

The Long Retirement

Berkeley pop band the Rubinoos still have oomph.

By *Eli Messinger*

December 5, 2007

For a band that effectively retired 25 years ago, Berkeley's the Rubinoos have been doing quite well lately. The pop band reissued its first three records, released a three-disc box set anthology, toured in Japan, and now have an upcoming gig at the Great American Music Hall. Even more impressive is how a band with only one chart single to its name has remained a worldwide influence for thirty years.



The Rubinoos

Vocalist Jon Rubin and guitarist-songwriter Tommy Dunbar met at Berkeley's Martin Luther King Jr. Junior High in 1970. They started a '50s cover band and weathered periods Rubin remembers as "really bad psychedelia" and prog-rock before finding the harmony-laden pop-rock sound that would become their trademark. Free shows at Provo Park and the Grand Auto parking lot begat gigs at the Longbranch Saloon, Keystone, and LaVal's, and the band's lineup solidified with Donn Spindt on drums and Greg Keranen on bass.

The Rubinoos' debut for Beserkley Records was a pure bubblegum cover of the DeFranco Family's "Gorilla" that was curiously out of step with prevailing mid-'70s rock. Dunbar recalls a customer at defunct Berkeley record store Rather Ripped Records saying "If their other songs sound like this one, they should just give it up." But they didn't give up, nor change direction. Keranen left to join a reconstituted version of Jonathan Richman's Modern Lovers and was replaced by Royse Ader for an even sweeter-sounding cover of Tommy James & the Shondells' "I Think We're Alone Now."

With their single peaking at number 45 and their self-titled album full of effervescent originals, the Rubinoos appeared on *American Bandstand* and in the pages of *Rolling Stone* and *Tiger Beat*. Dunbar's songs fused his love of Top 40 into a sweet combination of Brill Building craft and Jackson-Five-styled light soul.

Their second LP, 1978's *Back to the Drawing Board*, spun off the power-pop gem "I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend," whose climb to commercial immortality was stopped cold by a distributor's bankruptcy. (Ironically, nearly thirty years after its failure to chart, "Boyfriend" is the focal point of a lawsuit against Avril Lavigne and her sound-alike hit song, "Girlfriend.")

However, appearances in the UK and an opening slot touring with Elvis Costello couldn't restart the band's progress. Ader dropped out and was replaced by Al Chan. The group recorded demos for a third album (released a decade later as *The Basement Tapes*), but was unable to generate any commercial action. When an invitation from Los Angeles beckoned, Rubin and Dunbar took the bait, and in 1982 the band split.

Dunbar describes being seduced by "lawyers with big chairs and big desks." He and Rubin recorded an uncharacteristically inert EP, 1983's *Party of Two*, with Todd Rundgren and members of Utopia. "We really made a wrong turn," Rubin concedes. "We were told, here's a guy, super talented, and his name on your record is going to add this many units to your sales. Well, that was wrong. ... We just didn't know what the hell we were doing." A few demo sessions and some soundtrack work (including a song performed by Adrian Zmed in *Bachelor Party* that Dunbar jokingly labels "a dream realized"), and the band slipped into mothballs.

Rubin remained in LA, managing a recording equipment store and developing a cartage business, and eventually joining the a cappella group the Mighty Echoes. Dunbar returned to the Bay Area to play with the Strait Jackets, formed Vox Pop with Spindt and Chan, and eventually relocated to Sacramento, where he developed a successful production business.

A decade after leaving the Bay Area, the Rubinoos reunited for a 1992 show at Slim's and released demos of their never-finished third LP. In 1998, they released their first album of new material in twenty years, *Paleophonic*. Increasingly hailed as a power-pop pioneer, the band regrouped for 1999's *International Pop Overthrow*, and again in 2002 for their first tour of Japan. Their career picked up pace with a 2003 album of covers, *Crimes Against Music*, and in 2005 they reunited with their original producer, Gary Phillips, for *Twist Pop Sin*.

The band's second run has retained both the buoyancy and boyishness of their original franchise. Rubin explains the continuity of their sound across thirty years of releases, "I don't think we can help it." Reminding them of their beginnings is a fresh round of Beserkley reissues that Dunbar remastered from original tapes that struck him on the head as they tumbled from an ice chest in his garage ("Oh my

God — it's the masters!" apparently exclaimed before "Am I bleeding?").

Sanctuary Records, which now owns the Beserkley catalog, also discovered a long-forgotten tape of the Rubinoos' 1978 Hammersmith Odeon show. Dunbar reworked it to create a sparkling document of the band's energetic stage work, replete with between-song banter, a cappella doo-wop ("Rockin' in the Jungle"), hits ("I Think We're Alone Now" and "I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend"), and a cover of "Sugar, Sugar" that quotes "Smoke on the Water" and "Downtown" before drawing the audience into a sing-along. "I love that it exists," said Rubin, "because when asked, 'Why did people think the Rubinoos were good?' Well, that's why."

In October, the Rubinoos toured Japan, where they encountered rabid twentysomething fans not even born in the '70s. As they signed endless bits of memorabilia, they asked, "Why are you here? Why do you care?" and the answer came back, "Because the Rubinoos are a seminal power-pop group."

Rubin chafes slightly at the label. "If you twist my arm and make me say 'power pop,' I will, but generally I think of us as a sort of combination of pop and garage rock," he said. Dunbar jokes that power-pop is "kind of a catchall for bands that are trying to be melodic but don't make any money. "

Without the pressure to create careers, Rubin and Dunbar have been freed to simply enjoy playing together. Dunbar likens their recent tour of Japan to a vacation punctuated by "this really fun thing, which was to play at the shows." Rubin characterized it as "rock star fantasy camp."

The current group, augmented by keyboardist Susie Davis and drummer David Rokeach, returns to the Bay Area to open for their old Beserkley pal, Jonathan Richman. When asked if "Sugar Sugar" might be on the set list, Dunbar says there's a chance. When asked if Richman might reprise his dance performance of "The Archie," Dunbar smiles and says, "I think there's a slimmer chance," before finishing the thought with, "but I'm hoping!"