Bobby Womack

BY ROB BOWMAN

From the early 1960s through the late 1980s, Bobby Womack was one of popular music's great triple threats, making stunning, if often underrecognized, contributions to the world of soul as a session musician, writer of hit songs for others, and as an artist in his own right. His often unorthodox but eminently soulful guitar playing animated recordings by Hall of Famers Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Elvis Presley, Dusty Springfield, Janis Joplin, and Sly and the Family Stone; his emotion-laden treatises on the vagaries of love provided hit material for the Rolling Stones, Wilson Pickett, the J. Geils Band, George Benson, and New Birth; and his own recordings, from 1971's "That's the Way I Feel About 'Cha" through 1985's "I Wish He Didn't Trust Me So Much," defined the essence of what it meant to be soulful and funky in the 1970s and 1980s.

Born in Cleveland in 1944, Womack came of age as the middle child of a family of five boys – Friendly Jr., Curtis, Bobby, Harry, and Cecil. His father, Friendly Womack Sr., was a steel mill worker from West Virginia and a deeply religious man who sang and played guitar in a gospel quartet called the Voices of Love. By the time Bobby entered grade school, the five Womack siblings were rehearsing on a daily basis as a gospel quartet – under Friendly Sr.'s stern tutelage and upon his determination that his sons would follow the path of righteousness. Bobby was the lead guitarist, having taught himself to play his father's guitar left-handed and upside down. His main influence, interestingly enough, was country piano ace Floyd Cramer. Womack would eventually record two of Cramer's songs for his 1976 LP *B.W. Goes C&W.*

In 1953, Friendly Sr. managed to persuade Sam Cooke to let the Womack Brothers open for gospel superstars the Soul Stirrers on a local program at the Temple Baptist Church. Three years later, the group recorded its first single, "Buffalo Bill," for the deservedly obscure Pennant label. Working the gospel highway alongside such groups as the Staple Singers, the Davis Sisters, and the Pilgrim Travellers, Bobby developed as a guitarist to the point that in 1957, a few months before his thirteenth birthday, he was asked to go on the road as the lead guitarist with the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi.

The Womack Brothers' big break came in 1961, when Sam Cooke tapped them for his newly formed SAR label. Cooke wanted the group to record secular music. With Friendly looking over their shoulders, the Womack Brothers insisted that they would sing only gospel. A compromise was reached: Their first single would be a gospel recording – if it was a hit, they would continue to record gospel music; if it flopped, Sam would cut them singing soul. Fortunately for the world of secular music, "Somebody's Wrong" did well only in the gospel market.

For the Womack Brothers' next single, Cooke asked another SAR songwriter, Zelda Samuels, to write a new set of secular lyrics to the music of an unreleased gospel song written by Bobby called "Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray." Cooke also decided that Bobby should replace Curtis as the group's lead singer and that their name should be changed to the Valentinos. Issued in the summer of 1962 as "Lookin' for a Love," the single shot its way to Number Eight, and the fate of the Valentinos was set. Nine years later, "Lookin' for a Love" would provide the J. Geils Band with their first charting record. Shortly after the Valentinos' version was released, Bobby became Sam Cooke's lead guitarist in the studio and on the road, and his gospel-inflected fretwork can be heard on *Sam Cooke at the Copa,* among other recordings.

In 1964, the Valentinos achieved limited success with another Bobby Womack original, "It's All Over Now." A fledgling group called the Rolling Stones were turned on to the record by New York disc jockey Murray

A soul original: Bobby Womack in 1974

Cleveland's Womack Brothers in 1959: Bobby, Curtis, Harry, Cecil, Friendly Jr., and Friendly Sr. (clockwise from top left)

The Valentinos: Bobby, Friendly Jr., Curtis, Harry, Cecil (clockwise from top left), c. 1962

the K during an interview on their first North American tour. Recognizing a great song when they heard it, the Stones recorded their version of Womack's tune a few days later at Chess Studios in Chicago. A Number 26 single in the States, "It's All Over Now" became the Stones' first chart-topper in the U.K.

