

*****CENTER STAGE*****

Y96 Concert Proves Everything Old is New Again

by Jonathan Marten

It's Friday afternoon, September 8. I'm roaming backstage at Norfolk's Scope Arena, prior to this evening's WLTY Y96 Rock 'N Roll Oldies Show featuring Paul Revere and the Raiders, The Grass Roots and The Mamas and The Papas. While I may be slightly jaded from years spent in various backstage areas around the country, there's something special here.

Watching the roadies set up for tonight's concert brings to mind the dreams of many of us children of the 60s who dreamt of rock and roll stardom while idly passing time in school. That the stage is being set for three groups who were major figures of that era carries its own particular feeling of awe.

For all, there have been changes. Not only of personnel, but the changes that 25 years of life in a rough business and a rough lifestyle can bring.

And, still, there's the music.

A Scope maintenance man comes sweeping by, muttering, "Sure be glad when this is over."

Not me.

In a few minutes I'm going to be in the company of several of the giants of my musical youth, people whose songs my parents consistently requested I remove from my little mono record player.

Paul Revere, the master musical showman of the 60s, who, minus the breathy, hard-edged vocals of Mark Lindsay, has created a show of non-stop rock and roll madness. Kind of the Marx Brothers meet Spike Jones meet rock. But will it be the same? As good? Does it really matter?

Rob Grill was and is the heart of The Grass Roots. His plaintive vocals on *Midnight Confessions* and other "Roots" hits are as smooth as when first sung more than 20 years ago.

Where did those years go? Wasn't it only yesterday I was in high school, listening to these guys, playing drums and singing in bands that included songs from both these groups in our repertoire?

John Phillips is the only founding member of The Mamas and the Papas left, divorced from Mama Michelle. Cass Elliot, at a time when many of her contemporaries were ODing into oblivion was struck down by a wayward chicken bone at the height of her talent—a ghoulish joke on the fat Mama of 60s rock.

Now there's Spanky McFarlane of Spanky and Our Gang musical fame, and daughter Mackenzie Phillips, at age 30, graduated to Mama, singing her childhood lullabies to thousands of anticipating fans. Mackenzie, the child star is better known as an actress for her roles in *American Graffiti* and the sitcom *One Day at a Time*, as well as her much-publicized drug problems. Scott McKenzie, who was there at the beginning but left to ask the question "Are You Going To San Francisco," returns to replace Denny Doherty, gone to pursue family and an acting career.

It's so strange. These groups hit their peaks in another world, another time. Vietnam was in full swing. Ronald Reagan was still a bad joke, but at least he was California's problem.

Now the groups are taking their turns doing sound checks, making sure the acoustics are satisfactory. Little do they know the secret of Scope. Acoustics are non-existent. Even so, the equipment is more sophisticated than in the 60s. So are the musicians. 60s music played with 80s mixers, synthesizers and sound systems. How will it affect the music?

The music. Always the key.

As they warm up I find myself smiling. God, they sound good. It's a different sound, yet still the same. Are my ears really hearing this or the sounds I remember?

It doesn't matter.

John Salvato, an original member of the 60s group The Duprees, is producing the show for WLTY. Salvato and his clipboard, which never leaves his hand, is roaming about checking every detail, attempting to ensure the best possible show for audience and musicians. As showtime draws closer, he becomes more serious. He cares about the music, and it shows.

"I started out in this business back in 1962 when I sang with The Duprees," says Salvato, "and went into producing live music concerts some time in the mid 70s. I think producers should be people who are former performers because then they'd really know what's happening."

Various musicians are milling about now. With several hours to kill they don't mind talking. David Page is the 34-year-old drummer and production manager for The Grass Roots. Although he's been with the group for five years, he was in high school when the Roots had their last big hit.

"It feels great to be up there in front of that many people playing songs that are already track-tested and road-tested. They're good songs and people respond to them. It's like being in a candy store."

Omar Martinez had been playing drums for Paul Revere and the Raiders since 1972. "When I came in it was still the original members, Mark and Smitty...Then Smitty quit and Mark left to do his own thing."

