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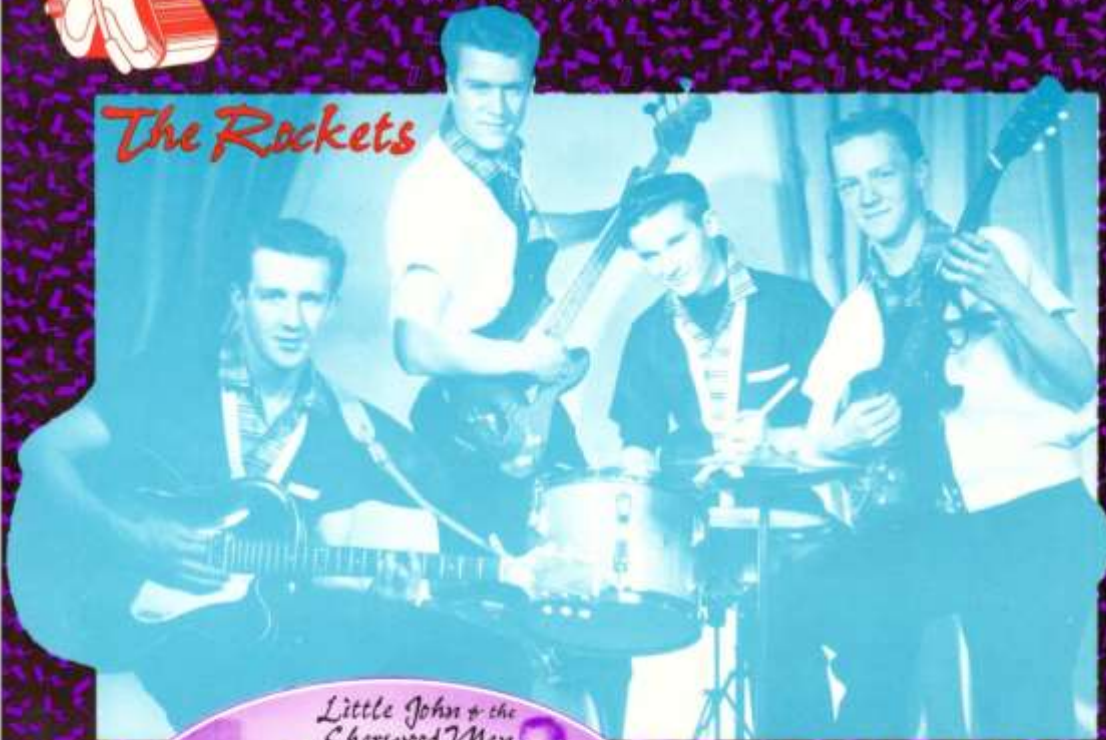
This Issue: Northern Minnesota

lost and found

A '50s/'60s Rock & Roll 'Zine

\$7.00

The Rockets



Little John & the Sherwood Men



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Liftin' Off With The Rockets

The tremendous impact that the 1955 movie "The Blackboard Jungle," and in particular Bill Haley & the Comets' song "Rock Around The Clock," was felt in full force in the northern Minnesota communities of Hibbing and Chisholm. Teens with musical inklings bubbling under the surface were finally given an outlet to channel their energy – ROCK & ROLL. Four teens in particular: three from Hibbing; Monte Edwardson (lead guitar), LeRoy Hoikkala (drums) and Ron Taddei (rhythm guitar, vocals) and one from Chisholm; Jim Propotnick (bass), all had feelings that they wanted to do more, but didn't know what exactly. Boom, there it was!

By 1957 the foursome was up and running as a full-fledged rock & roll band called the *Rockets*, making them one of the first in the Hibbing/Chisholm area alongside the Renowns, but before the Sherwood Men, and Reveliers. Also to their credit, they were one of the first r&r bands in the

state of Minnesota to sign a recording contract with a major record label – Aladdin out of Hollywood, California.

"I was a senior in high school and absolutely obsessed with music," said Jim Propotnick. "I played stand-up bass and saxophone in the school orchestra, but wanted to be able to do what Bill Haley & the Comets were doing. I first went to the high school band director and asked him to help me learn how to play bass pizzicato. He asked me why and I told him it was because I was going to play rock & roll! He threw me out instantly. I then went to a fellow high schooler that played stand-up bass with a bow, very well I might add, and asked her for help. She explained how the keyboard was broken down and I drew it all out on a piece of paper where the notes were and learned quickly."