After Sam Cooke's tragic death in December 1964, the Valentinos recorded a handful of singles for Checker before packing it in. In need of a gig, Bobby auditioned for Ray Charles and spent much of 1965 through 1967 touring as part of Charles's band.

Determined to continue as a solo artist, between 1965 and 1967 Womack cut a handful of singles for Him, Checker, Keyman, and Atlantic before signing with Minit Records. Minit sent Womack to Memphis to record with Chips Moman at American Sound Studios. While the first few singles he cut at American failed to chart, Womack quickly became ensconced as a guitarist in the studio's fabled house band. Moman was particularly enamored with Womack's penchant for crafting memorable introductions.

At American, Womack ended up playing lead guitar on a plethora of classic recordings, including Dusty Springfield's *Dusty in Memphis* and Elvis Presley's "Suspicious Minds," but his greatest success occurred when Wilson Pickett came down to American in late summer 1967. As fate would have it, Pickett needed material, so Womack quickly pitched him a song that he had recently written called "I'm in Love." Sporting a breathtakingly beautiful vocal melody and an equally intoxicating descending lead-guitar pattern, "I'm in Love" became the first of seventeen Womack songs recorded over the next few years by Pickett, including "I'm a Midnight Mover," "Jealous Love," "I've Come a Long Way," and "I Found a True Love." Womack played lead guitar on all of these recordings and in Pickett's road band for much of the next two years.

Having given his best original material to Pickett, Womack elected to refashion a number of pop songs in a soul vein for his first LP on Minit, 1969's *Fly Me to the Moon*. The title track, recorded by Joe Harnell in 1963; the Mamas and the Papas' 1966 smash "California Dreamin' "; and Tony Bennett's 1962 hit "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" provided Womack with his first forays as a solo artist on the R&B charts.

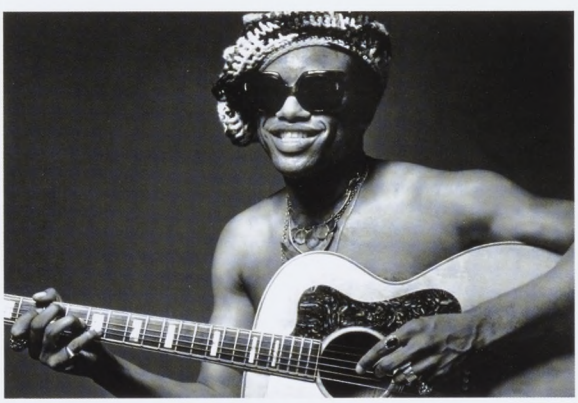
In 1970, Janis Joplin reached out to Womack, asking if he had material that might work for her *Pearl* album. Joplin ended up cutting a version of Womack's first single for Minit, "Trust Me," upon which Bobby also played guitar. A year later, Womack was befriended by Sly Stone, who asked him to play guitar and sing background vocals on a number of cuts on Sly's 1971 masterpiece *There's a Riot Goin' On*. That same year, Womack wrote and played on "Breezin' " for Hungarian guitarist Gabor Szabo. Five years later, George Benson would take the song into the charts for a second time.

Working with Sly had a profound influence on Womack. When he next entered the studio to record *Communication*, his first album for United Artists, his approach to both songwriting and recording were noticeably different. While he was still recording soul versions of pop songs such as James Taylor's "Fire and Rain," Ray Stevens's "Everything Is Beautiful," and the Carpenters' "(They Long to Be) Close to You," Womack's new originals, such as "Communication" and "That's the Way I Feel About 'Cha," were much heavier, sporting funky, serpentine bass lines, a surfeit of wah-wah guitar, sweeping string arrangements, and breathy, often falsetto, background vocals accompanying his own trademark grit-filled raspy lead vocals. Womack's lyrics were now philosophical in nature, interrogating the ups and downs, trials and tribulations of adult relationships. Appropriately, given the nature of the new material, he often introduced the songs with spoken raps.