As showtime approaches you can feel the excitement mount. WLTY's Cindy Butler, who has been promoting the show for the station, is trying to make sure everyone's happy while anxiously checking the audience to see if Y96's first venture into concert production is going to be successful.

Paul Revere and Co. patiently wait for d.j. Rick Shocklee's introduction while Mackenzie Phillips bounces in, so full of concert energy she can't stand still. Papas John



and Scott with Mama Spanky relax in their dressing room. Rob Grill, who flew in this afternoon, has still not arrived at the Scope.

Then it begins.

The Raiders invade the stage and for the next 50 minutes Revere turns the three-quarter-full house at the Scope upside down. Although Scope's non-acoustics garble some of the music, the frenzied energy of Revere and his Raiders win a legion of new fans while pleasing the older ones.

Meanwhile backstage, John Phillips and Scott McKenzie discuss their beginnings.

"We got started in Alexandria, Virginia, in the middle 50s," says Scott, "Cass Elliot was from there also."

"I was born in South Carolina," says John with a sly smile, "but I was raised in Virginia, by God."

In the early 60s John and Scott, joined by banjo player Dick Weissman, formed The Journeymen, becoming one of the most popular folk trios of the time. When Scott left in 1964 to pursue an acting career he was replaced by Denny Doherty. The addition of John's then wife Michelle and Cass Elliot completed the original Mamas and Papas.

"I was playing in a band in May of '87," recalls Scott, "and Denny came up to me the last night he was working and said, 'I took your place in the group 25 years ago; now it's your turn.'"

John continues, "I was trying to find someone to sing Mama Cass's parts, actually to replace her; suddenly it occurred to me, you can't replace someone like Cass or someone like Denny or Michelle or anybody, really. You have to find someone of equal stature...I called Spanky and she said, 'I was wondering when you were gonna call me.' She was on the next plane to New York and has been with us ever since."

Mackenzie joins the conversation and it becomes something of a family free-for-all. There's a close-knit feel to the barbs slung by each.

"I never thought I'd be a part of this years ago," says Mackenzie, "but it's really fun."

"She's always directing us!" mock-complains Scott.

"My lullabies (the Mamas and Papas music) didn't go like that," mimics John.

These guys are real people. Warm, friendly. Not averse to talking about the rough times, either.

"I was on probation for five years after being arrested," says John, referring to his drug addiction. "I'm thinking, 'this is going to be really tough. I'm on probation and I don't have to answer to anybody but myself and they're doing drugs backstage and this and that...' Nothing! No emotion."

"Dad has been especially perfect at being clean," says a proud Mackenzie. "I think there are a lot of people on the anti-drug thing that are still taking drugs."

"Yeah," smiles Scott, angelically, "You're not the only one."

Outside, Rob Grill, who arrived during the Raiders' set, has taken the stage with the Grass Roots and is mesmerizing the crowd with his string of hits. Meanwhile, a tired Paul Revere reflects on his performance and his career.

"I started the band for the fun of it," he says, "and it's still fun, even though on stage you can't hear them (the audience) and you can't hear yourself. It's kind of like being in a dream. The acoustics are so bad here, it's hard to communicate when you're talking. All I could hear was this rumble every time I opened my mouth. I kept asking myself, 'what the hell did I just say?' I guess it was a lot better than it felt. On stage you can't tell."

The Chief Raider, who, unlike the other groups, is not recording new material these days, feels he's bringing back a little of the past.

"What we try to recreate is an era—the mid 60s—probably the most fun time that rock and roll ever had. . . If we can put everybody who grew up in that era in a time-warp for an hour, that's great."

It's The Mamas and the Papas' turn on stage now. Unbelievably, they sound better now than they used to. The harmonies are crystal clear and the band is incredibly tight. All three groups have sounded as good as they ever did, or better. The audience, which greeted each of them tentatively, is now swaying, completely attuned to the music.

Rob Grill, having changed from his stage outfit, kicks back, ready to relax before the show's finale with all three groups together on stage. He starts talking about the new album the Grass Roots had hoped to release last year.

"It didn't turn out exactly the way we wanted it to," says Rob. "Being the competitive market it is, you better have the best you can get. We're still working on it. When it's right, we'll do something with it."

