

BILL POPP AND THE TAPES

a misfit in the pop world



The amazing story of Bill Popp can be summarized in three words: Perseverance, dedication and determination. "Living a split life is not easy," Bill says. "At night, I'm a musician, singing and playing keyboard with my band, the Tapes. During the day, I'm a plumber for the New York City Department of Parks. I'm the joke among my co-workers because I'll turn down overtime to go play for free at a club. For me, it's important to do what I love."

And that dedication has lasted decades, through the disco era, the hair bands, the grunge movement, and to the present day. "I know I'm a bit of a misfit in the current world of pop music," laughs Bill. "I'm old, bald, and crusty, but I love what I do, and my fans have hung in there with me for all of these years."

Just this year New York's classic rock FM giant, Q104.3, named Bill Popp and The Tapes the winner of its Battle Of The Bands, to become the 2008 NASCAR Band Of The Year. The band's new CD, *My Lonely Mind*, their first since Bill's return from open-heart surgery, is gaining critical acclaim, prompting *Time Out New York* to brand them "a local institution." *Powerpopaholic* said Bill deserves to be placed "among the unsung heroes of power pop," leading a band that's "one of NYC's best kept musical secrets." *The Boston Phoenix* tagged Bill "the downtown Elton John" and the *New York Press* called him a "master songwriter" with a personality in total contrast to his music.

Bill's story began with his earliest memories of childhood. "I always knew what I wanted to be a musician," he says. "By the time I was five, I was singing Elvis' 'Hound Dog' in the hallway. As a child, I was

into Ricky Nelson, Chubby Checker and Dion and the Belmonts. Then, in 1964, I started listening to the Beatles. I was 10 years old, and the group was bigger than life. Ringo owned a blue Ludwig drum kit, and I begged my parents for one. A couple of years later my parents caved. They bought me a sky blue set. Soon, I started my first band. We called ourselves the Tormenters and we lived up to our name; we were awful.

"My mother used to play piano by ear when she was a child. Since I had received drums, my father and sister decided to chip in and bought my mother a piano for Christmas. I thought the piano was silly—until I found out that John and Paul played it. In 1968, the Beatles released 'Hey Jude' and my friend Ralph taught me how to play it. One day I was sitting at the piano, when I started mumbling some words over the melody to 'Don't Let Me Down' and, viola, I wrote my first song. Five years later, I submitted my first demo tape to Warner Bros. They sent me my first rejection letter."

Bill and his group, which includes Gerry Barnas on lead guitar, Mary Noecker on bass, and Roger Foster on drums, soon became an institution at the legendary CBGB's, and Bill became a personal confidant of owner and visionary Hilly Crystal. "My first time in the place was in 1976 to see the Ramones," Bill recalls. "I went down with my drummer at the time, Keith Strange, and his friend Peter Zarella, who would go on to start the Fleshtones together. I later saw the Dead Boys, the Dictators and Suicide there together, and I'll never forget that first night. The place was packed and there were a lot of these intellectual hippie-looking guys just looking

around while the music was blasting. My first attempt at a punk song was titled 'Dee Dee's Got A D Cup' and was inspired by seeing the Ramones."

The Tapes got their own audition for the infamous CBGB's in 1981. "We passed the audition the first night," Bill remembers. "Hilly Crystal found out that I did plumbing work and the first job I did for him was replacing a smashed toilet on the wall in the men's room. Over the years I became good friends with Hilly. When I did my first Christmas show at CBGB's I came out in a full Santa Claus suit. He got the idea for me to play Santa Claus for his grandchildren, which I was more than happy to do. He was a club owner who truly cared about the bands that he had playing there. He was always a fan of our band's music and my songwriting."

The only thing that slowed Bill down, albeit temporarily, was a little thing called open quadruple heart bypass surgery. "Ironically, because of my heart surgery we had to postpone the 20th anniversary of a benefit I do every year for the American Heart Association in memory of my father, George L. Popp, aka Daddy Tapes. Our first return gig was at Crash Mansion, where we were interviewed by the *Daily News*, who ended up taking a picture for the paper of the band, and me showing off the scar on my chest, which all of New York got to see."

Bill has traveled the world looking for opportunities to play his music; from Budapest to East Berlin, and Hong Kong to Vietnam, he has plied his trade. From a young punk to a 50s-plus popster, he has continued his quest. As he says, "What else should I do at this point? This is who I am. I have no intention of stopping. A number shouldn't make you decide what you should do with your life—as long as you can do it. That's what's important. I'll see you again, Hong Kong."

You can find more information about Bill Popp and The Tapes at billpopp.com. The new CD is available via both the website and cdbaby.com.