

Rochester rocked the '60s

The grooviest combos ever to hit a (585) stage

BY MICHAEL BENSON



"Touch my instrument"

PROVIDED

During the mid-1960s a new kind of music burst forth from our area's garages, barns, church halls, and the back rooms of taverns. Played by adolescent baby boomer boys, it had all of the sophistication of juvie: primitive, strident, nasal, and pounding, with a fuzz guitar made of electricity itself and a beat that struck like a riding crop.

Those years were a wonderful, horrible time in America and a transformative era in popular music. First with the rise of the teenager, then more thunderously with the coming of the Beatles, show business opened up in the form of a silent nationwide casting call, an instantaneous and urgent need for *bands*.

The entertainment industry shape-shifted from a spectator sport into something more inclusive and participatory. Hair formerly combed back was down over the forehead, and penny loafers gave way to black high-heeled boots. Sales of electric guitars skyrocketed.

While Rochester's teenaged girls screamed and cried, teenage boys schemed and plotted to get in on that hysteria, fought their parents over getting a haircut, and formed musical combos that played three-chord two-minute masterpieces like "The Hump," "Woolly Bully," "Louie, Louie," and "Hang On, Sloopy."

And while "old" Rochester bands like the Invictas shifted gears and went Liverpudlian without breaking stride, newbies grouped and practiced from Irondequoit to Scottsville—but it wasn't easy. Social skills were required. Guys tried to mesh into a cohesive unit, despite different levels of talent, determination, ambition, intelligence, and interest.

It almost always didn't work. All sorts of things went wrong: Three guys drank after the show, one before. Girls that went with the bass player sometimes switched to the drummer. Musical styles and personalities clashed. Maybe there was one talentless guy whose dad was paying the bills.

And then there was the dark omniscient threat: Uncle Sam and his draft.

Only a handful of the bands that started out managed to get gigs at school dances or in Rochester's new rock and roll nightclubs. Fewer still achieved a small piece of immortality by recording a 45 rpm record. But even for those that didn't make it, *those were the best years*, bursting with camaraderie and shared dreams...

In 1961, Herb Gross matriculated at RIT, changed the lineup of his high school band the Furys a bit, and renamed the group the Invictas, after that year's space-age Buick. Gross's band perfected a rowdy stage show of rock classics and were hired as the house band at Tiny's Bengel Inn, a small and sweaty venue where kids mingled in the parking lot because they wouldn't fit inside. The Invictas also served as openers for big shows that came to the War Memorial (now Blue Cross) arena, warming up for the Beach Boys, Otis Redding, Jay and the Americans, and the Young Rascals.



Tiny's Bengel Inn sign

PROVIDED

Gross says it was ironic that much of the fuss regarding the Invictas centered around a record they made. He always considered the band a live act, a group that mind-melded with a crowd and created a party. That record, some may remember, was "The Hump," a song Gross wrote

in 1963. It earned a review as Billboard's "Spotlight Winner of the Week" but was plagued by hesitant airplay.

The song, Gross insists, was not a purposeful attempt to be "banned in Boston" or create a firestorm of angry parents. On the contrary, the idea came from, and the song was written for, adults who went to Tiny's. Gross got the idea from a dirty dancing couple in front of the stage, and the song and the dance were enjoyed at first exclusively by college-age kids.

Then Sahara Records came calling and said they wanted to put "The Hump" out as a 45. The studio was in Buffalo, and the band's first attempt to record the song was a failure. Alone in a quiet room, the Invictas couldn't muster the controlled chaos of a gig at Tiny's. The audience needed to be part of the show.

So Gross invited thirty friends to come to the studio.

"Bring beer and food," he instructed. When the studio was full and the beer was flowing, the recording light again went on, and the band nailed the song in one take.

The word "hump" meant the same thing then as it does now, and the song caused a ruckus when taken out of Tiny's and placed on the public airwaves. One night they were playing a gig in Newark, New York, thousands of kids were there, and the cops showed up. If they played "The Hump," the show would be halted. When Gross announced no Hump because of the cops, the crowd went nuts and chanted, "Hump! Hump! Hump!" Fearing a riot, the cops said, "Just go ahead and play it," and left.

Sometimes it went the other way. They were hired to play a Catholic school event and were informed by several tight-lipped nuns that there would be no Hump.

"Yes, Sister," Gross said, and that night the band skipped their greatest hit.