Discussing the complaint heard in some quarters, that the trend of older groups to hit the concert trail in the last few years is just a clever money making gimmick, Rob is quick to point out The Grass Roots are no Rolling *Bones* kind of group.

"The Grass Roots never broke up. The last original guy, besides myself, left in 1974. I've been the lead singer for 23 years. In that time I've had 67 different guys in the band. If you had John Sebastian with four musicians and he wanted to be The Lovin' Spoonful, to me that's credible. If you've got The Grass Roots with Rob Grill singing, that's credible, too. I'm taking the hits we've had and I'm having a career with them. That's just fine with me. As long as people keep coming to hear them, I'll be here. When's the last time Frank Sinatra had a hit?"

As all three groups hit the stage for the finale, I turn off my tape recorder and put away my notes. For a few hours I've had the privilege to enter the world of my childhood dreams and be a part of it. I've had the opportunity to talk with and listen to the music of some of the people I emulated in my misspent youth. It's over, but somehow I'm not disappointed. It's been a long road. We're all still here and doing fine.



ONSTAGE October, 1989

"Love" Stinks!

By Jonathan Marten

Okay campers, today's trivia question is, what is the most popular show in dinner theatre history? Need a hint? It boasts a script by the world-famous writing (?) team of **Willie Van Zandt** and **Jane Milmore** that's a cross between an episode of *Three's Company* and a two-hour version of *Love American Style*.

Give up? The answer is *Love, Sex And The I.R.S.* Yup, this is the very same *Love, Sex And The I.R.S.* which had a successful run earlier this year at the **Tidewater Dinner Theatre**. And guess what. It's ba-ack.

If this comes across as a note of sarcasm, it's not. It's a symphony. I don't mind having my intelligence insulted any more than the next guy, but in this case I'll make an exception. *Love, Sex And The I.R.S.* is puerile drivel, plain and simple.

Even in a badly written show, good acting can sometimes save the day. While that doesn't happen in this production, **Byron Whiting** who returns as the poor I.R.S. agent just longing for someone to be nice to him, gives it an awfully good try. Even through his mugging, Whiting supplies a quirky characterization that is entertaining and enjoyable.

The same can be said of **Ray**

Oprea and **Rosemarie Harper** in smaller, supporting roles, although there were moments Ms. Harper looked slightly uncomfortable being where she was...on this stage.

In leading roles, **Scott Rollins**, **Robert Shirley** and **Sandra Holcombe** are not only at the mercy of an unforgivable script, they are also at the mercy of unforgivable direction supplied by **G.F. Rowe** and **Marty McGaw**.

While Holcombe stands and poses, Rollins and Shirley prance, mug and deliver punch-lines with all the subtlety of a sledge-hammer. This script is broad enough. What it requires is finesse and a certain amount of underplaying, neither of which it gets.

So how did this muck become the most popular show in dinner theatre history? Maybe because of its simple-mind-

edness. It demands nothing of the audience. No thought, no concentration. You can sit back and enjoy two hours of mind-numbing, lifesize T.V. There's no question that the opening night audience enjoyed themselves immensely.

Anyway, actors gotta work, the theatre has to make a buck and the audience gets what they want and/or deserve. So much for popular taste and/or my educated opinion.

● OFFSTAGE

Well Centered & On Target

by The Insider

"Love is a temporary condition, curable by marriage"

—Ambrose Bierce

Don't know why, but for some reason I *love* that quote. Speaking of which, spring is here, love is in the air, and so is an inordinate amount of pollen — even by Hampton Roads standards. The constant wheezing, sneezing and headaches tend to keep one in a perpetual state of semi-annoyance and cynicism. Kind of like the current state of American politics.

From the What If They Gave An Election and Nobody Came Department — While I usually wouldn't stoop to soiling my hands with politics, the current races for the Democratic and Republican nominations, as well as the situation involving the Congressional Bank and the long-known-about-but-not-talked-about Congressional "perks," kind of force us all to remove our collective heads from the sand and give a long, hard and overdue look at the clowns running this country and the clones who want to take their places.

