

The Best Of Big Daddy

North Hollywood, CA – 1988

The gig went great! The show came off without a hitch. The soundman nailed it like never before. The stage monitors were so loud and clear, we could hear every note. our harmonies were "tight as a gnat's ass" We copped the groove from the first note of the first song and never let go 'til the last note of the last song of the last encore. The band rocked! The audience went nuts!

It was usually that way at the Palomino. The nightclub in North Hollywood had a history. a vibe that was truly awesome. Just think. .we had played on the same stage that had been graced by such country and rock legends as Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Ricky Nelson. to name but a few. Wow! What an honor! What a night!

The lights were up. Equipment was being packed up and cleared from the stage. A good number of people were still milling around as I walked from the dressing room, through the club, towards the front door, my car, and home. I was dog-tired but still elated from the show. As I passed the bar, someone reached out, grabbed my hand and started shaking it furiously. I turned around to see this grizzled old guy that I could probably best describe as having stepped right out of the cast of "Deliverance" Leathery skin, yellowish-gray hair under a John Deere cap, Harley Davidson T-shirt barely tucked into a pair of baggy old jeans held up by a pair of tattered red suspenders. He continued pumping my hand as he reached his other arm around my shoulder, pulled me right up close to him and said, through breath reeking of beer and stale cigarettes.

"I seen a lotta shows here.. and I just seen yers. and man, I gotta tell ya. that tonight. I saw more talent up there on that one stage..." At this point I'm thinking to myself, "You really can't judge a book by its cover. This guy's a fan. How cool!" My post-show elation intensifies as he continues, "wasted!" Now I'm thinking, "Did someone just drop an amplifier off the stage, or was that noise the sound of my feet slamming back down to the floor?" Without missing a beat, he goes on, "Why don't'cha just do them old songs the way they's s'posed to be done, and them new songs the way they's s'posed to be done?"

The truth is, not everyone "got it" the Big Daddy concept, that is. contemporary hits arranged and performed in the classic styles of 1950's Rock & Roll. But enough people got it, and loved it to keep Big Daddy rockin' & rollin' through four albums on Rhino Records, numerous TV and movie appearances, a top twenty hit in England, and more concert and club dates than you could shake an "All Access Backstage Pass" at!

From 1983 to 1994, Big Daddy roamed the Rock & Roll landscape foraging for the hit songs of the day, plucking them from the charts, chewing them up, digesting them and then spitting them back out, never to sound the same. Though the lyrics and melodies were virtually unchanged, the songs sounded as if they had been written and recorded in the golden age of Rock & Roll. the 1950's. Rick James' "Super Freak" as an Everly Brothers ballad, the Police's "Every Breath You Take" as classic Elvis, "Help Me Make It Through The Night" the Coasters? Was nothing sacred? Not as far as we were concerned.

The original Big Daddy line-up, starting with our first album, " What Really Happened To The Band Of '59", consisted of Bob Wayne (vocals), David Starns (vocals and lead guitar), Tom Lee (vocals and rhythm guitar), Gary Hoffman (drums and vocals) and myself, Marty Kaniger (vocals and rhythm guitar). Bob and I, childhood friends since 1955, grew up together in West Los Angeles. Around 1973 we formed an "Oldies" group which we called "Big Daddy Dipstick and the Lube Jobs" This group played around the Southern California area throughout most of the 70's. During this time the name was shortened to "Big Daddy", and the group's personnel changed several times. By the end of the 70's the group had broken up. In 1981, Bob opened a recording studio in Culver City, California. The studio was just getting up and running when he gave me a call and invited me over to record some tracks... just for fun. just to "work some of the bugs out" We got some musicians together: Gary Hoffman, from the "Oldies" group Big Daddy, on drums, Tom Lee, a recent transplant from Michigan who was introduced to us by mutual friend and musician Don Raymond (remember that name!), on bass vocals, and a few other guys. David Starns was there but didn't play on the session. At the time, he was working for Bob as an assistant engineer. I found out later what a great guitarist and singer he really was.

After working together in the studio, Bob, Gary, Tom and I talked about putting the "Oldies" group Big Daddy back together. Needing a lead guitar and another singer, we brought David Starns into the fold and began rehearsing. Before we could even book a gig, Rhino co-founder Richard Foos, who was doing some projects at Bob's studio, upon hearing of the re-formation of the group, suggested the idea of recording an album of contemporary songs done in Doo Wop styles. We expanded the concept to include as many different styles from the 50's and early 60's as we could and started work on our first album. Thus was born the second incarnation of Big Daddy.