"As soon as the electric bass came out I already knew the fingering, knew the keyboard, and there it was made easy for you – you could hang the dang thing around your neck! I bought the first Fender electric bass that came into the music store in Chisholm. I spent \$250, which was a king's ransom back then."

"I graduated from Chisholm high school in '57 and went to Junior College, which happened to be in Hibbing. Junior College and the high school were in the same building. I met Ron Taddei there first. He was so stoked



The Rockets, 1958. L. to R.: Ron Taddei, Jim Propotnick, LeRoy Hoikkala and Monte Edwardson

on music that we hit it off right away. One day I went to a talent contest that the high school was putting on and saw LeRoy Hoikkala and Monte Edwardson playing in a band. After the show, Ron and I approached the two and got them to come with us out to an empty field. We brought along a record player that could be plugged into the car and put on some 45s and started playing along with them. After a couple tries... son-of-a-bitch, we could play! It was just that simple."

"I met LeRoy when we were both working after school in stores across the street from one another," said Monte Edwardson. "We discovered that we were both musicians, and LeRoy introduced me to Bob Zimmerman. The three of us started getting together for jam sessions and formed a band called the *Golden Chords*. Eventually we entered a few talent shows, usually ending up in second place – due to the nature of the music we played. The adult judges were not ready to accept the new sound. At that time we played mostly r&b music that Bob had heard on a Louisiana station. Needless to say, this style of music didn't provide many paying jobs in northern Minnesota at that time."

"LeRoy and I were more into r&r and started spending a lot of time working out songs from records. When Jim and Ron came along, we decided to make the switch. We left the *Golden Chords* and formed the *Rockets*. This union proved to be a success, as the band was able to book jobs and actually make money. Prior to this time I had been playing with country bands and dance bands to pay for instruments."

"We practiced a ton at Monte's house," recalled Jim, "buying every popular record we could get our hands on, learning them inside and out. That's what you did back then because that's what the kids wanted to hear. Our band loved Bill Haley & the Comets, the Everly Brothers, Little Richard, Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly, Fats Domino and, of course, Elvis Presley."

"As r&r progressed, the guitars and electronics improved as well, and we heard sounds we could not reproduce," said Edwardson. "So, I traded in my electrified acoustic guitar for a real electric – a Les Paul Jr. – and bought a Silvertone amp. This amp pulled double duty, as we added a set of external speakers and ran my guitar in one channel and the mic in the second channel as a PA system. Talk about travelling light! We could put all the band instruments in the back of my station wagon and still

seat the four of us."

"We had to improvise a lot. For the Johnny Cash sound, I used a felt ukulele pick as the amp did not have a good bottom end. LeRoy swapped the tone and volume controls on the guitar for me so I could operate the volume with my little finger while playing and get a sound similar to a steel guitar. When Fender came out with the Stratocaster, the volume control was in the right place; so, I bought one. The sound of the Strat really helped in giving us the 'real rock' sound."

The *Rockets* were invited to play at different events like P.T.A. meetings, high school functions and even a few local bars. At first their popularity took off like a rocket and the quartet didn't seem to have control. They took control of the situation, however, and figured out they could have fun and make some money too. "We got ourselves a manager named Mike Fagan that really hustled up work for us," said Propotnick. "We also decided to pool our money and rent out local armories ourselves, paying for security cops, ticket takers, etc. The *Rockets* played a lot in Hibbing, Chisholm, Virginia, Grand Rapids and Duluth. We also got involved with

Bill Diehl, a dj from WDMY down in Minneapolis, who got us some jobs in the Twin Cities. Probably the biggest place Diehl got our band in was the Prom Ballroom in St. Paul."

"We also promoted the hell out of ourselves by putting speakers on top of our cars, advertising upcoming dances. We also passed out tons of self-promotion flyers. I look back on it now and I'm kind of surprised at the balls we had. But we didn't think we could fail!"

"When the big-name, national bands would come to Hibbing, or Duluth, for example, we'd go to watch them closely. It wasn't so much the music we were after, it was more about watching the way they presented themselves on stage. You know, did they or did they not move around. We thought it was neat that bands like the Renowns, Reveliers and Little John & the Sherwood Men were springing up behind us. It just added to the whole r&r hype. The more bands that got going, the better we felt. Nobody got stale that way."

