



Kaleidoscope

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Original Rock-A-Boogie Boy 'stretched' into big time music

Although Bobby Lowell refuses to put an exact date on his musical beginnings, he is most probably Lincoln's first rock'n'roller.

In youth, Lowell attended Sacred Heart School (as a non-Catholic) and fell in with a black kid who was an excellent pianist and similarly ostracized from the school. The two started hanging out at the old Railroadmen's Club on 10th, and a key-members black night club located where the downtown Denny's now stands. Still in his early teens, Bobby got his first tastes of cold beer and hot rhythm and blues.

Selling newspapers and shining shoes around North Ninth and 10th streets from the age of 11 or 12 also provided Lowell with musical influences and contacts. One of these was a tap dancer and musician called Count Davis.

"You know this b.s. they're doing now called 'break dancing'? Well, in those days the blacks used to tap dance..." Lowell said. "One would tap dance, then the other'd try and tap dance, and they'd just try to outdo each other. I hung around him (Davis) a lot and he kinda took to me... liked the way I played piano and sang, mostly blues."

Lowell started his first group at age 14 and played "rolling blues" in the two clubs he frequented around T Street. At about that time, "rock and roll came out, but I was playing some country western to make a

few bucks," Lowell said. "Everything was country then. That was when Boxcar Willie was still Marty Martin. I knew Marty pretty good."

A local scout for a national telethon heard Lowell in one of those C&W joints and asked him to perform during one of the locally-inserted late-night segments, called "stretchers."

"It was like 3:45 in the morning," Lowell recalled. "We went out and did a couple Elvis tunes and some old standbys, you know, three-chord stuff, and the reception was unreal. The phones started lightin' up."

The next day, Les Ash Williams, who had a small recording studio, asked Lowell to get a group and come in and tape a song. The group recorded "Sixteen Chicks." DJ Karen Thompson, who had a show on KFOR called "Datetime," played the record and the response "was crazy," Lowell said.

The group, now known as the Rock-A-Boogie Boys, recorded "What You Do To Me," a calypso-ish song "before calypso was big," according to Lowell, and on the flip side -- "Um-Baby, Baby." The record was picked up by 30 stations in 20 states, moved to number 11 on the (then regional) pop charts, and got the band a mention in Billboard Magazine.

At that time, the combo consisted of Lowell on piano, guitar and vocals; Jimmy Akin on lead guitar; Will Vanover on rhythm guitar and Vern Boosinger on bass. Akin is the only other original Rock-A-Boogie Boy still in the Lincoln area, and can occasionally be found around town tickin' the ivories. After a time, Doug Campbell replaced Vanover, and he has gone on to some fame. Campbell had plastic surgery to make him look more like Elvis, and has often played the Grand Ole Opry and also toured with Charley Pride. Jimmy Akin, whom Lowell calls "an excellent musician," has recorded on several record labels. And Ron Genco, a later drummer for the group, is reportedly still playing in the Boston area.

The Rock-A-Boogie Boys cut a striking image on stage with black pants, white shirts and black ties, contrasted with Lowell's black shirt and white tie. In a faded Lincoln Journal clipping the paper asks, "Does Lincoln have its own 'Elvis Presley'?"

Nowadays, Lowell is into tattoos and motorcycles. With his two sons and two daughters Lowell tattoos in his home at 3345 R St., not far from where he grew up.

Lowell says that while his image with other people over the years may have changed, he has not.

"I got my first Indian motorcycle when I was 14. In the '60s they called me a hippie. In the '70s they called me a biker. The only difference is now I've got better leathers than 15 or 18 years ago. It's too bad that people are so opinionated that they can't relate to a lifestyle that can't be stereotyped."



Clockwise, from upper left: Lowell, who has collected tattoo patterns for 18 years, got his first tattoo at age 14. Lowell and daughter, Jeannie, sit in their home's tattoo parlor. Both work in the family business.

A publicity shot from the early '60s featured Lowell (left) and Geno Krueger, a guitarist in Lowell's band, clowning behind the bars of a makeshift Sing Sing prison. Rockin' Bobby Lowell as he looked at the start of his musical career in the early '60s.

Bobby Lowellisms:
On Lincoln clubs: "I was tickled to death when I recently stumbled onto the Zoo Bar. Not only was it great people, but great music, music I hadn't found for years. I was surprised to see how many really good musicians there are now in Lincoln."
On the development of rock music: "These guys today have a hell of a lot more going for 'em electronically than we had. Back in those days you had to have raw talent... we didn't have buttons you could push on the floor to make things quiver and all that stuff. Now, if you get so noisy, you're all right. Then, people wanted to hear what you're sayin', what you're playin',... not to take anything away from these guys now... times change."
On Lincoln's current bands: "I think Jacob's (of the Crap Detectors) got a helluva talent. If he ever gets it in line... if he finds that notch, he's gonna be sensational. He's got that raw talent."