Along with the first album, "Big Daddy... What Really Happened To The Band Of '59", came the "Big Daddy Story" Rhino executives Harold Bronson and Richard Foos wanted something different that they could use to promote the group and the new album. It was decided that a story would be concocted to explain why the group could only play new songs in old styles. The story, which was told in great detail on the back of the album, went as follows: While on a USO tour of Southeast Asia in 1959, Big Daddy was captured by Communist forces and held captive until the mid 80's at which time they were rescued by C.I.A. forces and subsequently returned to the United States. While being held at Camp David for de-briefing, they were given sheet music of contemporary hit songs so that they could re-build their repertoire and get back to the only work they knew. making music. Of course, not having heard the evolution of Rock music during the quarter century they spent imprisoned in the jungles of Laos, they arranged and performed these songs the only way they knew how. in the classic styles of the 1950's. Rhino got wind of the recordings made by Big Daddy at the Camp David recording studio and immediately signed them and released the album. Hey! It could've happened!

The album was actually recorded at Bob's studio in Culver City, Sunburst Recording, and released in 1983. We then added John Hutton on bass, Jim Reeves on sax and Vince Ciavarella on keyboards. We were now ready to get out and start performing our material for the public. Besides the club and concert circuits, there were other projects that we added our unique abilities to, such as: writing and recording songs for the movie "Hideous Sun Demon - The Special Edition", an on screen performance in the New Line Cinema film "Book Of Love", writing and recording the Cleo nominated TV commercial for Chicago's "Lincoln Park Zoo", and the "Nerds Cereal" spot for Ralston Purina. We also appeared on various TV shows including "The Martin Mull Show" and "Throb" Hey! It was happening!

In late '84 we started recording our second album "Meanwhile... Back In The States" The album was almost finished when, in January of '85, we were asked to go to England to promote our first album, which was about to be released there. The English label, Making Waves/EMI, asked us if we had a new recording that could be added to the cassette of "... What Really Happened To The Band Of '59" as a bonus cut. When they heard that we had just finished a version of Bruce Springsteen's "Dancing In The Dark" done as a Pat Boone ballad, they flipped! Springsteen's record was going up the English charts, and so the timing couldn't have been better. On our first night in England, we performed "Dancing In The Dark" live on the TV show "Old Grey Whistle Test" We were scheduled to do a different song off the album, one that was supposed to have been the single, but the producer of the show had heard our tape of "Dancing In The Dark" and insisted on a last minute change. "Do the Springsteen tune," he said, "trust me." We did, and he was right. Within a week our record was being played on the radio all over England and by the week after that, it hit the charts. We toured extensively throughout the UK as "Dancing In The Dark" worked its way up and eventually reached #20 on the national charts, selling in excess of 80,000 copies.

Upon returning to the U.S., we got back to touring and promoting the release of our second LP "Meanwhile... Back In The States" We began playing at major corporate events and hotel showrooms such as Caesar's Tahoe, Harrah's and Bally's in Reno, and the Tropicana in Las Vegas. In 1987 we opened for Jay Leno at the Universal Amphitheatre in Los Angeles and then flew off to Australia for an extended engagement at Kinsella's, the most prestigious nightclub in the city of Sydney. Shortly before leaving for Australia, another personnel change was made; David Starns left the group and was replaced by Don Raymond (remember that name?) on lead guitar and vocals. Shortly after returning from Australia, Jim Reeves and Gary Hoffman left, followed soon thereafter by Vince Ciavarella.

As we started laying down tracks for album number three, "Cutting Their Own Groove", Hal Melia took over on sax, Billy Block on drums and Norman A. Norman (you read it right. Norman A. Norman) on keyboards. This album was in the works for almost three years. During that time, and about halfway through the recordings, Hal and Billy bowed out and were replaced by Bob "Guido" Sandman and Damon DeGrignon.

"Cutting Their Own Groove" was released in April of 1991. Rhino decided to take a different approach to promoting this album. Instead of going out on the road in conjunction with the release of our new CD (notice, I said CD... sorry folks, no more vinyl from this point on!), it was decided that Big Daddy would star in its own play. A screenwriter friend of Bob's and mine, Ira Hefler, wrote a script based on the "captivity" story. The cast consisted of Big Daddy, some friends and relatives, and two professional actors, Don Dolan and Wayne Duvall. "Big Daddy... Stranded In The Jungle" ran for eight weeks at the Groundlings Theatre in West Hollywood. It turned out to be a great way to gain the attention of the entertainment press and a helluva lot of fun to boot.

