

AIN'T IT LIKE I TOLD YOU
(Leslie-Cruey)
C. VAUGHN LESLIE
And His
Sleepless Knights

Story by
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Photos contributed

Beach music and blue-eyed soul:

Looking back at C. Vaughn Leslie and His Sleepless Knights

If you loved to dance in the 1960s, it's likely you remember the Sleepless Knights and their hit 'Ain't It Like I Told You.'



C. Vaughn Leslie and His Sleepless Knights formed in the tumultuous mid-1960s, and are remembered for their biggest hit, "Ain't It Like I Told You."

They were Johnson City boys who became one of the region's top beach bands, touring the Southeast and playing their soulful songs to packed clubs.

Current state Sen. Dewey "Rusty" Crowe, on guitar, was a founding member, along with drummer Larry "Odell" Cole and bassist Bill Comfort.

The group formed in 1964, with Cole, Comfort and Crowe practicing in Comfort's home at night.

"Bill's mother got so fed up with us," Crowe said with a laugh. "She came up with the band name because she couldn't get any sleep."

They soon recruited organ player Doug Cruey and singer C. Vaughn Leslie, plus T.C. Brooks

on bass (replacing Comfort), Ron Corzine and Joe "Bo Peep" Franklin on saxophones and James "Pimp" Alexander on trumpet. It was the start of something good.

They were a functioning band until 1969, with various lineup changes and as many as a dozen players at a time.

"We were one of the first blue-eyed soul bands in Tennessee," Cole said.

"I was 17 and they had to sneak me in," Crowe remembers. "We would set up in a black club and they'd laugh at us and wonder 'Who are these guys?' but the minute we kicked into James Brown they'd go crazy."

The boys traveled around in a 1959 Cadillac hearse with the band name painted on the side.

"I remember coming back from a gig and going over the mountains between Johnson City and Asheville, and we came upon

some people whose car had broken down," Cole said. "We were helping them but we couldn't get their car going. So we offered them a ride, and when we opened up the rear door of the hearse, a couple of our guys were in the back sacked out under sheets sleeping, and they raised up to see what was happening.

"That scared the people off. They took off running."

A band on the road accumulates such tales. The Sleepless Knights played Chattanooga, Nashville, Macon, Ga., and Myrtle Beach, S.C. They backed up greats like Rufus Thomas, The Tams and Percy Sledge.

The group's fortunes were reasonably good. While they didn't make much money — sometimes splitting \$50 for a night — it was still exciting. Circumstances finally led to the band's breakup, though.

"We were just getting to the point where we weren't going to make a career out of this as much as we wanted to," Franklin said. "Guys were starting to graduate from college, there was a draft going on — I got drafted — the Beatles and the British Invasion came in and that kind of hurt Motown and R&B music. But we made some pocket money out of this."

The band members have long since gone their separate ways, with careers in medicine, engineering, insurance, banking and politics. About 15 members got together a couple of years ago, ostensibly to celebrate Vaughn's 60th birthday. They rented an American Legion hall in Harriman and jammed together for the first time in years.

Then last year the Sleepless Knights were honored by the Georgia Music Hall of Fame as representatives of beach music. They're included in a new book "The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music," and the celebration was done in conjunction with the book's release. The accompanying CD includes "Ain't It Like I Told You."

The Internet keeps the band's music alive, and Crowe said they were surprised to learn a 45 copy of "Ain't It" sold online last year for \$450.

Several of the Knights still play music regularly, and there's talk of reuniting to record a couple more songs. The bond is still there, after all these years.

"Music is the main ingredient keeping us together," Cole said. "It's a language we all understand. If any one of these guys shows up at my door, they can have anything I have — short of my wife and daughter. It's just a real close group."

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From left, Ron Corzine on sax, Joe Franklin on sax, vocalist C. Vaughn Leslie, T.C. Brooks on bass guitar, Larry Cole on drums, Rusty Crowe on lead guitar, and Doug Cruey on organ.