The response from black radio and the African-American audience was immediate, with "That's the Way I Feel About

Old friends keeping it in tune: Womack with Ron Wood and Keith Richards, early eighties

Thank you (falenttinme com backstage agin):
Womack with Sly Stone, 1984



A six-string smile: Bobby in 1975

Bobby gives it his all: Los Angeles, August 24, 1974.

Womack looking good in red, Chicago, 1985 . . .

. . . and in white, New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, 2002. OPPOSITE: Still lookin' for a love, still playing the guitar upside-down, 1985.

'Cha," "Woman's Gotta Have It," and "Harry Hippie" shooting their way into the R&B Top Ten in 1971 and 1972. The next year, Womack wrote *Across 110th Street,* which, alongside *Shaft* and *Superfly,* ranks among the finest blaxploitation soundtracks of the period. The title cut, buoyed by percolating percussion and a stunningly dramatic string arrangement, became Womack's fifth R&B Top Twenty single in a row. Through 1976, Womack continued to storm the black charts with such era-defining records as "Nobody Wants You When You're Down and Out," a recut of "Lookin' for a Love," "You're Welcome, Stop On By" (later covered by Rufus featuring Chaka Khan), "Check It Out," and "Daylight." Funk-laden to the core, "Lookin' for a Love" was his only single to achieve any crossover success in North America, managing to reach Number Ten on the pop chart, while topping the R&B listings. Though he may have had limited crossover success stateside, in Europe Womack was a much bigger star.

The second half of the 1970s proved to be a fallow period for Womack, as he was plagued by personal demons, the onset of disco music, and a series of unsympathetic record companies. Counted as a has-been by most within the industry, Womack was recruited in 1980 by the Crusaders' Wilton Felder to sing lead on the title track of his solo album, *Inherit the Wind.* Released as a single, "Inherit the Wind" led to Womack's signing a recording contract in 1981 with the tiny indie label Beverly Glen. Womack's first Beverly Glen LP, *The Poet,* was a stunning comeback and just might be the greatest soul album of the 1980s. Sporting three hit singles, including the majestic heartbreaking ballad "If You Think You're Lonely Now," *The Poet* reached the top of the R&B album chart, where it stayed for five weeks and became the first Womack LP to breach the pop Top Thirty. Womack followed it up with *The Poet II* in 1984, featuring a cataclysmic, spine-tingling duet with Patti LaBelle on "Love Has Finally Come at Last." Moving over to MCA the next year, Womack stormed the charts a final time with one of the great cheating songs, "I Wish He Didn't Trust Me So Much." The following year, he sang backup on the Rolling Stones' version of Bob & Earl's "Harlem Shuffle."

Since 1987, Womack has only sporadically recorded, cutting *Resurrection* in 1994 for Ron Wood's Slide label and in 1999 a gospel album appropriately titled *Back to My Roots* and a Christmas album, *Traditions.* Despite such a paucity of new recordings, Womack's music has remained in the public eye. In 1994, Jodeci's K-Ci Hailey covered "If You Think You're Lonely Now" for the soundtrack to *Jason's Lyric,* achieving a Top Twenty R&B and pop hit in the process. Three years later, Quentin Tarantino used "Across 110th Street" in the opening and closing sequences of *Jackie Brown.* Womack songs have also been featured in *Meet the Parents* (2000) and *American Gangster* (2007). In 2005, "Across 110th Street" was featured in the hit video game *True Crime: New York City.* The following year, K-Ci Hailey once again reached into the Womack well to cut "A Woman's Gotta Have It"; and Mariah Carey's chart-topping hit "We Belong Together" referenced "If You Think You're Lonely Now" in its lyric. Most recently, in 2008 Destiny Child's Kelly Rowland had a U.K. hit with a cover of Womack's "Daylight."

More than a half century since he cut his first single as a member of the Womack Brothers, tonight the inimitable Bobby Womack takes his rightful place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. 𝄞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Cleveland Rocks! And So Does Cincinnati, Columbus, Akron, Youngstown . . .