Well, as you might have already guessed, with the closing of the play it was time, once again, to hit the road. From record industry convention concerts in Dallas and Minneapolis to "The Bottom Line" in New York City, we left a trail of fractured hits and happy fans. We spent the entire month of December 1991 touring the United Kingdom as special guests of the famous. the really famous. and now the really infamous Gary Glitter. Gary, probably England's most eccentric "Glam Rock" star, had become known for his yearly "Christmas Gang Show" tours which zigzagged all across England and Scotland with concert performances at most of Britain's larger arenas. We even had the thrill of playing two sold out nights at London's legendary Wembley. It was nice to have the opportunity to revisit the land that had given us our hit record a few years earlier.

Returning from England, we went to work trying to convince Rhino to accept a concept for our next CD. Five years earlier, Bob had come up with the idea of recording the Beatles' entire "Sgt. Pepper" album. Big Daddy style, of course. At that time, it was coming up on the twentieth anniversary of the release of what was, arguably, the Beatles' greatest work. What could be more perfect? Rhino wasn't convinced and so they passed on the idea, and the opportunity soon slipped away. We presented the idea to them again in January of '92 and this time, with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the release of the Beatles' classic coming up on June 2nd of that year, they said "yes" With little time and lots of work ahead, we started on our fourth album "Big Daddy. Sgt. Pepper's" With the exception of Norman A. Norman leaving and being replaced on keyboards by Tim Bonhomme, the line-up remained the same.

"Sgt. Pepper's" was released on June 2nd 1992. It contained the same songs as the Beatles' version. in the exact same order with the exact same amount of space between the songs. and the length of that sustained note at the end of "A Day In The Life" the same! Oh yes, there's even a backward masked message. The only difference was that the sounds, the styles, were more like those of the Beatles' early influences than the Beatles themselves. It was the sounds of Jerry Lee Lewis and Dion and Elvis and Buddy Holly and more that Big Daddy brought to this, our final album of the century. We felt it was a fitting tribute to both the Beatles and our common heroes.

For some strange reason, "Big Daddy. Sgt. Pepper's" was never released in England. This remains a mystery to us to this day. The German release, however, did very well and so it wasn't long before we took off on a whirlwind tour of Germany and Switzerland. The following year brought more personnel changes, as John Hatton, Damon DeGrignon, and Bob Sandman left the band and were replaced by Denny Croy on bass, Todd Tatum on drums, and Ed Smart on sax. We continued performing for the next couple of years but eventually the tours all seemed a little longer, the suitcases a little heavier and the gigs a little less exciting. It was fun while it lasted, but maybe the time had come to ride that old tour bus off into the sunset.

Big Daddy has performed only once since packing it in around 1994. We got together in January of '97 for a reunion concert as part of a benefit organized for the family of our former sax player Bob "Guido" Sandman, who had passed away in December of 1996. After Big Daddy, "Guido" played sax with, and became the Musical Director for The Brian Setzer Orchestra. Brian showed up at the event and sat in with us. It was a sad, yet magical night, to be sure. but it was only one night.

We've all since gone on to individually pursue other endeavors, mostly in the music and entertainment industry, though we often work together, in various combinations on different projects. A few years ago, for example, Bob, Don and I used our Big Daddy sensibilities to turn out another Rhino CD entitled "Chantmania" in which we took virtually the same concept, contemporary hits done in styles that were popular decades earlier, only this time. it was centuries! Taking on the personas of the "Benzedrine Monks", we performed classic rock songs in the style of Gregorian Chants. Big Daddy in sackcloth?

Earlier this year, the guys at Rhino and Carl Caprioglio (you read it right. Caprioglio!) of Oglio Records got together and discussed re-packaging and releasing a series of "Best Of. " CDs, making available once again some of the classic recordings from Rhino's past. We were honored when they chose Big Daddy to spearhead this effort.

It took this CD, "The Best Of Big Daddy", to finally get the core members of the group back together again. as Big Daddy. We chose the cuts that appear on this album: three from each of our first three albums and four from "Sgt. Pepper's", plus a previously unreleased live recording of "Little Red Corvette", a Beach Boys' style version of "Sukiyaki" which was only available on the Japanese release of "Cutting Their Own Groove", and finally the newly recorded bonus cut. a rousing, rockabilly romp through the titanic hit "My Heart Will Go On", our first "Big Daddy" recording in more than eight years. Seems like only yesterday... Guess it's like riding a bike.

All the members of Big Daddy, past and present, hope that you enjoy this CD. We're all extremely proud of the work we've done over the past eighteen years, and though our first four albums are currently out of print, maybe this one will spark renewed interest. Maybe they'll be re-released. and maybe. if you close your eyes and repeat the words. "I do believe in Big Daddy, I do believe in Big Daddy. " Just maybe. there might even be a whole new Big Daddy CD. Hey! It could happen!

Marty Kaniger,
Founding member, Big Daddy

