998), etc.

Big Daddy's collaborations have happened throughout their run (and still occur today) including original songs written and recorded for the indie film, *The Hideous Sun Demons*, *The Special Edition* (1984), featuring a then unknown Jay Leno; jingles including original music for *The Lincoln Park Zoo* (nominated for a *Clio* in 1986), and music produced for and performed on-camera in the film *Book of Love* (New Line Cinema, 1991).



In 1994, Rhino approached Bob about doing a parody of the successful record, *Chant*, by the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos. Although it wasn't a Big Daddy project per se, *Chantmania* captured the voices of Don Raymond, Marty Kaniger, and Bob Wayne (multi-tracked with ultra-cathedral reverb) on irreverent reinterpretations, Gregorian Chant-style, such as "Hey, Hey We're the Monks," "We Will Rock You,"

and "Losing My Religion." *Chantmania* became Rhino's most successful original recording, selling in excess of 100,000 units.

Big Daddy has backed up Lesley Gore, Lou Christie, Darlene Love, Freddy Cannon, and were themselves featured on the compilation *Grease is the Word* (Rhino, '98) which covered songs from *Grease* with original '50s stars from the period.

### The Spirit Goes On

Big Daddy reunited in 1997 for a tribute concert in memory of former band member and charismatic sax man, Bob "Guido" Sandman. Bob Wayne, reflecting back on the evening, calls it "a nostalgic band meeting a nostalgic moment."

### ...And On and On

In 2000, Oglio Records released *The Best of Big Daddy*, including tracks from all four albums plus "Little Red Corvette" (recorded live, 1989), "Sukiyaki" (Japanese-only release, 1992) and the newly recorded "My Heart Will Go On" (from the film *Titanic*).

Even though Big Daddy is no longer performing and all four Rhino releases are out of print, a fan-based Web site <[www.bigdaddyfan.com](http://www.bigdaddyfan.com)> remains active. The *Best of...* CD is still available, and a new crop of tunes, ripe for transformation, abounds.



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