



STILL HUMPIN' AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

When I spoke with The Invictas' frontman Herb Gross in 2001, he nixed the idea of a band reunion.

"It would be pretty tough to re-create that time," he said. "But it was a blast."

From 1964 to 1968 The Invictas —

Herb Gross (lead vocals, rhythm guitar), Dave Hickey (drums), Mark "Max" Blumenfeld (lead guitar), Jim Koehler (bass) — ruled Rochester's early rock 'n' roll scene. The band played primal, r&b-based music that Gross describes as "in the shadow of groups like The Stones and The Animals." In fact, The Invictas recorded a cover of Bo Diddley's "I'm Alright" as a single two years before The Stones did. The band also caused near hysteria locally and nationwide with the then-controversial single "The Hump."

In the early '60s, rock music was just getting off the ground to fly the mainstream skies. It was young, completely wild, and totally unpredictable. Sadly, that will probably never happen again.

Enter The Invictas... again.

Long since retired from music and living in North Carolina, Gross (up visiting Rochester) and Invictas drummer Dave Hickey were having a beer at the Dinosaur last summer. Blues mama Mary Haitz was on stage and invited them up.

Gross, who hadn't played guitar in 20 years, agreed only to sing one song, The Invictas' hit "Long Tall Shorty."

"The crowd went crazy," he says. The audience started yelling for "The Hump."

The Invictas were back, baby.

1962. Gross and his friends at RIT were bored.

"We just decided that maybe we should put a rock 'n' roll band together," he says. "We ran an ad at RIT and got a bunch of guys together and we just started jamming."

The early Invictas sound was garage rock with a decidedly English accent, despite the fact that the British invasion was still somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. Gross cites The Ventures and boogie woogie — like Jerry Lee Lewis' "Whole Lotta Shakin'" — as early influences.

frat parties. "They'd fill up a bathtub with everything they could put in it. God, it was nasty stuff. And then there'd be kegs of beer. In some of these places, you'd go slidin' across the floor

"And I said, 'What the hell you doin' there?' And he said, 'I'm humpin'.'"

Two weeks later the band debuted "The Hump" at Tiny's.



When rock was wild: a 1960s photo of The Invictas.

there was so much beer being splashed all over the place." The band started demanding risers for those shows to avoid getting electrocuted.

Word started spreading and more schools like Hobart College and Colgate University started calling. The growing hype eventually led The Invictas to Tiny's. And then things really took off.

Tiny's Bengal Inn was a little dive in Summerville at the end of St. Paul Boulevard. Fred "Tiny" Watson ran the joint, collected money at the door, and bounced rowdies.

Tiny's became The Invictas' home, where they played four-night stands, Thursdays to Sundays.

"It was a college hangout with a legal limit of about 150," says Gross. "We would jam 500 to 600 people in there a night, easily. And there'd be another 300 to 400 standing out in line all the way to the Coastguard station. The whole place would shake when we played there. The floor would go up and down, the walls would wave back and forth."

That's where "The Hump" came about: "Well come with me, push it in and push it out / Put your hands behind your head and you'll learn what it's about / Do the hump, do the hump."

Buffalo's Sahara Records owner Steve Brodie caught wind of The Invictas and put "The Hump" b/w "Long Tall Shorty" out on his label. At the height of its run, "The Hump"

was locally outselling the current releases by The Beatles ("Ticket To Ride") and The Rolling Stones ("The Last Time"). It went number one in Miami, it made The Billboard Top 100, and it was banned in Boston.

"I remember a gig specifically in Newark, New York," Gross says. "The police had surrounded the whole stage.

We were playing, the crowd was going crazy, girls were grabbing at our hair, and the cops were trying to keep them back."

The police chief threatened to shut down the show if the band played its hit; but he let them play it when the crowd looked ready to riot.

For roughly four years The Invictas made their living rockin' Rochester. They were also the first band in Rochester to release a full length LP, *The Invictas A Go-Go*, on Sahara Records. The band essentially dissolved in 1968, after graduation.

"We were making good money for the time," Gross says. "We were just kids. We were able to go out and buy ourselves a new car or motorcycle, things like that, maybe put some money away for college."

Though a few other shows are planned later in the summer, it remains to be seen how long the Invictas' reunion will last. Logistically it's hard to practice. Gross has been flying back and forth from North Carolina and Koehler has been commuting from Pennsylvania for the past six months. In between practices they've been mailing CDs to each other to practice along to.

"I know this is as much a memory trip for people as it is about the music," says Gross, who will be slinging his original Telecaster on stage. The band will augment their original set with '60s classics like "Twist And Shout" and "It's Only Rock 'n' Roll."

"And we'll definitely be doing 'The Hump.'" ■

The Invictas play Friday, June 4, and Saturday, June 5, at The California Brew Haus, 402 West Ridge Road, at 8 p.m. Tix: \$8-\$10. 621-1480.