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Hometown Band Gets Taste of Rock & Roll Royalty

By Larry Rifkin

I've been blessed in my various careers to have worked with, interviewed and come into contact with an amazing array of talent from Charlton Heston to Ringo Starr to Carole King to Sarah Brightman.

A quarter of a century and hundreds of programs later for Connecticut Public Television, and a renewed career in radio at WATR interviewing America's best and brightest, has well satisfied my desire to meet the famous.

Truth is, they are no different than the rest of us. Well actually they are. They're generally better left as the glamorized figures we imagine in the PEOPLE Magazine. Allowed personal contact, you realize how their careers have made them more guarded, more insecure and more dependent on handlers than you could ever imagine.

I say this only to suggest that I'm more accustomed to working with stars than imagining myself to be one. And that's just as well. Yet, for one small moment in time, I was given the chance to go out on a large stage and have a taste, just one sip, of it all.

The band I've been in for the last four years, BOOM, took a turn on a major festival stage, on June 12, for a one hour set, following the legendary band, ZZ TOP.

Improbable, you say? Am I dreaming this happened? Well, like all realities, there's more to it than that. Through relationships long held I came into contact with the people who do video amplification for the Riverbend Festival. In the course of our conversation, they mentioned that they were planning a documentary on the routes various bands took to get there.

And they wanted to feature known, up and coming and unknown bands. Well, we comfortably fit in the last category. While we've played out for a

little over three years, the largest crowds we've been exposed to in about 50 gigs have been at the Prospect Car Show, where we've performed over the last three years. Estimates are as high as 5,000 people.

Well, imagine rolling into town and seeing crowd estimates at 100,000 for the evening we were playing! It was too late to lose nerve and turn back. After all, TV crews had twice visited Prospect and the area to record a rehearsal of BOOM, held at The Meeting Place, thanks to the Mayor's Office, and at my home where our band rehearses. I guess you could say we're a Prospect-based band.

I went to Chattanooga a day ahead of my bandmates to visit with the TV production group and get a sense of the dimension of the experience. We would perform on the same stage as Mark Farner, of Grand Funk Railroad, Alex Chilton, lead singer of The Box Tops ('The Letter' and 'Cry Like A Baby') and guitar virtuoso, Joe Bonamassa, a protégé of B.B. King.

This was a rock 'n roll fantasy camp experience on steroids. Not only would we play after ZZ TOP and be amplified on screens all across the Festival grounds, but we would have the entire concert recorded in high definition and be part of the documentary, which organizers hope I can help them distribute to PBS or other outlets.

Needless to say that bandmates, Antony Casagrande, of Wolcott, Steve Mednick, of Hamden, George Meyers, of Cheshire, and Haig Papasian, of West Hartford, were as excited about the opportunity as I was.

Our only regret was that band member, Vern Coles, of Norwalk, couldn't make the trip because of business. We planned a one hour set of covers and originals written by most band members.

As show time loomed closer, we made our way onto a stage—not a cluttered bar with mirrors and walls making sound adjustments impossible, not hard pavement with instruments at the mercy of a sudden wind or thunderstorm, and not as tired middle-aged guys, who had had to drag the equipment out of basements and garages and set it all up.

No, we had stage hands and instrument techs, who for at least one night, were there for us.

As a drummer, arguably the most idiosyncratic instrument, I got to work with a young drum tech to get everything just the way I like to attack the kit.

Yes, it was heaven. Yes, it was an improbable journey that we were taking on behalf of all fellow garage rockers who had imagined such a moment, but never lived it.

And then, ZZ TOP finished their encore and we were told "you're up."

And so we played the best we could with nerves put to rest as much as was possible. When we came off and left, not having to lug all of our equipment as is the case on all other gig nights, we had that brief sense of what the stars feel.

As we walked to the car waiting to get us, a lone voice on a condo balcony overlooking the Festival, said 'you guys were awesome'.

Yes there will be a video record that BOOM existed and even if for just one night we got a sense of what it was like to be a rock star.

Had most of us not come back to our instruments in our 40's and 50's could that have been our life?

No regrets, I reminded the guys, because our world tour continues at the Pope John Paul II School Carnival in New Britain the next weekend.

Make sure to bring your back support, because the lugging begins anew.

News From the Whittemore Memorial Library

Frank Strauss, author of the book "Dawn of a Dynasty" will be speaking at the Howard Whittemore Memorial Library on Thursday, July 17 at 6:30 p.m. Strauss wrote about of incredible and improbable story of the 1947 New York Yankees.

The book introduces readers to the many veteran Yankee players returning to baseball following their World War II service, including Joe DiMaggio, Phil

Rizzuto, Tommy Henrich and Charlie Keller as they attempt to blend with rookies Yogi Berra, Frank "Speck" Shea and Bobby Brown. Refreshments will be served.

On Thursday, July 10 at 6:30 p.m. Jerry Joyell, author of "A Lifetime Ago: Before the Death of Childhood" will be available for a book signing at the Howard Whittemore Library. This book is a memoir of the author's child-

hood in the 1940's and 1950's with a commentary on children past and present.

The Howard Whittemore Memorial Book Club will meet on Tuesday, July 15 at 7 p.m. to discuss "Portrait in Sepia" by Isabell Allende. Refreshments will be served.

Summer events for children are happening through July and August. Please pick up a flyer for details. Registration is required.