

Oganookie: The Song Remains the Same

by Richie Begin

TIME MARCHES ON. THE music remains.

And the groups.

Think about it. World War II and the Andrew Sisters and Dorsey Brothers, the Summer of Love and The Jefferson Airplane, The Cold War and the Beatles, etc. Music and eras, they define each other.

Small towns are like that. Especially small isolated towns in Northern California full of students and free spirits. This town. Funny how time blurs events and sharpens the music. I can't remember much about the early '70s in Santa Cruz but I can still hear Larry Hosford nasaling his way through "Down in the Santa Cruz Bay" with a chorus of high harmonies from the Fly By Night Band behind him. There were too many nights at the Catalyst to recall, but my head still pounds to local rock band Snail and their signature closer "Music is My Mistress." I remember the '80s a lot better and can still hear the Humans singing about "Living in the City" and heavyweight punk Joe Richards high kicking his way through "I Wanna Wanna Wanna Be Your Piranha." Remember?

If you're a bit older and can

remember the early '70s in Santa Cruz, you'll surely remember a hybrid local country rock band called Oganookie who literally reigned supreme in area clubs and concerts and spawned a whole host of other bands with similar sounds. This was the free and easy time in Santa Cruz when our town wasn't yet a bedroom community for high tech commuters,

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and UCSC was still an innovative, albeit kooky experiment in higher education. (Oganookie banjoist George Stavits majored in "History of Consciousness" there.) The main pastime in Santa Cruz was hanging out,

getting by and getting high.

Oganookie was the house band at the Old Catalyst when it was located in the St. George Hotel on Front Street, but that's gone too.

Gone also are such mountain clubs as the Chateau Liberte (near the summit), the Town and Country Lodge in Ben Lomond, the High Street Local near the University and the Civic Auditorium. (Hey, one out of five ain't bad.)

Tim Ackerman, Jack Bowers, George Stavits, Bruce Frye and Bob Stern (as well as group manager Peter Troxell) remember well. They were Oganookie and they return for a 20 year reunion this Sunday Sept. 1 at the Coconut Grove. They won't be alone.

Communal Music

These were the days when like-minded people got together and simply pooled their resources. In more than one case, the interest was music, the resources were slim but the living was easy. It was so in Brookdale where the members of Oganookie, their significant others, children, pets and visitors numbered around 18 during the three year height of the band's popularity from 1970-1973. "We all lived in a large estate," recalls group



Oganookie, featuring (clockwise from top right) Bob Stern, Jack Bowers, Tim Ackerman, George Stavits and Bruce Frye, will bring back the '70s this Sunday at the Coconut Grove.

manager Peter Troxell, now development director for KUSP. "There was a guest house we converted into offices and residences, a garage-studio, a chicken coop which was turned into a residence, uh, after we got rid of the chickens. A couple built a geodesic dome out in the apple orchard. It was great."

The band, commanding a whopping \$125 to \$300 per night at their two main venues, the Town and Country and the old Catalyst, was able to support this entourage and make ends meet doing just what they loved to do. They played over 40 engagements at the old Catalyst and a similar number at the Town and Country, quite a feat even in those days.

"We broke ground on a number of things other bands hadn't done

before," says Troxell. "We made our own record album, hard to do in those days, and were one of the first bands to create our own art posters for upcoming shows. We also played over 300 gigs in our three year period." Troxell laments that even he has only one copy of the record and not even a T-shirt.

The music they played was a feat unto itself as well. More of a hopped up version of rock/bluegrass than country, the band featured '30s style harmonies, a driving rhythm section punctuated by a popping banjo and the virtuosity of classical violinist turned fiddler, Bob Stern. Pianist Jack Bowers was the chief songwriter for the band and his unique lyric and melodic sense infused all of the band's material.

The audience this Sunday will surely remember such Oganookie classics as "Your Woman Is Ugly," "The Blues Ain't Nothing But A Bad Dream," and "Blackjack Davey."

Nowadays Stavits and Tim Ackerman are together making pajamas in New York City. Bob Stern is a dentist in New Jersey. The other three members live in Santa Cruz. Jack Bowers works for the Department of Corrections' Prison Arts Project in Soledad. Bruce Frye is an active potter and Troxell works at KUSP.

The opening act for Oganookie will be another Santa Cruz favorite son, and long time friend of the band, Bob Brozman.

This weekend, it will be 1970 again. Listen for the sound on Sunday night. •