BY ASHLEY KAHN

An Ohio native recounts the numerous musical gifts
the Buckeye State has given to rock & roll

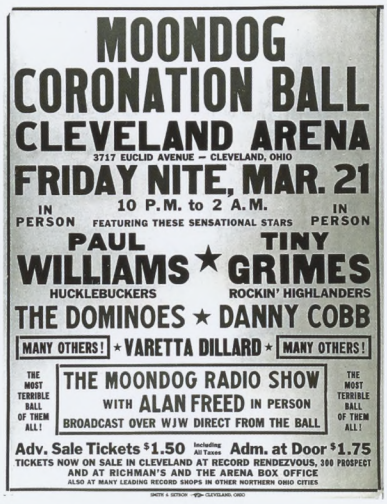
In elementary school in Cincinnati, we used to say our home state was round on the ends and tall in the middle. Get it? *O-hi-O.* Well, my rapier-like wit had to start somewhere, and the same with my schooling in rock.

In the seventies, rock was everywhere in Cincinnati. WEBN was playing it on the FM dial, airing too much Frampton and not enough Springsteen in between fake ads for Tree Frog Beer. The legendary three-hour Coliseum concerts – Pink Floyd, Steve Miller, Led Zeppelin – seemed huge and dazzling back then, though hazy to me now. I remember the Eagles playing the first rock concert in Riverfront Stadium; harmonizing on "Lyin' Eyes" was our mayor – Jerry Springer. Yes, *that* Jerry.

I recall driving up to Cleveland to see the Stones, tuning in to WMMS, and hearing the Michael Stanley Band for the first time. In 1976, Cleveland's Michael Stanley Band was big stuff in O-hi-O. MSB (as we called them) never quite made it onto the national radar, but they should have. They could rock out with the power of a Grand Funk boogie, or get backseat sticky like a Bob Seger ballad. They put on a high-energy show and put out solid albums. Give a listen to *You Break It, You Bought It* from '75, or *Heartland* from '80. You'll agree.

For a young Ohioan falling in love with rock, MSB was an early lesson in regional pride. As my affair with the music deepened, my ears began to reach out to older styles, and I found plenty more reasons to celebrate Ohio's role in the rise of rock: Bands of national influence that grew from small

Cleveland's own Michael Stanley Band: Daniel Pecchio, Bob Pelander, Tommy Dobeck, Michael Stanley, Gary Markasky, and Kevin Raleigh (from left)



The concert that sparked a revolution

locales like Youngstown, Canton, and Akron. An R&B record label of historical significance that was – surprise! – based in my own hometown. A Cleveland DJ who, in 1951, began broadcasting black music to a racially mixed audience, being the first to regularly refer to the music as "rock & roll."

Today, Alan Freed, a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee since its first year, has been crowned a pioneer of the grand tradition. His WJW program *The Moondog Show* is considered a cradle for the dissemination of R&B to a mainstream audience, and his first Moondog Coronation Ball – held to riotous reception on March 21, 1952 – is widely hailed as the first rock concert of all time. Much of it had to do with Freed's hustle and jive-talking patter, but Cleveland – an important "breakout city" where countrywide trends first appeared in local form – had a part in it, too.

That's one of the reasons the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame opened here in 1995. And here we are again tonight: the perfect opportunity to acknowledge the extent of Cleveland's – and Ohio's – contributions to the grand rock & roll tradition. Normally that would take a book (two already exist: Nick Talevski's *Hang On Sloopy* and Deanna R. Adams's *Rock 'n' Roll and the Cleveland Connection*). What follows is a more condensed retracing of one Ohioan's rock & roll education, which started in the heyday of arenas and album-oriented radio.

In the 1970s, the Michael Stanley Band was not the only group blasting out of Cleveland. There was the more widely renowned James Gang, featuring guitar star Joe Walsh, with such national FM-radio favorites as "Funk #49" and "The Bomber," and Walsh's solo hit "Rocky Mountain Way." Over on the AM dial, the Raspberries, also from Ohio's northeast corner, featured Eric Carmen's soaring vocals and created rapturous, hook-filled slices of power pop: "Go All the Way," "I Wanna Be With You," and "Overnight Sensation."

