

3rd COAST MUSIC

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US/Canada • \$18 (12 issues, 1st class)
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MUSIC EVERY NIGHT

Pub Rock went from a single desperately broke band persuading their local to book them on dead Monday nights into a full-blown national phenomenon, whose theme song could have been Bees Make Honey's *Music Every Night* (or possibly their *Knee Trembler*), in a matter of weeks rather than months. It died almost as quickly five years later when Punk Rock entered the same cycle. The Rise and Fall of Pub Rock is a textbook case study of the strengths and weaknesses of British music journalism, at least as I knew it. 15+ years later, its culture may well have changed, for better or, more likely, worse, and my experience may now only evoke a bygone era.

Still, back in the day, being a British music writer was a pretty cool gig. For starters, thanks to the National Union of Journalists, it was a nice little earner, staff or freelance, and there was a ton of work, at *Melody Maker*, *Sounds* and *New Music Express*, the dailies, Sundays, weekly and monthly magazines. None of them wanted Shakespeare next week, they wanted something they could use by noon tomorrow, so if you were halfway literate and could meet a deadline, the 70s and 80s were good times indeed.

The single biggest difference between British and American music journalism is that America has major, medium and minor media markets, Britain has London. With a comfortable pair of shoes, looking in on just about every serious outlet in the country was a morning's work and by lunchtime most of Britain's music press corps could be found in one or other of maybe half a dozen pubs. This had two related consequences, one very healthy, the other rather mixed. The first was that no one could get away with recycling a press release or somebody else's review, a common American practice—if you're 'writing' for the Bumfuck bi-weekly, who's going to know, or care?

The other was that British music journalism was incredibly competitive. The goal was not merely to write the definitive article on a new artist or band but the *first* one, making everyone else eat your dust. Others could Me Too about that artist or band, but they'd have to find a different angle of approach and a fresh vocabulary. This was, of course, marvellous for emerging acts, but the cold fact was, then as now, that real keepers were thin on the ground, so, well let's say a certain amount of inflation crept in.

When Eggs Over Easy set up shop at the Tally Ho, in North London, in 1970, it was a true godsend, setting off a manic musical feeding frenzy; soon every writer and paper had its own pet Pub Rock band. You have to remember that this period was a musical wasteland, there wasn't anything else to write about except disco and dub. Then came Punk Rock.

There were already omens, notably The Pirates and Eddie & The Hot Rods, though they were infinitely better musicians, but, if they mostly couldn't play for shit, the punks were happening, 'controversial,' outspoken, even, in some cases, especially Slade The Leveller of New Model Army, intelligent and articulate, and, of course, art directors adored them. The street cred gang abandoned Pub Rock and went hunting for the most anarcho, most outrageous punk bands they could find. For those of us who were into roots music (or just music if it comes to that), the Joe Ely Band's 1977 tour was perfectly timed—it would be hard to exaggerate the impact Ely, Jesse Taylor, Lloyd Maines and Ponty Bone had on the British music media, but that's another story.

The lesson of Pub Rock's brief heyday is that the British music media could be a wonderful friend, providing an unknown band with, overnight, a brimming press kit, gigs, audiences and record deals, but a fickle one. Like a shark, it could only move forward, always looking for fresh meat, but at least, unlike its American counterpart, it never gave a toss about The Next Big Thing. **JC**

ELIZABETH McQUEEN & THE FIREBRANDS HAPPY DOING WHAT WE'RE DOING; A TRIBUTE TO PUB ROCK

(Freedom *****)

For an art director, a graphic image for pub rock might be a bit of a poser, given that the short-lived phenomenon deliberately eschewed visual cues, in fact might just as well have been called 'scruff rock.' For a one time consumer, it's a doddle—it has to be a live action shot of Wilko Johnson when he was lead guitarist with Dr Feelgood. Actually, the cover pic is of Johnson when he was fronting his own band, The Solid Senders, in 1981, but you'd never know if I hadn't told you. This issue is dedicated, with my deepest sympathy, to the memory of Irene Knight, Wilko's wife of 36 years and mother of Matthew and Simon, who died last August.

