

GARY HIGGINS

A Biography

This business with the magic of music drew me in at a pretty young age. I can distinctly remember a plastic Gene Autry Guitar with an auto chord mechanism as a Christmas gift around age seven or eight. I remember being totally in awe as to what these combinations of chord sounds would feel like. It wasn't too much later that wind instruments worked their way into my life. Largely due to the influence of my music teacher at the time and from lesson after lesson, the French horn and I became a reality. With that reality also came the knowledge that this thing, though a great instrument, was clearly not my cup of tea. By then the 50's were fully raging, "The King" was popular, and I was hooked! That guitar he played, surely that must be "it." It took a few years for a guitar to make it into my hands (they were expensive and not easily found in those days) but I eventually became the proud owner of a "Kay" acoustic. It had strings about an inch from the fretboard and the tone of a dishrag—outrageous! I could not get enough of it and the music world around me was exploding. Due to exposure from my older brothers (and this artist guy named Simeon) I became heavily influenced by such musicians such as Dave VanRonk, Joan Baez, Doc Watson, Earl Scruggs, The Kingston Trio, Dave Kewskin and various bluegrass groups too numerous to mention. Thanks to an older, local musician friend I learned the 'Travis' finger picking style and my desire for more was insatiable. I also managed to obtain a quality instrument and learned every complex piece of music in those areas I could get my hands on. Then came Bob Dylan and the Byrds and of course the Beatles and Stones and electric excitement beckoned.

Around this time other musicians emerged from our local scene (really pretty small) and a natural gravitation toward a couple of now life long friends, Dave Beaujon and Jake Bell. At this point ('63/'64) all we wanted to do was be a rock band. But we were three guitar players and realized right away we needed to expand or find others to have that proper mix of instruments. I volunteered to learn the electric bass and soon owned an old beat up Fender Precision. Now we were two guitars and a bass but still short a drummer. After several auditions we came upon this kid named Ronny Baily. His incredible ability blew us away. Thus was born the infamous Random Concept (though yet not named). Somewhere very close to this time a fellow named Simeon Coxe also came on board. Simeon was a long time friend and fellow jug band member and had a vision more focused than any of the rest of us. He helped us all buy new Ampeg amps and along with a borrowed set of drums and a new Echoplex we were ready for the world of RocknRoll. Simeon's wife Dorothy came up with the name Random Concept which we all eagerly adopted. We rehearsed and rehearsed and soon had a few jobs (our first for \$50). Now this rock stuff was our food and reason to be. We became quite a hit locally and were the house band at a place called The Rumpus Room. Packed houses every night and

craving more.

I had decided with some nudging from my parents and my girlfriend at the time, that I was going off to college and would not be able to continue with this music stuff anymore and left the band for books. The band marched on with a new member just back from California, keyboardist Terry Fenton, who was doing bass parts and organ parts in my absence. I would go hear them on weekends and was essentially miserable not being a part of the band anymore, not to mention blown away on how they sounded. Simeon had emerged as the front guy and was the consummate 'showman' his appetite for this status ever growing. I soon, after a mere semester of college, had decided school was not for me and that I would return to the world of music with a vengeance. Now we were six and unified, gathering attention from several talent agencies. It was not long before we were playing in clubs all over the NYC area. The Cheetah, Joel Heller's 8th Wonder, The Purple Onion, Night Owl and the like. We soon decided to move to the city and lived in a place called 'The Hotel Albert' rubbing elbows with fellow hotel members John Sebastian, The Blues Magoos, and The Paul Butterfield Blues Band. NYC was bursting with music life.

We were mostly all suburban boys at heart (except Simeon, who had lived in the city as a graphic artist) who were getting homesick for that clean country air. We were also having some issues with our drummer who was beginning to miss rehearsals and showing up to gigs too drunk or drugged to play. Simeon was in his glory—city life and a young girlfriend—and craving more. The rift was there and four of us decided we needed to move in other directions. Phase Two of Random Concept begins.

Dave, Jake, Terry and myself decided we had a more common ground—all wrote music and sang—and though we had no drummer, felt like this core could really work. I soon decided to take on the drums. After a mere two months of learning (I didn't say well) I had my first paying job. We played backup for singer Len Barry ("One Two Three") and a guy named Gary U.S. Bonds ("Quarter to Three"). We rehearsed and wrote and played and then played some more. We did a very long stint at a club in Albany, NY and became a very tight band both emotionally and musically. Psychedelia was now entrenched in the music scene and we embraced it. We met this fellow named Gary Cardillo and soon were playing as the house band in a club of his called The Hukah. We played a small circuit of similar clubs and life was good. The music was good and we were fulfilled (and complacent and forever brain dead as business midgets). Simeon had continued on with his quest to form Silver Apples and the rest for him is history.

Somewhere in the early 70's, Terry decided to move to Minneapolis and pursue his education, so Random Concept became three. Also in this period, Jake and I started playing



in an acoustic group called Wooden Wheel with songwriter/singer Paul Tierney and singer/cellist Maureen Wells. I led this dual musical life for several years. Writing many tunes for both venues and it was probably my most prolific creative period ever.

I, like many at that time, experimented with drug use and even inhaled. As a result of my association with a friend and ex-school mate, I became a pawn in a most unfortunate legal situation. That mess resulted in a great sense of urgency to complete a musical project. In the early part of 1973, in a mere 40 hour recording session, the album *Red Hash* was recorded. I had the feeling I might never get a second chance to complete it or any other musical project for, essentially, ever. I was unavailable for mixing and final production of the album and watched from afar as *Red Hash* hit the streets. At the time the album was very well received but without live support and carried solely on undying enthusiasm and tireless effort from a small group of friends with essentially no experience in record promotion and sales, momentum slowed and cases of records quietly became collectors of dust, stored in basements along with fond memories and thoughts of what might have been. Great work, great effort for which no one involved should ever feel remorse.

In the years after, I have continued writing and recording, areas that will never leave me. I have played in several local groups on and off over the years. I have managed to assemble an extensive home studio. In my mind, I was always considering the next project and with archives of material ever growing, awaiting the daylight and eager ears.

The main focus in my life however, became family and hopefully being, a good parent. I have absolutely no regrets on this path. Life has been good. My wife, Carol, of nearly 30 years has been an undying and infinitely patient supporter. My son Graham, a very accomplished guitar player, and I now perform together on occasion and the circle has turned full.

Thanks to the great people at Drag City, with most special thanks in particular to Zach Cowie. The *Red Hash* album has now been given new life, soon to be released on CD to a whole new group of listeners and the world. The process has been remarkable and the results incredible. Indeed the circle has turned full, and if you look closely, so swiftly, that the rim is still smoking! Quicker than a Locy down a railroad track, wasn't even close.

