

Wall Street Journal

Rock's Secret History

The Ponderosa Stomp
Features Overlooked Bands
From Past Decades

By JOHN JURGENSEN

April 25, 2008; Page W2

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120907625472443071.html>

As an anesthesiologist at a major New Orleans hospital, Ira Padnos puts patients to sleep. In his other life, he revives the careers of music pioneers.

Dr. Padnos is the founder of the Ponderosa Stomp, a music festival that spotlights talent from rock 'n' roll's primordial years. Some jukebox all-stars boost the bill (Ronnie Spector of The Ronettes will appear this year), but a big part of Dr. Padnos's mission is unearthing acts who cut classic records a half-century ago -- and typically faded into obscurity soon after.

This year's event, set for April 29-30 at the House of Blues in New Orleans, features one of Dr. Padnos's proudest finds: The Green Fuz. In 1968, this quintet from Bridgeport, Texas, recorded a feral self-titled theme song in an empty diner. The setup made the record sound like it was echoing from the bottom of a well. The Green Fuz -- all teenagers at the time -- were so annoyed with the results that they peppered some of the 45s with a shotgun. The band soon slipped from view.

Years later -- after the song was covered by influential acts including '80s garage-punks The Cramps, and featured on compilation albums -- "The Green Fuz" became a Holy Grail for record collectors. Clues from this network led Dr. Padnos to Les Dale, the group's guitar player, who had settled in Virginia Beach, Va., after two decades in the Navy. "Surreal" is Mr. Dale's description of the past year, in which he discovered he'd written a cult classic, reunited with bandmates he hadn't talked to since high school, signed a contract for a 30-minute set at the Ponderosa Stomp, and began flying to Texas for rehearsals.

Though the Green Fuz barely registers as a footnote, they're part of what Dr. Padnos calls the "secret history" of American music in the '50s and '60s, which was flavored by regional styles. The Ponderosa Stomp specializes in the feverish mix of rock, R&B and country that percolated in the South, particularly New Orleans. Guest stars this year will include Dr. John (billed by his pre-fame name, Mac Rebennack) and Wardell Quezergue, who created arrangements for Crescent City staples like "Iko Iko." Now in its seventh year, the Ponderosa Stomp is working with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and other organizations on an accompanying conference that will feature discussions and oral histories.

Nicknamed "Dr. Ike," Dr. Padnos is a Chicago native who moved to New Orleans to attend Tulane University. He didn't set out to run a festival. After hiring late blues man R.L. Burnside and others to perform at his 2000 wedding, he began mounting concert revues at a local club. In the style of the city's "carnival krewes," he called his organization the Mystic Knights of the Mau Mau. (That's why, in the picture of Dr. Padnos at right, he's in the funny outfit.)

The group operates a nonprofit foundation that survives on donations, ticket sales and cash infusions from its founder. Dr. Padnos said he remortgaged his New Orleans home in 2005 to help keep the operation afloat. Because of his day job at University Hospital, where he's practiced anesthesiology for 13 years, Dr. Padnos is often tapped for medical advice by musicians. He helped Scotty Moore, Elvis Presley's original guitar player, get ready for a heart procedure. He hooked the hard-living guitarist Earl King to a multivitamin IV drip. And he helped Chicago blues player Magic Slim settle on a treatment for heartburn.

Dr. Padnos says he doesn't recruit acts for their nostalgia factor; the bands are chosen "on the merits of their performances." And though plenty of Ponderosa Stomp acts went defunct when popular tastes shifted, some just never retired. "They could at least give us a gold watch," says Ms. Spector, 64, who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last year and whose performance at the Ponderosa Stomp will mark her first New Orleans concert. "The word 'oldies' is not a compliment. We're still kicking butt."