

SONGS FOR
SIXTY FIVE ROSES PRESENTS



THE PRESSURE BOYS



THEN



NOW

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PRESSURE BOYS by Peter Cashwell

During the 1980s, the Pressure Boys were one of the southeast's hottest bands, performing over 400 shows in towns from New York to Texas to Idaho, releasing two EPs, a cassette, and an LP of original material, and filling dance floors with their own loopy brand of ska and high-energy pop wherever they went. After they split up in 1988, the group's members went on to work with artists as varied as Don Henley, Trailer Bride, the Squirrel Nut Zippers, and the Sex Police, but their fans, particularly those in their home town of Chapel Hill, still hoped they would someday find a reason to reunite.

It took them twenty years, but they've finally found a reason to do it: cystic fibrosis.

On Friday, May 2nd, 2008, the P-Boys return from a twenty-year hiatus to perform at the Cat's Cradle, with proceeds from the show going to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation for CF research.

If this seems a touch mature for a band that once recorded an ode to Peter Pan, well, times change.

Back in 1981, the group was just a quartet of Chapel Hill High School students and a pair of CHHS graduates hoping to perform at a talent show, but they soon saw the possibilities that playing their favorite ska, new wave, and reggae songs in a band offered: fame, fortune, creative expression, travel, and the chance to eat strange food in strange restaurants all over the country. The early shows consisted primarily of songs by British "two-tone" groups such as Madness and Bad Manners, but at guitarist Bryon Settle's urging, the P-Boys soon began writing their own material. Their live shows became more polished, combining the technical brilliance and driving beat of drummer Rob Ladd, the sometimes-maniac, sometimes-unflappable stage persona of singer/trombonist John Plymale, and the striking visual presence of saxophonist Greg Stafford, six feet five inches of trench coat and houndstooth hat.

In 1982, the Pressure Boys went to Mitch Easter's Drive-In Studio in Winston-Salem and recorded seven original songs, releasing the resulting EP *Jump! Jump! Jump!*, on their own label. To support the record, they began to venture further from their home base (Plymale's mother's house in Carrboro) and perform at clubs, fraternity houses, and parties throughout the southeast. Soon they were opening for bigger bands like Duran Duran, and before long the P-Boys returned to the studio with producer Don Dixon to record their second EP, the four-song *Rangledoon*, which spawned the cult favorite song (and video) "Where the Cowboys Went." More touring and opening gigs for Billy Idol, Fishbone, and R.E.M. were to follow, and the band was tapped to contribute a song to Dolphin Records' *More Mondo* compilation; that song, "Pete," would signal a new maturity in the P-Boys' sound, as well as an oncoming burst of creativity. In 1987, that creative explosion was captured on the self-produced LP *Krandlebanum Monumentus*, featuring the double-sided single "Around the World"/ "Dial Tone," but in 1988, after seven years of relentless touring and frequent personnel changes, the group decided to call it quits.

They left a legacy, however, as performers whose creative energy simply couldn't be contained on stage, let alone on record. Members of the P-Boys were constantly performing in side projects such as the ska revue Rohrwaggon, the TV-theme-song-based Rouch Cats, and the world's only Wall of Voodoo tribute band, Great Wall of Doo Doo. They didn't restrict their artistry to music, either; several of the band members were gifted cartoonists, and they collaborated on the cover for *Krandlebanum Monumentus*. Most notably, the band's Dodge van, "Death Pete," became a rolling canvas, decorated with paint, markers, plastic, and even a few plants growing in the crevices. They even dabbled in performance art, such as the night at Rhythm Alley when Stafford found the club's Chapel Hill phone book, seized a marker, and scrawled on it the words "PRESSURE BOYS GUEST LIST."

It's thus unsurprising that since their breakup many of the Pressure Boys have remained in the music business, though others have sought careers in other fields. Trumpeter Je Widenhouse played with Plymale in the Sex Police for several years before moving on to a spot in the Squirrel Nut Zippers' lineup, while bassist Jack Campbell played with Johnny Quest and was the owner of Poindexter Records for over a decade. Settle and P-Boys soundman Mike Beard, now both in Hillsborough, founded their own studio, Yellow Recording, producing recordings by Trailer Bride, LUD, Evil Wiener, and Pipe, among others. Ladd moved to California and became a sought-after drummer, recording and performing with such artists as Don Henley, Alanis Morissette, and the Red Clay Ramblers. And Stafford hung up his trench coat and went to law school, settling eventually in Pittsboro.

Plymale, meanwhile, has remained in the Triangle and has become a producer of some note, working with bands such as Superchunk and Athenaeum. In 2004, however, he and his wife were shocked to learn that their then two-year-old daughter, Allie, was suffering from cystic fibrosis. Plymale responded to the situation by creating the **Songs for Sixty Five Roses** project, a CD featuring many of the North Carolina artists he had worked with (such as Chris Stamey, Katherine Whelan, Athenaeum, and Southern Culture on the Skids) performing songs by other N.C. artists (such as Superchunk, James Taylor, Randy Travis, and the dB's). All proceeds from the disc went to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation for research into treatment, but Plymale wanted to do still more, and the idea of a benefit show came to him: a show big enough to bring attention to the cause of CF research in a big way, a show that would span twenty years and bring performers from all over the country—a Pressure Boys reunion show.

In short, the band that never grew up may have grown up, but as part of their effort to be responsible members of society and good parents, they'll spend May 2nd recapturing their youth, pumping life back into songs that haven't been heard in the Triangle for two decades, and putting on the show their fans have been waiting for since ties were skinny and so were most of the fans. As Tom Robbins once said, it's never too late to have a happy childhood.

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www.pressureboys.com

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