Has anybody noticed that voter turn out is extremely low. Political pundits who summon righteousness about "voter apathy" and "civic duty" are preaching to the choir. Has it occurred to these geniuses there might be a message in this? Since ballots in the United States don't have a section for No Confidence, staying out of it entirely *is* a vote. As the little old lady in New Hampshire, bedeviled by reporters, snapped, "I never vote! It only encourages them."

Unfortunately, that's not really the answer, either. Let's face it; someone's going to be elected — like it or not. And that someone will have his or her (no sex discrimination here) hand in *your* pocket, spending *your* money and making *your* choices for you. And you *do* have choices — however few or inadequate — and you *do* have money, however little, or these characters wouldn't be climbing all over you trying to claim your vote.

Remember something the government and the I.R.S. seem to have forgotten. It's tax time. If you're getting something back, it isn't just a gift from the government; it's yours, paid in and garnering no interest (for you, at least). If you're paying more taxes, think about where it's going, and why. When you're struggling to balance your checkbook, think about those arrogant clods in the capital (Richmond as well as Washington). If you're going to have someone's hand in your pocket, maybe you ought to register your choice as to whose hand it will be.

In the What Color Is the Sky On Their Planet File, officials at the Center for Disease Control have turned thumbs down on a series of humorous anti-AIDS ads proposed by the New York advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather. The ads, targeted at teens and starring the likes of Whoopie Goldberg, Ray Charles and George Burns, urged the use of condoms with lines like: "I wouldn't be seen without one," (Charles); "I first started using condoms when I was a young man — I think I was 72," (Burns); and "Ain't no making whoopie without one." (Goldberg). The CDC told Ogilvy that they didn't want their ads to have humor nor should they mention the words "sex" or "condom." *Excuse me?*

Somebody correct me if I'm wrong, but according to a recent report by the House Select Committee On Children, Youth and Families, the number of young adults and teens diagnosed with AIDS over the past two years has risen 77%! More than 5,000 children and young adults have already died from AIDS. Obviously, aside from the fact that government efforts to fund AIDS research have been woefully inadequate, methods to support AIDS awareness and education have also failed miserably. And the Center for Disease Control doesn't want to use *humor* or the word *sex* — things that might, just might, get through to kids? Personally, if I may remain on my pedestal for just a few more seconds, I think it's time the CDC and a lot of other people in this country grow up and face reality. If they don't — and this disease is allowed to spread even further — somebody's going to have an awful lot to answer for. That somebody is every single one of us.

Sammy, We Hardly Knew Ye — Show business mourns the loss of comedian Sam Kinison, whose brilliant comic mind was often overshadowed by his penchant for hard-living. It's ironic that the man whose routines featured a defense of drunk driving ("...how else are we gonna get our cars home" and "...it's not like you're going to your car thinking, 'Well, I sure hope I slide into a family of six tonight'") and who made his name expressing anger and outrage toward his ex-wives, died at the hands of a drunk teenaged driver while returning to work after his honeymoon. The former Pentecostal minister who took sharp and pointed aim at religious hypocrisy was a major talent and will be sorely missed.

In the Class Act Category, kudos to the Virginia Symphony for having the grace to offer trade-ins to Orchestra Virginia Beach ticket holders. Those who were left high and dry by the death of the Virginia Beach organization can at least take comfort in the fact that in some way, shape and form, the music does go on.

And, finally, **From the Boy, They Sure Work Fast Department** — Congrats to actor Gary Morton and his lovely wife Rachel, currently at work on their first co-production. Another six-months or so should do it. Let's see now, you guys got married when?.....

FAREWELL TO A NIGHTCRAWLER

CHIP ORTON 1945 - 1991

by Jonathan Marten

To be an intimate of Chip Orton's was at once to love, hate, respect, loathe, admire and revile him. Chip had a way of attracting complicated relationships with those he cared about. Such was a requirement of basking in the glow of his genius. In his lifetime, many people, including many of the top luminaries in the entertainment industry as well as waiters, doormen and bill collectors found themselves enveloped by the Orton charm. One thing's for sure though, once touched by Chip, you couldn't ignore him.

