



Rock of Ages

Long history in music business affords Shithook singer pizzazz

BY BRET SCHULTE
Senior Reporter

Phil Shoemaker spends his Thursday nights playing people's favorite rock songs from the past three decades.

But Shoemaker, the lead guitarist of Shithook, has a rock 'n' roll story all his own. Prompted to pick up the guitar by The Beatles' appearance on the "Ed Sullivan Show" in 1964, Shoemaker has had a love/hate relationship with rock nearly as old as the music itself.

Now 42, Shoemaker leads the local rock purist and periodic karaoke group Shithook as vocalist and guitarist after 30 years in the business. Recently releasing its first album, "When a Boy Scout Gets the Blues," Shithook is the most recent project for a man who has spent the greater part of his life on stage—a stage he has shared with such classic and respected artists (most of whom he hates) as REO Speedwagon, Rush and The Replacements.

The kitchen manager at his family's truck stop, Shoemaker's Restaurant and Truck Stop, 4800 W. O St., Shoemaker has lived in Lincoln most of his life. He helped form his first band, Axis, as a ninth-grader.

Like most high school rock projects, Axis didn't last much longer than an average lunch period. But the experience was invaluable, leading Shoemaker to a Lincoln glitter band, The Boys, which would prove to be one of his most memorable rock experiences.

Modeled after the androgyny of David Bowie, the band found limited success in Minneapolis.

"We were pretty outrageous for around here and pretty controversial," Shoemaker said of Lincoln.

Shoemaker joined the band as a drummer, despite his guitar experience. Before long, the band outgrew its hometown. They made the move to Minneapolis at the urging of a management company promising to get the group signed to a label.

Although that never happened, The Boys did release three singles and the company managed to land their opening concert slots for some of the decade's premiere rock bands.

"It was great," he said. "But after a year, (management representatives) realized they weren't going to get anywhere with us, so they sent us home."

It wasn't a tremendous tragedy for Shoemaker who essentially hated many bands for which he opened.

Shoemaker's experiences with '70s rock led mostly to frustration as The Boys opened time and time again for art-rock concept bands.

"We just felt contempt for these bands because they were like art-rock, and we thought we were so much better than everybody else."

Shoemaker laughed as he said this, noting the irony of Rush's success. But despite fads, Shoemaker has remained true to his personal vision of rock 'n' roll. After returning to Lincoln, he was thrown out of the band after realizing it was time for The Boys to grow up.

"I got kicked out of The Boys because I was tired of plotting strategies at the Village Inn for eight hours a day," he said. "I was making fun of their songs and stuff. I deserved to get kicked out."

Soon after, Shoemaker was recruited by Charlie Burton and Rock Therapy, a successful Lincoln rockabilly group. And Shoemaker could now rock standing up: Charlie Burton needed a

guitar player.

"They were doing what The Cramps were doing way before (The Cramps) existed," he said.

The success of Burton and his band—ending as Charlie Burton and the Hiccups—was immediate, and the group frequently played with R.E.M. and The Replacements.

After playing with R.E.M. at Lincoln's now-defunct The Drumstick in the early '80s, the bands developed a relationship—for a while. As R.E.M. grew increasingly popular, it would include Burton band members on guest lists whenever in Nebraska. But absence doesn't always make the heart grow fonder.

"One time we showed up at the box office to get our backstage passes, and we got dumped," Shoemaker said. "I never talked to them again since then."

But Shoemaker says the members of the band were personable and likable guys, curious about the local music scene.

The relationship with R.E.M., though, wasn't nearly as significant as the one forged with The Replacements, whom Shoemaker initially met while with The Boys in Minneapolis.

"I watched them go from being normal to so f**ked up it was alarming," he said.

From '81 to '90, Charlie Burton and the Hiccups played about eight shows with The Replacements, one of the few bands Shoemaker opened for whose music he enjoyed.

It seems the feelings were mutual. During the Replacements' last tour, they fired their opening act to hire Charlie Burton and the Hiccups. However, the tour marked the end of The Replacements, and ultimately, Charlie Burton and the Hiccups.

Shithook formed from the ashes of Burton's group, which moved to Austin, Texas. Phil Shoemaker got the job as frontman.

From years of experience, band members knew they would need a vast repertoire of classic rock to make a living in Lincoln's music scene.

"We just wanted to play for drunks," Shoemaker said.

Hence, Duffy's Tavern, 1412 O St., where Shithook has performed almost every Thursday night as a karaoke group for nearly three years.

Now the musicians are local legends, particularly among college students packing the bar on Thursday nights to offer their own slurred renditions of rock 'n' roll favorites.

"This Duffy's thing is really successful, and people seem to enjoy it and enjoy watching people sing," Shoemaker said.

But the night isn't always as fun for the band. Repeat requests make for some repetitive nights, Shoemaker says. And the more a song is played, the more the band starts to dislike it.

But Shoemaker likes what Shithook does for people and generally doesn't mind playing whatever people want to hear.

There are other benefits, as well.

"We get all the beer we can drink," he said. Shoemaker and the other members of Shithook aren't settling for being known only as a cover band, however.

"I started to write songs because we didn't just want to be a stupid cover band," he said.

Those songs culminated with the recent release of an album. With the album and local success as the city's best party band, Shithook is catching fans, Shoemaker said.

"We love the audience. It always surprises me that the place is full."



Who makes the grade

From R.E.M. to REO Speedwagon, Phil Shoemaker over the years has opened for a variety of rock 'n' roll bands, many whose performances he considers sloppy seconds. Below are his grades and comments on a few of the more well-known groups.

Blue Oyster Cult: No Comment

"Don't remember seeing them. Probably was backstage filling up our drum cases with their beer for whatever."

R.E.M.: B

"No big rock star egos. They were cool, but it was always surprising to me how big they got."

REO Speedwagon: F

"Dumb ass, sickening ballad rock. Hard to take."

The Replacements: A

"I saw them play good, I saw them play horribly, which was what they were all about. Even when Westerburg was bad he was cool."

Rush: D

"Too pointy-headed"

X: A

"Billy Zoom and the band were just great. They were inspiring."

ZZ Top: C-

"Disappointed in the show. No steer. No rattlesnake."



PHIL SHOEMAKER, in the company of a guest singer, displays one of his more serious moments Thursday night at Duffy's Tavern, 1412 O St.

WHEN NOT PLAYING rock 'n' roll, Phil Shoemaker works as the kitchen manager of his family's Shoemaker's Restaurant and Truck Stop, 4800 W. O St.

ONE OF SHITHOOK'S steady gigs is providing karaoke fun at Duffy's Tavern on Thursday nights.

Photos by Lane Hickenbottom