Being a Cincinnatian, I soon learned about the Isley Brothers and how their earliest hits – "Shout" and "Twist and Shout" – inspired the Beatles and other British Invasion groups. And how local guitarist Lonnie Mack, who played one of Gibson's first Flying V guitars, inspired Stevie Ray Vaughan. On the garage-band tip just a little upriver in Youngstown, a group called Human Beinz hit it big in 1967 with their version of the Isleys' "Nobody but Me." In '74, on

Joe Walsh (far right) and the James Gang

Eric Carmen (second from right) and the Raspberries

The man with the Flying V: Lonnie Mack

They came from Akron: Devo, 1979 . . .

. . . and the Cramps.

And from Cleveland: Pere Ubu, 1979 . . .

. . . and the Dead Boys, live in 1978.

the more bubblegum side, Cincinnati's Bo Donaldson and the Heywoods hit the pop charts with "Billy Don't Be a Hero."

As rock spat and snarled its way into the punk years, a new crop of bands grew from Ohio's northern sector and left their mark on a national scale. Cleveland's cult favorite Rocket from the Tombs – led by a legendary rock writer named Crocus Behemoth – were a high-energy, proto-punk band that shared both the sound and attitude of Iggy and the Stooges. The group never went further than the local scene. More significant, as the band splintered, it spawned two important groups – the scruffy and scuzzy Dead Boys, led by Stiv Bators, and the dark, brooding intensity of Pere Ubu, fronted by David Thomas (Crocus's real name).

From Akron came the quirky, futuristic rock of Devo. Boosted by a range of fans that included Neil Young and David Bowie, the costume-wearing and concept-driven band was perfect for MTV's initial years; its tune "Whip It" was one of the first singles propelled onto the charts primarily by music-video promotion.

Devo was considered one of the big success stories of the so-called new wave; another were the London-based Pretenders, led by Chrissie Hynde, a transplanted songwriter, singer, and guitarist who went to Kent State with Devo's Mark Mothersbaugh. Around the same time, the Cramps – dreamed up in Akron by Christine Wallace and the late Erick Purkhiser (a.k.a. Poison Ivy and Lux Interior) and launched in New York with drummer Miriam Linna and guitarist Bryan Gregory – became a downtown favorite, blending horror-movie schtick with primal, rockabilly raunch, creating a new style called "psychobilly."

On the soulful side, Ohio had much to offer as black music morphed through the years, from jump blues to R&B to soul. In the forties through the fifties, Cleveland brought forth balladeers Bull Moose Jackson and Little Jimmy Scott, and Screamin' Jay Hawkins – whose howls on "I Put a Spell on You" and other tunes combined heavy backbeat rhythms with the spine-tingling sounds of an exorcism. There was the harmony group the Valentinos, straight out of the Cleveland church scene, famed for the original versions of "It's All Over Now" and "Lookin' for a Love." Speaking of the Valentinos: Founding member Bobby Womack is one of this year's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees.

Other Clevelanders who made it big in the soul world include Edwin Starr, whose Vietnam-era song is one of the angriest of its kind ("War! *Hunh!* What is it good for?"), and Hall of Famers the O'Jays, whose message-laden hits – "Backstabbers," "For the Love of Money," "Love Train" – were crafted by Philadelphia International's mid-seventies production machine. Gerald Levert came up under his father Eddie – an original O'Jay – to become a successful singer and producer. Two more R&B heavyweights from northern Ohio: Akron's James Ingram and Canton's Macy Gray.

Turning to southern Ohio, there's a fertile, funky tradition that stems from a converted icehouse on Cincinnati's Brewster Avenue. A plaque was recently placed there with the Rock Hall's participation, marking the historic headquarters of Syd Nathan's King Records empire. King, with its subsidiary Federal and other labels, was a veritable R&B factory, producing more than 500 hit singles and creating a stable of rock legends – Hank Ballard, Little Willie John, Wynonie Harris, Freddie King, bandleader Tiny Bradshaw, and, most memorably, James Brown.