Best known as a columnist and critic for Cue (now New York) Magazine, Chip was, for a number of years, one of the most respected and feared critics in New York. His word alone carried enough weight to close a show, or keep one open as he did several times in his career.

His special love was cabaret. He loved the atmosphere, the performers and every club in New York. When Chip walked into a room, people noticed. Maitre d's and waiters were solicitous, and performers sweated a little heavier. What few of them realized was that Chip was so enamored of their world, and excited to be a part of it, he always had a hard time playing the role of the jaded critic. The people who did see through the mask, were those invited into his private circle.

I, like most people in the entertainment industry in New York, had read Chip's column, *Nightcrawling*, in Cue. My first sight of him came when he hosted his own cable cabaret show in New York. Chip would sit there and introduce friends like Rita Moreno, Wayland Flowers and Madame and comedienne June Gable. We didn't meet then, however. Chip was traveling in rather exalted circles, while I traveled in circles frequented by starving young actors.

A number of years later, when ONSTAGE was in its infancy, Shirley MacLaine came to Hampton Roads to hold a weekend seminar on New Age development techniques. She held a press conference to explain the content of the weekend and after her prepared statement, entertained questions from the floor. All of us eager beaver reporters raised our hands to try and get in a question or two. Pointing to a short, patient little man with a conciliatory smirk painted on his mouth seated behind me, MacLaine cupped her hands over her eyes to see better and exclaimed, "Chip, is that you? What the hell are you doing here?"

Little did I know at the time that I was going to be hearing and reading that line, "Chip, what the hell are you doing here?" over and over again for the next three years.

In his last few years in New York, Chip had turned to composing, putting himself on the other end of the critic's pen. His music was performed at Radio City Music Hall, recorded by the Spinners and the then unknown Michael Bolton, helped his good friend

Marta Sanders win New York's prestigious Cabaret Performer of the Year, and fittingly enough was presented by Chip, with his partner Doug James, Sanders and NBC TV critic Katie Kelly in its own cabaret production, *Puttin' My Music Where My Mouth Is*.

A personal crisis as well as the desire to isolate himself near the ocean so he could concentrate on his music led Chip to leave New York for Virginia Beach where his parents had previously retired.

A few months after the MacLaine press conference, I was working on a story about the problems between the cast and producers of the Virginia Beach Shakespeare-By-the-Sea Festival, talking with celebrity artists Rita Moreno and Michael Greer, who, along with Emmy winner John Wesley Shipp (*The Flash*), had been brought here to help popularize the Festival.

Both Moreno and Greer discussed their long association with Chip and how it had been his months of cajoling that got them down here. I called Chip, who was not only cooperative, but actually grateful for someone acknowledging his efforts. As we talked, he mentioned that he had seen the magazine and expressed an interest in helping out.

I thanked him for his offer, but explained that we were still in our infancy, underfinanced (the ultimate understatement) and probably not anywhere near able to afford him. He replied in that curt Chip tone I was to come to know so well, "I didn't ask for money, I offered to help. I believe in what you're trying to do."

Over the course of the next few years, Chip became one of my closest friends, one of my biggest nightmares, a major force to be reckoned with on the Hampton Roads arts scene, a stalwart part of the ONSTAGE team and, at times, the bane of my existence. In other words, typically Chip.

His contributions to ONSTAGE were not his only contribution to this area. He supported numerous charitable causes, directed a highly successful video for Black History Month at the Chrysler Museum and brought cabaret to the area, producing and appearing in *Puttin' My Music...* for his friends Wayne and Jane Smith at Alexander's In Ghent. He was even responsible for getting his good friend Jim Kincaid out from behind his WVEC anchor desk, putting him on stage and making a performer out of him.

Unfortunately, he never finished his book, *Memoirs of A Dirty Little Name Dropper* (a pastime at which he was a past master, having met everybody at least once). We'll never know what he could have achieved with his music. For those of us lucky enough to have heard his work, this may be the ultimate tragedy of his passing — what might have been. Even so, Chip Orton has left a legacy of his talent, concern, love, animosity and genius. He touched many people. He touched me. He was my friend, even though, sadly, at the end, neither of us seemed to know it. I'll miss him.