

Back To The Beach '07

Fairview Beach - July 27th, 28th and 29th

During the years after The Rotations reunion that Saturday afternoon in September, 1986, from time to time the topic of having another one would come up in conversation among members of the band. But nothing ever materialized for one reason or another. Maybe it was because we doubted we could get everyone together at one time in one place. Most of us still had kids living at home until the late 1990s. Would everyone be interested in having a reunion? We were spread out from Florida to Wisconsin, and from Tennessee to New York City. Who would be willing to undertake the difficult task of organizing such an event?

The answer was Steve Jarrell. And he had the perfect sales pitch to get us all excited about it. In 1986 we spent an afternoon drinking beer and playing songs (as best as we could remember them) for ourselves, friends and families. This time around we had the added allure of being able to play as a group, IN PUBLIC, for the first time in almost 40 years!

Fairview Beach, VA is a sleepy little family resort town on the Potomac River where The Rotations first formed and played on weekends in 1967. It was hit hard by a fierce storm in 2006. The beach was washed away as well as most of the jettys. The kind of money it would take to restore from all the destruction was not available. So, as a fundraiser, it was decided to try and get all the bands that played Fairview in the '60s to come back for one big bash of a concert. A crowd of 2,000 – 3,000 was anticipated.

Rotations response was great. Gene Wells would be back on keyboards, Bobby Speck on drums, Leon Frazier on guitar, and

Billy Gwin on guitar and lead vocals. Horns would include Steve Jarrell, Neil Conway and Jon Hutton on sax along side trumpeters Mike Bliss, Jim Ring and Arthur Myers. Steve, Mike and Jon also doubled as lead singers. Jack Birch and David Limerick, both bass players, still play professionally and weren't available so arrangements were made for Richard Mason of The Diplomats (and Ron Moody's current bass player) to fill in. The only dissenter was trombonist Bobby Driscoll. He simply never responded to our requests that he play.

The prospect of playing in front of a big crowd again was exciting. It was also terrifying. The last thing we wanted would be to get on stage and embarrass ourselves. Over the decades since the band dissolved most of us had played very little music. Individually many of the guys (including me) were concerned as to how much our skills had eroded. And how could we possibly sound good together without many hours practice as a group?

Again, Steve had the answer. Each band member was sent a CD of the songs we would play during our 30 minute set, along with the sheet music. We had three months to "get our lips back in shape", hone our skills to a passable level, relearn the songs and be ready for practice on Saturday July 28.

Sounds good on paper.

I thought we would be able to practice together all day Saturday but I was wrong. Jarrell organized the entire "Back To The Beach '07" event and needed to attend, as a participant, the rehearsals of several other bands. Leon had to practice with the Prophets and Richard Mason, who was filling in on bass was scheduled to be with his old band, The Diplomats. Neil Conway wasn't able to make it to Saturday practice because he had to be at his retail store in Washington, DC.

So, although most all of us were at our “rehearsal hall” (a garage behind band friend Brad Butler’s house which he had converted into his own private sports bar), little could be accomplished before *early evening* when everyone would be there. During the course of the day we did go over a number of things. Remember the song “Mr. Pitiful”? That was the first song we attempted. And it was just that. Pitiful. But the day wasn’t totally wasted. Gene, Billy and Hutton worked out a medley of Ray Charles “Georgia” and “You don’t know me”. And the guys in the band had lots of time to visit with each other and talk about way back when and those great times we had together so long ago.

Finally, Steve, Leon and Richard got to practice around 6:30 PM. Things didn’t go very well. Speck kept having problems keeping the tempo right on drums. He attributed his problems to his injured wrist. I felt the problem might have had a little something to do with all the beer he drank over the course of the day waiting for everyone to get to practice. The horns didn’t sound as full and powerful as I had remembered, either. Nevertheless, I felt we might be able to get through Sunday okay, especially when Steve lined up an additional drummer to come onstage and complement Bobby.

The first thing I did Sunday morning when I got out of bed was to look out my motel room window. Weather forecasts for the day were not promising. And, although it wasn’t raining, the sky looked ominous.

All the bands slated to play met at Fairview at 10 AM for briefing. The Rotations weren’t scheduled to go onstage until around 6 PM so Gene, Bobby and the horn section (minus Steve...again, he was running the entire event) went back to Brad’s “sports bar” to practice some more. But this time Neil was there with his baritone sax. And Speck held his own on drums. The improvement was

amazing. When we got back to Fairview Beach I couldn't wait to play, confident we would sound quite good, thank you very much!

Then it started raining, followed by storm cells complete with thunder and lightning and no relief in sight. Steve and the other members of the Beach Erosion Project Committee had no choice but to cancel the event. Only half the bands got to play that afternoon.

There we were, excited, our adrenalin pumping hard, dying to get on stage together for the first time in nearly four decades. And Mother Nature shot us down. It was probably our "last best chance" to ever play together on stage again. And that chance was gone.

I also felt bad for Greg Haynes and his wife Nora. Greg, author of "The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music" (which included a section on The Rotations) and Nora drove all the way from a Swinging Medallions reunion in Greenwood, SC Saturday night to hear us play. And the gig got cancelled. Fate can be cruel. It certainly was that day.

But, all in all, I wouldn't trade that weekend for anything in the world. All of us being together again was very special. In retrospect, I even enjoyed the frustrations of Saturday's practices because it all came together Sunday morning. And we got to laugh together a lot. It was almost as if we had never been apart.

Jim Ring
August 3, 2007