Book bands, sell beer; you'd think it just doesn't get any more basic than that, but the 70s British phenomenon of Pub Rock was both fortuitous and, as it turned out, anomalous. In the early 70s, there weren't many gigs for bands which played folk-rock, country-rock, rock & roll, blues or rockabilly rather than glam or stadium rock, but there were a lot of gin palaces with underperforming function rooms or billiard parlors; Pub Rock was, essentially, the two getting together. The downside was that the pubs that put on music usually had shitty beer because the ones that sold good beer didn't have to bother with gimmicks, but, thanks to the music press, places like Sir George Robey, Torrington Arms, Hope & Anchor (aka Grope & Wanker), Sawyers Arms, Bull & Gate, Dublin Castle, Tally Ho, Nashville Rooms, Lord Nelson and others whose names escape me, few of which you'd give the time of day if you just wanted to sink a few bevvy with your mates, became household(ish) names.

By 1976, Pub Rock was pretty much done, elbowed aside by Punk Rock, which also killed off the circuit as publicans, unhappy with crowds sporting mohawks and bondage gear upsetting their regulars, switched to strippers or sports. A few places, notably The Cricketers, supported 3rd Coast-y music through the 80s but, far as I know, the only Pub Rock era house left that's still putting on music you and I might want to go to is The Half Moon, Putney (I am, of course, open to correction from any British readers).

Of the acts, few survived the collapse of the scene. Elvis Costello (Flip City), Nick Lowe (Brinsley Schwarz), Joe Strummer (101'ers) and, in Britain at least, Ian Dury (Kilburn & The High Roads) went on to varying degrees of stardom, while The Pirates, Dr Feelgood, Wilko Johnson, Eddie & The Hot Rods, The Groundhogs and Steve Gibbons built lasting, if low key, careers on loyal fanbases, but bands like Juicy Lucy, Bees Make Honey, Charlie & The Wide Boys, Ace, Roogalator and a host of others simply disappeared.

That Britain's Pub Rock should, almost 30 years after its heyday, be celebrated by American musicians is actually not as odd as it sounds because it actually traces back to an American country-rock band, Eggs Over Easy, which, brought to London in 1970 to cut a record then marooned by its label, wangled a Monday night residency at a North London jazz joint which caught fire, inspiring a host of imitators, notably Brinsley Schwarz, and launching a movement. What is rather more curious is that this project is fronted by a woman as Pub Rock was a (high) testosterone deal. The only female Pub Rocker I can recall is the eternally underrated Carol Grimes.

Though none of it sold worth a shit, Pub Rock generated a fair amount of vinyl, some of which has even made it to CD, and there are several compilations, the best being EMI's *Naughty Rhythms*, so Austin's Elizabeth McQueen had a fair amount of material on which to draw. Purists could carp at a few of her choices, particularly Elvis Costello's anachronistic *Almost Blue*, when Flip City period songs like *Pay It Back* or *Radio Radio* would have been more appropriate, and, chronologically, the Nick Lowe, Dave Edmunds and Rockpile numbers, *When I Write The Book*, *A-1 On The Jukebox*, *Seven Nights To Rock* and *You Ain't Nothin' But Fine*, are more than a bit iffy, while New Waver Graham Parker (*Local Girls*) has explicitly disavowed any relationship to Pub Rock. Still, Ducks Deluxe (*Love's Melody*), Squeeze (*Annie Get Your Gun*), Brinsley Schwarz (the title track), Eddie & The Hot Rods (*All I Need Is Money*), Eggs Over Easy (*Home To You*, featuring original band member Austin DeLone on keyboards) and Dr Feelgood (*That's It, I Quit*), along with McQueen's own in-the-spirit Costello-inspired *Dirty Little Secret*, all hit the spot.

McQueen, for me, is like a child I see once a year and say 'My, hasn't she grown.' If you'd suggested, three or four years ago, that she could pull off a project like this, frankly I'd have been dubious, but, backed by her husband/producer Dave Sanger on drums, Chris Miller guitar, The Conrads and others, she strikes the perfect balance, not being too reverent of or, worse still, patronizing the material. Recently, I've had a problem with many tribute albums without knowing quite why, but McQueen makes me realize what I've been missing, people just having fun playing the music.

McQueen's concept of Pub Rock, which she worked back to from admiration for Costello, Lowe, Edmunds and Parker's later work, may be slightly skewed—it all happened a long way from Little Rock, and before she was born—but she has a real affinity and affection for it. The parallels between the diversity, dynamic and energy of Pub Rock and what happens most every night in Austin, 'Bar Rock' if you will, may seem obvious, but McQueen gets the credit for linking two scenes that, 30 years and an ocean apart, have a common motto: happy doing what we're doing. **JC**