Nathan entered the business, like so many independent record men of his generation, as a retailer, then in 1943 shifted from selling to producing, establishing Queen Records to record and release country music – "hillbilly" as it was then known. In '47, he changed the label's name and focus. By 1950, King and its spin-off, Federal, were profiting most from its R&B singles; Nathan hired a prominent producer named Ralph Bass, who in turn discovered a boxer turned drummer turned singer in Georgia. Despite his initial reluctance, Nathan released "Please, Please, Please," by James Brown and the Flames, in '56. King – and American music – would never be the same.

King's studio became Brown's laboratory: It was there that he came up with the tunes that led to the creation of funk: "(I Got You) I Feel Good," "Cold Sweat," "(Say It Loud) I'm Black and I'm Proud." In late '69, when a pay dispute led his band to walk out, Brown looked no further than Cincinnati to find replacement backing – discovering a group called the Pacemakers that included guitarist Phelps "Catfish" Collins and his brother, bassist William "Bootsy" Collins. Besides Bootsy's ascendancy as a star in his own right, it's important to also acknowledge that following their apprenticeship with Brown, both Collinses played instrumental roles as members of George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic.

Ohio-born groups that hit heavy on the one followed through the late sixties and seventies: Cincinnati's Isley Brothers ("It's Your Thing," "Pop That Thang," "That Lady") and Dayton's Ohio Players ("Fire," "Love Rollercoaster," "Skin Tight") kept dance floors full. Around that time, a young guitarist by the name of Kenny Edmonds was getting started on the Cincinnati scene, playing briefly in Bootsy's band, then as a founding member of two R&B outfits – Manchild and the Deele – that caused a few national ripples. Of course, Edmonds is now most celebrated by the name Babyface.

James Brown (second from left) signs with Cincinnati's King Records label founder Syd Nathan (seated).

Born to funk: Cincinnati's legendary Isley Brothers . . .

. . . and just up the road, Dayton's Ohio Players.

Under that moniker, he grew into a one-man hit-producing army in the late eighties and nineties, writing and often producing chart-topping singles for Madonna, Whitney Houston, Boyz II Men, Sheena Easton, and Bobby Brown; which is not to mention Edmonds's own Grammy-winning triumphs as a recording artist.

Collectively, Ohio's R&B, rock, and now hip-hop pedigrees stretch from the nineties to the present, bringing the story up to date. In Cleveland, Trent Reznor created a menacing, mechanized sound under the collective name Nine Inch Nails; his music remains the most successful industrial rock to date. Out of Columbus came the funk-punk outfit Royal Crescent Mob and rapper Bow Wow. From Cincinnati came alt-rockers the Afghan Whigs and the Blessid Union of Souls, and Guided by Voices, led by Robert Pollard, made Dayton proud. Most recently, Akron's eclectic singer-songwriter Joseph Arthur is yet another Ohioan of musical promise, with many sure to follow.

As Ohio has brought forth countless musicians of national importance, so the state has inspired an extensive number of songs that must be mentioned. They range from Neil Young's chantlike protest tune "Ohio" to Randy Newman's wistful ode to small-town USA, "Dayton, Ohio – 1903." From Ian Hunter's pint-raiser "Cleveland Rocks" to the Band's storm-warner "Look Out Cleveland" (I'm still working on what that tune's really about). There's the frat-band perennial "Hang On Sloopy" that launched Richard Zehringer (a.k.a. Rick Derringer) to fame, along with the McCoys from Dayton. The three-chord anthem has since become the signature of the Ohio State University marching band and, in '85, Ohio's official rock song.

Yet, if one Ohio-spawned recording bears cultural significance above all others – one song that continues to speak to all genres and generations – I believe it's the disco-era classic "Play That Funky Music, White Boy." Recorded in 1976 by Wild Cherry – a Steubenville band named for a cough

Ahhh, the name is: Cincinnati's Bootsy Collins gets down.