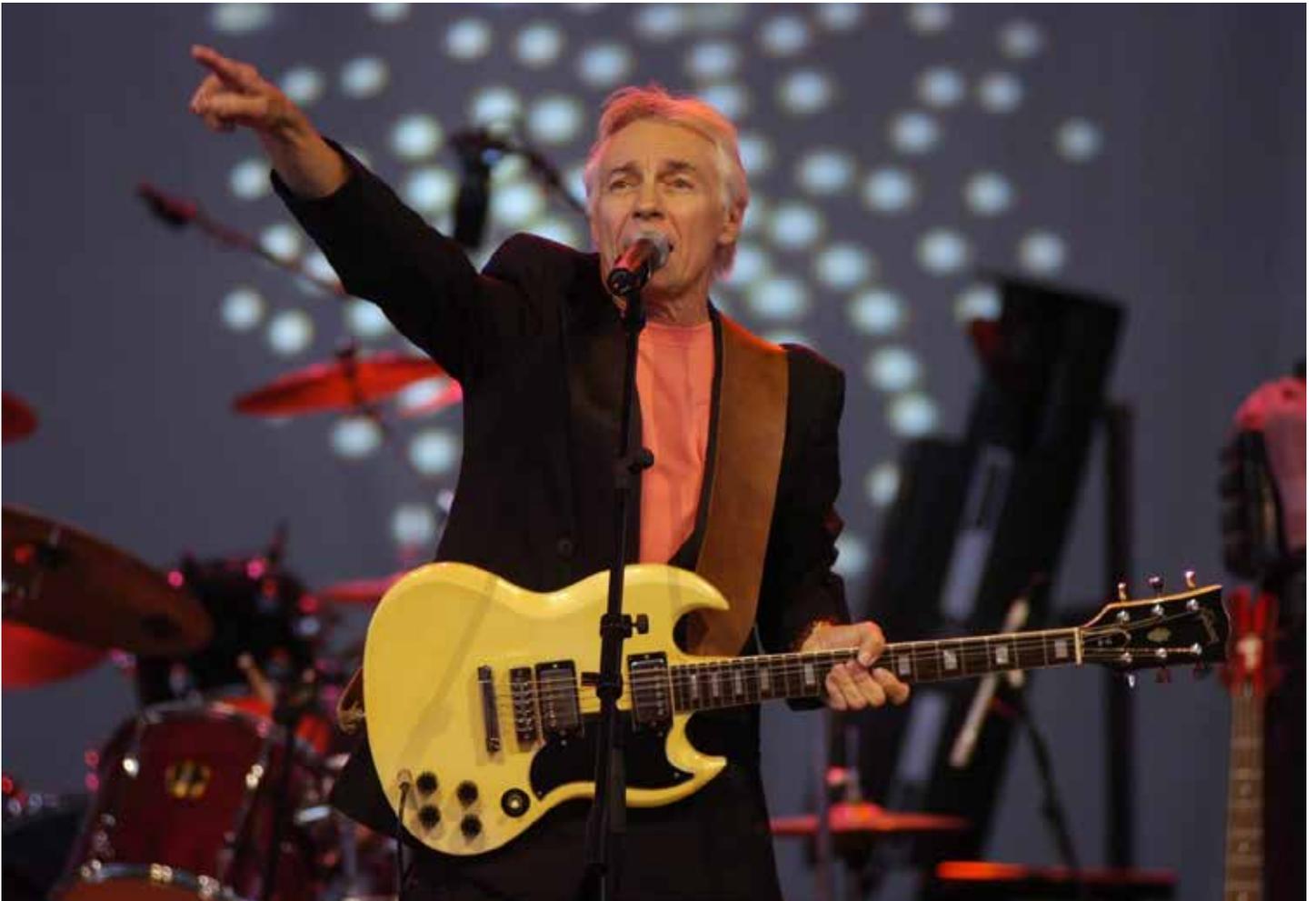
When the record came out, outselling the Beatles locally, younger girls started hanging around, which was a drag because it was a strictly no-touch situation. Gross, who for a time called himself Herb McGovern because it sounded more British, had to be nice but firm when he'd come home at night and teenaged girls would be camped out on his front lawn.

WSAY took to the record right away, and it went to number one on their chart in March 1965,

but WBBF was reluctant, worried about sponsors. Eventually there were so many phone requests that BBF had to play it also.

The Invictas rocked Rochester until 1967 when they lost two members to the Army. But they never really went away, regrouping for good in 2008. The Invictas still play anywhere on the East Coast as part of their never-ending “Skip ’n’ Go Naked Tour.” (To book them, email herb@herbgross.com.)

Gross has had a successful career producing TV commercials and has never had to grow up. Wholeheartedly, he advises against it. His message to baby boomers is: “Get off your ass and follow your dreams. Don’t let age get you down.”



Herb Gross

PHOTO PROVIDED

Michael Benson, a native of Chili, is a classic-rock aficionado and author of Why the Grateful Dead Matter (University Press of New England).