

THE PIRATES: OUT OF THEIR SKULLS

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FATE PLAYS the strangest tricks. For years, The Pirates shared a similar fate to Bo Diddley. In their respective roles as innovators, they opened the door for a whole generation of Sixties rock bands, but in the ensuing stampede were left holding the handle.

If the name Bo Diddley is synonymous with a specific beat, then The Pirates are instantly associated with a particular group style that has often been emulated but never actually improved upon.

For as long as I can remember, The Pirates have always looked a bit shady. Nowadays, they appear quite fearsome. When you talk about rock 'n' roll heavies, one need look no further.

Bass-player Johnny Spence could be easily mistaken for a psychotic South-London villain who snaps fingers for pleasure. Drummer Frank Farley resembles a swarthy wrestler and basks in the boos of the crowd. And guitarist Mick Green, can only be a hustler who helps goods fall off the backs of lorries.

As the late Johnny Kidd's backing group, The Pirates were Britain's seminal R&B band. The precursors of the electric power trio and, if you catch my drift, the only three man four-piece band in history.

I'll elucidate.

The Pirates main attraction has always been guitarist Mick Green who, between 1961 and 1964, single handedly perfected the highly complex technique of playing both lead and rhythm simultaneously.

Using a Fender Telecaster Deluxe, Green somehow synthesized the very best aspects of Scotty Moore's finger-pickin' Sun sound, a basic urban R&B back-beat and a few choice Diddley rhythms into a highly personalised dry, tense, barbed rhythm chop, and played with such aggressive skill that, in next to no time, he revolutionised British guitar.

Without question, Mick Green contributed as much as The Yardbirds' Holy Trinity of Clapton, Beck and Page to the development of contemporary rock guitar.

Precisely how Green achieved his unique *modus operandus*, nobody has quite managed to suss out. Ask him and he claims that it's much easier to illustrate than to discuss. Be that as it may, it served as a basic blueprint for not only the 60s British Beat Boom, but in later years Dr. Feelgood and currently, a large section of rock's emergent frenetic fourth generation.

BRITAIN'S first bona fide and underground band, The Pirates pre-dated the initial R&B boom backing Johnny Kidd on such hits as "Please Don't Touch" "I'll Never Get Over You", "Hungry For Love" and "Shakin' All Over" (although Mick Green didn't play the famous guitar lick on this rock classic). While other groups played endless package tours, The Pirates seemed content to roam around Europe playing roots-level beat clubs and ballrooms.

By the mid-60s, Mick Green had quit to join Billy J. Kramer, Johnny Kidd was dead in an auto smash and the Pirates had disbanded. It was left to the others to capitalize on the band's legacy.

That's exactly how things remained until just six months ago when The Pirates and yours truly both caught each other totally unprepared for what was about to happen.

Out of sheer curiosity, I ankled to London's Dingwalls one Tuesday evening in November and was stunned by what confronted me. Billed as a one-off reunion, The Pirates erased the twelve years that had elapsed since they last performed together and played with a spontaneity one rarely sees these days.

It may have taken me a couple of days to recover but, in my review, I claimed that there wasn't another guitarist currently playing on a British stage who could compare with Mick Green.

Like I said, that was six months ago. I've been back quite a few times since then to see if perhaps I'd been a little over-enthusiastic – but I still haven't reversed my initial opinion.

Seemingly, I'm not the only person who diligently checks out each week to see where The Pirates are plugging-in. Not only do their supporters trail them around the country, but a group of the most ardent camp-followers recently hauled ass to Holland for a week, to keep tabs on their progress.

IF YOU measure a man's greatness by his degree of modesty, then Mick Green must surely keep the lowest profile around town. Truthfully, Green is the only musician that I've ever encountered who is almost apologetic about being so bloody talented. To make matters even more bizarre, Green can't relate to his near-legendary reputation, so he doesn't even bother to try. It exists and he's grateful, full stop.

Not only does the modest axeman

find it most embarrassing to discuss his prowess, but up until recently, he was totally oblivious to the fact that his name was held in great reverence by his contemporaries.

Before I proceed any further, it needs to be firmly established that The Pirates, are by no stretch of the imagination a one-man band. Both bassist/singer Johnny Spence and drummer Frank Farley perform a most integral role in the success of the band. Without one another, The Pirates couldn't operate in such a unique fashion and they are the first to admit it.

By the same token, Spence and Farley readily concede that Green is their trump card while at the same time speculating that the Star Of The Show has never surpassed his achievements with any other rhythm team.

"When the three of us play together", remarks Spence, "everything seems to come across quite natural, and I believe that to be the secret. Mick can do whatever he wants in the knowledge that Frank and I are always there right behind him."

After Green quit, at the end of 64, to become one of Kramer's Dakotas, Spence and Farley stayed behind before drifting through a succession of other backing bands.

On occasions, their careers again criss-crossed as they signed-on with Billy Fury, Julian Covay and Cliff Bennett. Spence then went into the motor trade, Farley became a strip club bouncer and Green lived five years of La Dolce Vita in Las Vegas pickin' ballads behind Engelbert Humperdinck. This was followed by three years with the ill-fated Shanghai before all three once again found themselves back together again and trading under their own colours.

However, it was more by accident than intent.

Somehow, Spence and Farley fell back into the business a couple of years ago on a semi-pro level at a nite-spot in Surrey. As their Sunday evenings were free, they decided to run their own rock gig and call up Green who had just jumped ship from Shanghai and was at a loose end.

One gig for old-time's sake was suggested. Even though they had absolutely no intention of any permanency for The Pirates, by mutual consent they agreed that instead of just a solitary session, The Pirates, (according to Farley) "would play a couple of karzee gigs before calling it quits".

Those gigs just happened to be a Tuesday at Dingwalls' and a Sunday at the Roundhouse.

I caught them at Dingwalls' then shortly afterwards watched as they came close to stealing some of the thunder from Eddie & The Hot Rods at a crowded Roundhouse. I later saw them at a Christmas knees-up (again at Dingwalls) and watched it escalate from there on in.

A few more facts:

Within an hour of having been