"What was weird though was that guys would stand in front of the stage and stare at us, which was uncomfortable at first. Until we figured out that they were copying our playing style, moves, etc., just like we were

Select Finalists In Frolic Talent Contest

Finalists in the Hibbing Winter Carnival Talent Contest were selected at a preliminary contest in the Little Theater of Hibbing Memorial Building Thursday afternoon.

The four top entries in the two groups will perform prior to the Winter Frolic Queen Coronation at 8 p.m. Thursday in the Little Theater.

The winners Thursday were as follows:

Group I, ages 11 and under –
Group 1, ages 11 and under –
Group 2, ages 11 and under –
Group 3, ages 11 and under –
Group 4, ages 11 and under –
Group 5, ages 11 and under –
Group 6, ages 11 and under –
Group 7, ages 11 and under –
Group 8, ages 11 and under –
Group 9, ages 11 and under –
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Group 95, ages 11 and under –
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Group 98, ages 11 and under –
Group 99, ages 11 and under –
Group 100, ages 11 and under –

Newspaper announcement for the Frolic Talent Contest in which the Golden Chords competed

doing with the national acts."

"Monte, Ron, LeRoy and I went down to Minneapolis to see an Alan Freed 'Rock & Roll Show' that included Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis. None of us were old enough to drink, but after the show we decided we were going to try to get into a bar. No sooner did we walk in a sit down than somebody came up to Ron Taddei and said, 'Look, it's Buddy Holly!' Taddei did look like Buddy Holly quite a bit with his horn-rimmed, black glasses. We didn't say a thing because we were so happy just to be in the bar and being served drinks. Of course, eventually we were asked to get up and play. We got up and played one Buddy Holly song. I thought we covered it nearly as well as the original because we had practiced his material so much. Also don't forget, the only place you could ever really hear the original artist was on a cheap little 45 player or over your little AM transistor radio. We were live and sounded better than any record! We pulled it off that night."

In the fall of 1958, Bill Diehl arranged for the *Rockets* to do some recording down at Kay Bank studios in Minneapolis. To further enhance the deal, through contacts he had in the radio/record business, Bill had contracted with representatives from Aladdin Records to release the *Rockets* on their national label. "I thought it was a really big deal to go down to the 'big city' to a real recording studio," said Jim. "We drove down in my car and I remember Monte (music) and Ron (lyrics) writing several original tunes; one was 'Let Me Know' and 'Big Black Train,' to record. If you put a guitar head up against a window, you could hear it – it was like having an amplifier. That's what Ron and Monte did, with LeRoy keeping time with the sticks on the back of the seat. The bass parts weren't a problem for me. I was keeping along with them in my mind."

Monte – "The first song we recorded, 'Big Black Train,' was actually a song that Bob, LeRoy and I had worked out in the *Golden Chord* days; and we finished it



GET RECORD CONTRACT—The Rockets' "Big Black Train" group has signed a contract with the Aladdin Record Co., Hollywood, Calif., for the production of a record "Let Me Know." In the picture, left to right, are Bob Taddei, singer and guitar player; Jim Freeman, bass; Monte Diehl, drums; and Steve Edersheim, lead guitar. The quartet is known as "The Rockets."

on the way to the recording studio. I believe Ron wrote most of the other songs with the exception of 'Wild One,' which LeRoy and I created, and which Dave Karakash later recorded when he was with the Renowns."

"I remember when we recorded the engineer had Ron stand out in the hallway to sing to get that 'echoy' sound," said Jim. "Our record session was pre-'Mule-skinner Blues' by the Fendermen, or 'Suzie Baby' by Bobby Vee & the Shadows. They weren't quite sure how to handle our rock & roll music. Monte was one of the best guitar players in the entire area and I beg anyone to differ. There were good guitarists



Monte rockin' out with his Strat!

that came up after him, but none could hold a candle to him, in my opinion. He was in fine form that day in the studio."

"I don't think our recording venture turned out quite like we thought it would," said LeRoy. "I remember it had been really cold when we got down to Kay Bank and we didn't have a lot of studio time booked. My drums were very cold and the heads were too tight. I'd forgotten to bring the key along with me, so I couldn't adjust them in the studio. Like Jim just mentioned, I don't think Kay Bank was quite ready for us either – they had us scattered everywhere. We walked out of the session with a handful of acetates to do whatever with. One was sent out to Aladdin Records for them to give a listen to. We used the others to go back home and get played on the radio."