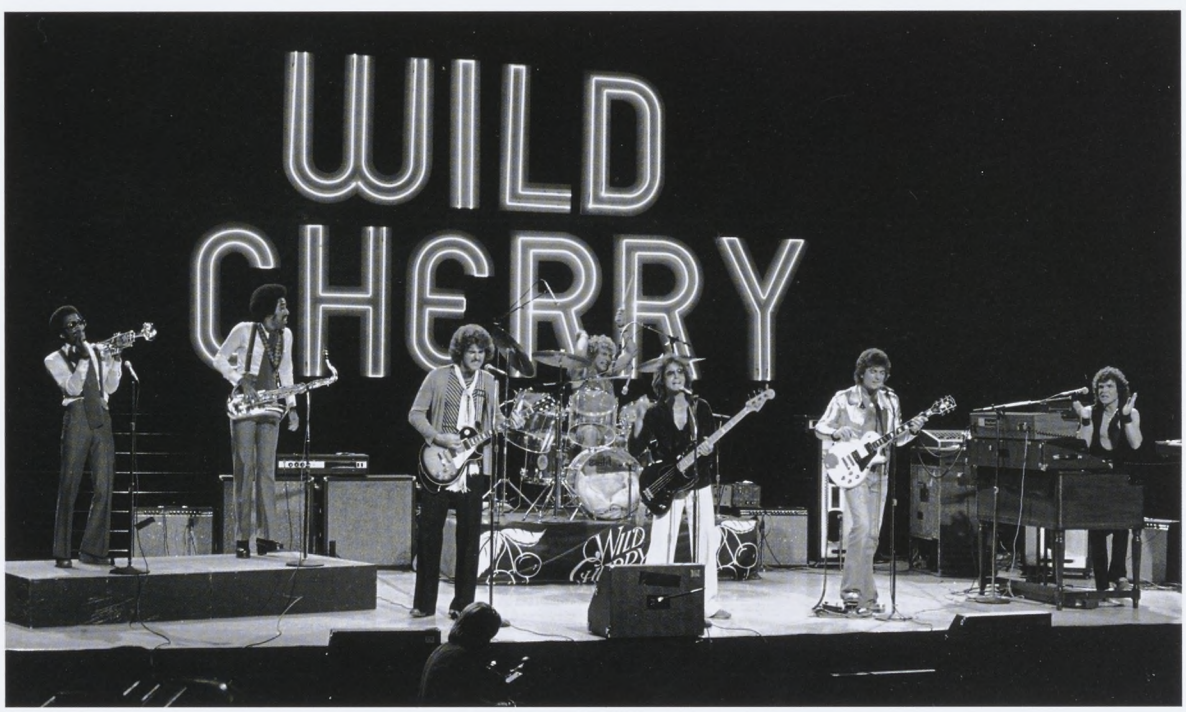
Akron's Chrissie Hynde and her Pretenders

Hang On Sloopy: Dayton's Rick Derringer (left) with the McCoys, 1965

Cleveland's Trent Reznor with Nine Inch Nails, 1994

drop – the song tells the story of a rock band that learned to let go and get down: an accurate reflection of the vast cultural shift then taking place. Yet the message it carried is timeless: white musicians (and music fans) learning how to respond to a new sound that began in black America. Think Elvis Presley, or Mick Jagger, or Justin Timberlake. Or any of the countless music heroes enshrined in the Hall of Fame.

To be entirely precise, disco actually emerged from Latin and gay discotheques as much as the urban dance scene, but you get the idea. Rock – like all the best styles that have come along – is a glorious, hybrid music. It's a result of the cultural dialogue between all of America's folks and strokes – a dialogue that can't help but continue, as musical styles grow and overlap and change. It only makes sense that this defining aspect of the rock tradition would be reflected here in Ohio, with a statewide musical legacy that crosses all categories and county lines. It's a legacy of which any Ohio rocker can be proud. 𝄞



Steubenville's Wild Cherry, 1976