

Countdown to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame A guitar smash to the head started it all

As the days unwind to the opening of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, The Farce is pleased to publish another timely slice of rock and roll history. Wedged in between the days of the fresh, innocent sound of the British Invasion and the era of acid rock, psychedelia and MK Ultra was the merry good times of Atlanta-based Slapstick Rock. The national frenzy was shortlived but infinitely influential and has placed its permanent footprint on the throat of rock and roll.

It was an ordinary Thursday morning when Ritchie Cravitz took his usual seat down front at the Musty Cave for an hour or so of lunch and music.

"I liked to go down and check out the local rock bands," says Cravitz between puffs of his long gold-plated cigarette holder while leaning over the rail of the 34-foot boat floating in his backyard lake. "I never expected anything special. I just went down there for something to do during lunch."

In those days, the last thing Cravitz expected to become was a multi-billionaire rock and roll promoter.

But the band that took the stage on October 16, 1965 changed his - and everybody else's - life.

"It was a sudden hit - like when you're minding your own business, then somebody breaks out of the crowd and whacks you in the balls with a croquet mallet," says Cravitz.

Moe Healy and the Bad Tuna were a virtually unknown local group that played occasionally around Atlanta mainly playing Beatles and Rolling Stone tunes, occasionally dropping in one of their original compositions.

"The Beatles had just released Rubber Soul and Norweigan Wood was all the rage," said Cravitz, sipping on a Perrier with a twist of peach. "Bad Tuna was in the middle of that song when suddenly the music stopped and Moe Healy turns to Bud Popovich and says, 'Why I ought to pound you,' then he busted his guitar over Bud's head. That was the single most greatest thing I ever saw on the stage."

It was also the beginning of Slapstick Rock, which quickly took Atlanta, then the country, by storm.

"It gave us something to identify with, something that made the whole thing worthwhile," said Hardy J. Chaplain, who rose to fame as the leader of the War-dogs, the first band to incorporate poetry into Slapstick Rock. "We were hanging out that afternoon in my backyard when Rod Hoxley squealed into the driveway with his '59 Pontiac and came back screaming that Moe Healy whacked his drummer with his guitar on stage. I think it hit us all at once. It was just so cool, it was right there in front of us. I think I went through 20 guitars that year and Chucky (Dodd, drummer for the Windows) ended up getting brain surgery on Christmas Eve, but man oh man was that a year.



Before discovering such acts as Elton John, Supertramp and R.E.M., Ritchie Cravitz, shown in 1965, accidentally walked into Slapstick Rock - a block of rock history and millions of dollars. (Photo: Associated Farce)

By November 1965, every band in Atlanta was doing slapstick. Cravitz, who sold billboard advertising for a local company called Turner Communications, immediately signed Bad Tuna to a management contract.

"I didn't know shit about managing a rock and roll band, but I saw that something was going to go down and fast," he says. "Besides, I was getting tired of taking shit from old man Turner's punk kid, so I quit my job to promote the band."

Cravitz originally planned to take Bad Tuna on the road, but it was another local promoter that saw that fame through slapstick could come easier.

"Gussy Goldstein is the guy who saw the magnetic influence of slapstick," said Peter Dunn, editor of a local alternative rock magazine, Beat Me. Goldstein was the manager of Tex Ryan and the Eye Pokers.

"Gus was the first to realize that he didn't have to take his band out because slapstick was so infectious that people would come to Atlanta to experience this new phenomenon," Dunn says.

And come they did.

By January, the buses were literally pouring kids from all over the country onto the streets of Atlanta.

"They were getting off the bus slapping each other in the face and in the back of the head," said Earl Harell, a captain with the Atlanta Police at that time. "We didn't know how to handle it at first. You have people slapping the hell out of each other and sooner or later you know its going to get

out of hand. We let it go on for a few months because we didn't want to get blamed for causing problems, but sure enough, it got out of hand."

What became known throughout the country as The Summer of Slapstick - the famous summer of 1966 - faded almost as quickly as it started less than a year earlier.

"The Peachtree riots was the beginning of the end," Cravitz reflects. "It was a lot of fun when the local kids were digging it, but when a bunch of outsiders came in and took over the town, we could sense what was coming. We knew that we'd better make a lot of money fast because once it was over, it was over."

It was not far from the bus station at Peachtree and International where musicians were jamming together.

"A guy from Alabama got poked in the eye by Jimi Towns, the first black Slapstick guitarist and he took offense," said Plugs Battery, whose band, the Ever Eddies were the first Slapstick band to experiment with acid after a visit from undercover CIA agents. "He started to yell about Atlanta being a southern city and why don't we keep our negroes in line like they do in Birmingham. Everyone told him to lighten up, we were all having some fun. But the guy pulled a knife and cut Jimi's face and all hell broke loose. Any kind of blow with a blunt instrument was fair game in Slapstick, but that was the first time anybody drew blood and that was really taking it over the line."

Following the three-day riots, the city lost its enthusiasm for Slapstick.

"We all had to sit back and



The father of Slapstick Rock, Moe Healy takes a nostalgic poke into the eyes of Bud Popovich, whose sore cranium began the craze in 1965. Cravitz walked away with the millions generated by the Bad Tuna, but "Who cares," Healy said. "What's important is we all had some fun." (Photo: Associated Farce)

Formerly alive Jerry Garcia was influenced by Slapstick-turned acid-head Hardy J. Chaplain. (Photo: Some Deadhead)

reassess what we were doing with our lives," Healy says. "We all made some good money and had some good times, but I guess after the riots, it was time to move on. We had our 15 minutes of fame and it was somebody else's turn."

Healy, who now plays with former Monkees in lounges for guys with polyester suits, may have started the craze, but unlike some other Slapstickers, never made the millions that some of the other performers did.

"I had a crappy deal with Ritchy and he got about 90 percent of our cash," he said. "Who cares. What's important is we all had some fun."

"That's what I say too," Cravitz said. "Moe made a little bit for himself but he really didn't care about the money that much. I did. I will always be a greedy son of a bitch and proud of it. So it worked out good for both of us."

Healy was inducted last year into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

By October 1966 - a year after Healy administered the famous guitar smash to Popovich's head - the nation's rock and roll youth were heading west to San Francisco, where free love, sex and drugs were replacing slapstick as the latest rock and cultural rage.

Chaplain was one of the few Slapstickers to make the conversion. The Windows were a major influence on acts like Jefferson Airplane and Big Brother and the Holding Company.

"Hardy was one cool mother," said the Greatful Dead's Jerry Garcia, just days before he died. "He came to San Francisco and showed us how a hit of acid could make you feel like you just got whacked on the side of the head with a two-by-four, but without the pain. He taught us how to walk around for years without a clue and some of us are still doing it."