Aladdin thought there was promise in the demo, but was going through financial difficulties of their own. They told the *Rockets* that after things were straightened out, they'd take the band back into a professional studio and work with them. Unfortunately, that never happened. As far as all the band members can recall, no vinyl was ever actually pressed up by the California label. "I was disappointed that the songs didn't do more," said Jim. "Ron and Monte were both very talented and between the two of them they could've written a number of good songs that might have done something."

By the end of '58, Ron Taddei left the *Rockets* to

attend college in North Dakota. Monte and LeRoy called upon the services of their old friend Bob Zimmerman once again, and he became the bands' new singer. According to Jim: "Bob had eclectic tastes even back then and he'd go from one thing to the next, always looking for something different - changing out players, instruments, etc. We'd played a county fair on the same billing as his band the *Satin Tones* once before. Zimmerman did a good job on Little Richard songs I thought and he kind of looked like him with his hair standing straight up. If there wasn't a piano at the places we played at, Bob brought along his guitar. In the beginning, piano seemed to be his first priority, though."

"I remember when Bob first came over to my house to practice. I don't think we even really had him try out. We went over our songs and he seemed to fit right in. Occasionally he'd try to get us to do one or two of his own songs and we always blew him off. Pretty stupid now when you look back on it."

Bob Zimmerman, ever one to be restless, left the *Rockets* within months of joining them. Dave Karakash joined the group in his place. He was a very good singer, played a good rhythm guitar, and was also a good looker to boot. He became a heavy draw with the female crowd, and where girls were, so followed the boys. Dave was with the *Rockets* for about one year.

By the end of '59 the *Rockets* disbanded. Jim Propotnick had finished up Junior College in Hibbing and had enrolled at the University of Minnesota, Monte and LeRoy both graduated from high school in June of '60 and had other plans of their own. Both went to California for the summer. When they came back in the fall they discovered Dave Karakash had joined the local combo, the *Renovans* (see chapter elsewhere). That October, Monte joined the Air Force. LeRoy also went into the service.

"When I was going to the U of M, Bob Zimmerman looked me up," recollected Jim. "He asked me if I wanted to play bass with him down at the Scholar Coffee House. I went down to check it out and saw all kinds of beatniks sitting around drinking espresso and eating little tiny sandwiches. It just wasn't my thing and also his style of music had changed considerably. What finally cinched it for me was when I asked Bob what I'd get paid and he replied, 'You get to eat for free.' I wish now that I'd have gone with him, but I didn't."

Jim played in a few pick-up bands while finishing up school at the U of M. For the next 30 years he was a Chief Deputy US Marshal. Today he's retired, living in Hawaii, and works as a private investigator. In 1961 Monte went out to Denver, Colorado for electronics school, and continued to play r&r with *Ronnie Kay*, who recorded several drum songs like "Drums Off The Cliff." He was then transferred to Japan where he worked with country bands and made several appearances on the "Grand Old Opry"



Above: The *Rockets*, 1959. L. to R.: Mike Fagan (manager), Monte Edwardson, LeRoy Hoikkala and Dave Karakash
Below: Monte and Dave



of Japan.

"I continued to play mostly country and country rock for a number of years in the Denver and Central City area," said Edwardson. "I still play regularly with a group called *Muzzle Creek* in the Denver area. I am presently employed as Manager of Water Resources and Treatment for a large private Water Utility Company and look forward to retirement in a few years!"

LeRoy played with a few bands while stationed in Washington and Maryland in the service. Today he is a manager at US Steel/USX Corporation in northern Minnesota. He's not involved in music anymore.



Big Black Train

*Well big black train, coming down the line
Well big black train, coming down the line
Well you got my woman, you bring her back to me
Well that cute little chick, is the girl that I want to see*

*Well I've been waiting for a long, long time
Well I've been waiting for a long, long time
Well I've been looking for my baby
Searchin' down the line*

*Well here comes the train, yeah it's coming down the line
Well here comes the train, yeah it's coming down the line
Well you see my baby is finally coming home*

Words and music by Monte Edwardson, LeRoy Hoikkala and Bob Dylan