

METRO SPIRIT

Hey baby!

George Croft of The Pallbearers, a '60s band, is one of Augusta's hidden rockers, a man who once appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show"

by : Erika Bolin



AUGUSTA, GA - Back in the heyday of mop-headed "hey baby" pop rock, Augusta's The Pallbearers made the national charts and toured the country with huge opening acts like Ray Charles and the Young Rascals.

Today, one of the band's Augusta-born-and-bred heartthrobs, George Croft, is still brightly shining at 67 years old. Though he couldn't recall how the name came to be, he remembered, "We used say our motto was, 'We are the last one's to let you down.'"

Today, Croft is an electrical contractor and recently resigned as operations director of the James Brown Arena. And, as part of Augusta's musical legacy, he was asked to help rock historian Greg Haynes compile what has become an encyclopedia of sorts called "The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music."

Croft himself has a long musical history that began when he was just over two years old. Croft reminisced, "My mom brought me down to the Miller Theater on Broad for a talent show. I was so little they had to put me on a chair so I could reach the microphone."

Croft said his debut was a song called, "Dance by the Light of the Moon." The tiny talent was such a hit with the audience that he was invited to do an encore. He closed with "Accentuate the Positive."

From that precocious start, he began playing a regional circuit for young talent. He'd belt out what they called "show tunes." He started to stack up wins.

In fact, he said, he won so often he was told he couldn't enter as a competitor any

longer because it was unfair to the other kids. He became a special guest performer. With the sparkle of a child, he added, "The greatest thing I ever won was a roadster bike. I still have it. In fact, it was in my truck until this morning. I am going to have it refurbished. It's a grand and sturdy old thing."

At 10, Croft played "The Ed Sullivan Show" in 1950 and sang, "Ding Dong Daddy From Dumas."

But as he grew into his teens and puberty struck, "the cuteness of singing pop American standards" to cooing adults grew redundant. Croft looked for something new.

"I would sneak into my room late at night and listen to WLAC out of Nashville. They were playing nothing but blues. It was 'black music.' I wasn't allowed to listen, but I did anyway — even if I had to hide under the bed."

He said he was not the only one tuning in and listening to the likes of Bobby Blue Bland, Muddy Waters and Lightning Hawkins.

Then, in 1958, Croft began to emcee The Imperial Theatre's weekly ABC/Paramount affiliate "Teen Time Show."

"It was a combination of a rock 'n' roll show followed by a movie," he explained. "I really stirred things up one week. I had a covert operation where I snuck in a black band called Bill Johnson and the Four Steps of Rhythm. We had to sneak them in the building and everything.

"We were still segregated then and I thought they were going to run me out of town. But I tell you, the place was packed. They saw what a success it was and they allowed me to continue to do it."

While emceeing, he met his future bandmates and cemented what would be a life-long affection for performing music. "For a short time, The Pallbearers were a vocation. But it's really always been an avocation."

The Pallbearers had a shtick. The band members would solemnly walk along a casket that was on rollers while the traditional death march was being played from an organ. Once they reached the center of the stage and the band took their places, a cue in the form of a high-hat rim shot was given and a microphoned Croft would pop up from the casket and burst into song.

"Once we played with a group called The Tams who refused to come on the stage until we removed the casket," Croft said as he laughed at the memory. "They were afraid of the coffin."

He grew serious, "Now, we only used the coffin at kid shows." He's referring to those popular multi-band shows of the '60s, not the nightclubs they played. But his wording is rich with humor at the double entendre.

"I had a blast," he reiterates as he reaches through some aged clippings. There are half a dozen chart forms from Augusta's WBBQ from 1967. "Look here. We were at No. 16 from 50, then a week later we made it up to No. 8 then No. 4. Then we started to fall back but that was great fun."

The group also hit No. 8 on national charts with their song "Get Fired Up." They also beat out Alabama's "Take Me Back to Birmingham" on "American Bandstand"'s popular "Rate-a-Record" segment.

The Pallbearers got big enough that they played all over the country. When asked about his most cherished memory from those days, he said it wasn't meeting any of the would-be legendary musicians (though Ray Charles was a thrill for him); it was a place. "I got to walk out on the icy Lake Erie banks and play in the snow."

He admitted there are a few other, bawdier, memories from the road that he prefers not mention.

George Croft and The Pallbearers are just a small part of the musical legacy in Augusta. In fact, this area and its neighboring states had so great an influence in rock 'n' roll history that historian Greg Haynes asked Croft for assistance in producing a book on the Southeastern region's forgotten faves called, "The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music."

Croft said the book is so big "it could be a coffee table." Within its gorgeous pages you'll find an unprecedented look at the region's contributions from those who had the one-hit wonders and some of the names forever engraved in beach and rock 'n' roll music history.

"The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music" (\$59.99) is available at Books a Million and online @ heybabydays.com