

The Struggle to Be Frank

On July 24, the Gypsy Cafe hosts several local musicians for "Frank-fest," modeled on the previous Neil-fest and Bob-fest (featuring the songs of Neil Young and Bob Dylan). This show features the music of a local singer/songwriter who no longer performs, Frank Allison. I encourage you to check out what should be an inspired evening, bringing back to life some of the best songwriting ever to come out of Michigan (see sidebar). In preparation, I thought you might be interested in Frank's story. It's not as lascivious as VH-1's "Behind the Music," but it's still got excitement and demons and heart.

Most Friday nights a decade ago, people all over southeast Michigan headed for a bar in Ann Arbor, Hamtramck, or Detroit for the music of Frank Allison and his band, the Odd Sox. As soon as Frank came on stage with his guitar, everyone hit the dance floor to hop and spin and twist and sweat. They sang along to Frank's happy love tunes with intricate rhymes, watched his cartoon faces belting out hard-rocking numbers, and adopted common dance steps for his imaginative lyrics. At the end of the show, exhausted and exhilarated and desperate for water, fans made plans to do it all over again the next night, wherever Frank was playing.

This went on for years. Frank Allison and the Odd Sox were voted "Best Band" in various local media, their CDs were well reviewed, and they toured the US and even the USSR. Frank began performing acoustic solo shows as well as his usual band gigs. And the fans kept coming. Even if they graduated and moved away, they planned a return visit around a Frank show.

Like any special time, it couldn't last forever. By the mid-90s, it began to unravel. Fans still loved Frank Allison, but most didn't know about his mounting debt, his crazy schedule, and his feeling that he was getting too old for the bar scene. And nobody including Frank understood what was happening to his voice. After writing over 350 songs in 15 years and performing for 11 of those years, Frank called it quits after he played—and barely sang—his last gig on New Year's Eve 1995 at the Blind Pig.

The problems started two years earlier, during a third consecutive show on Mackinac Island. As Frank puts it, "Whammy! In the middle of a song, I just lost three notes in my middle to high range. I opened my mouth and nothing came out." He didn't think much of it at the time—attributing it to riding on top of the Mackinac

Ferry on a cold, rainy day. But the problem didn't correct itself.

"If I stretched my neck really weird I could sing around it for still recording. I didn't take time off right then to try to heal. I had bills to pay, a band of guys who needed the money." There was the loan on the band's van and credit card bills for motel rooms and recording costs to pay back. "I thought it would get better," he says. But by January 1994, it was worse. Not having any health insurance at the time, Frank picked a doctor from the phone book, who told him he had a node on his vocal chords and should take some time off. Though he didn't play any shows for a month, his singing voice deteriorated further.

"So I went back to playing," Frank shrugs. It may not have seemed logical, but after a month of no income, and no sense that time off was helping, he had to do what he knew how to do. "I didn't want to lose the momentum I had built. If I stopped, I was gonna lose it all. So I decided to keep it rolling until I absolutely couldn't anymore." He continued to eat poorly and sleep only in



four-hour shifts, tired all the time trying to juggle bookings, promotion, CD production, and late-night performances, along with his personal life and his desire to keep writing songs.

Meanwhile, vocal coaches didn't seem to help. Audiences could hear that something was wrong, especially in his last solo shows. Finally, Frank remembers, "I was doing anything I could just to make noise." His singing went from 20 hours/week at its peak to one hour a day, until he had nothing left. The Odd Sox disbanded. Frank went home, confused and frustrated, but at least no longer sinking further and further into debt trying to keep his career afloat. "The only smart thing I did was quit," he reflects.

After his wife's new job got him some health insurance, doctors at the University of Michigan Vocal Health Center found him to have spasmodic dysphonia, which can't be cured. He could barely talk above a whisper. Although rare, spasmodic dysphonia has been known to affect other public performers who rely on their voice,

such as radio-talk-show host Diane Rehm. It's a neurological problem that causes the vocal chords simply to spasm shut when one tries to use them. The condition can become so pronounced that sufferers must use sign language the rest of their lives. The most common treatment is periodic "botox injections" into the vocal chords—an application of the bacteria that causes botulism.

Not wanting to go this route, Frank's been researching alternative treatments, and recently found a doctor on the Web who claims to have a therapy-based cure, though at \$550 per session. Frank instead ordered the doctor's books which, for now, have been helpful. He's been practicing a new prescribed way of talking and finds he can even sing a little again. But it's hard to sustain, and the therapy—if it is the solution—could take a year or more to restore the normal functioning of his vocal chords.

Meanwhile, at 38, he's become a stay-at-home Dad, focusing his energies on house repairs, cooking, gardening, and his family. Sometimes he reflects on the "sad story" of his life: "I drove myself into the ground. I don't work, I can't figure out what I want to do." But he talks more about the "other story," saying "I'm living my life for myself now. I have a beautiful life. I do a lot more good things in my day. I sleep decent and eat good. I help out with the kids next door. I never would have done that before." He's slowly digging himself out of debt, still writes music, but gets frustrated that he "can't make a finished thing" without singing.

Frank's optimistic. Although his music is still his life, he plans to do things much differently the next time around. Even as he sits in my living room, holding his sleepy two-year-old on his lap, he's eager to tell me about a CD collection of his songs—called Mad Smattering—being released on the Dutch Waaghals label. He's purchased a CD burner, is reviewing tapes of early tunes for a limited, homemade pressing, and plans to make one-of-a-kind comical drawings for the CDs.

And rumor has it Frank is coming to Frank-fest. Even though he admits to never being particularly comfortable with the self-promotion part of a music career, and feels a little weird about the whole thing, he may play some guitar there. If you go to the show—whether you're an old fan or newly introduced to Frank—let him know you're wishing him well. I wish we could all go dancing again, but I really just hope he'll get to be the Frank he wants to be.

He encourages friends and fans to e-mail him at franklsn@lni.net.

What: Frank-fest

Where: Gypsy Cafe,
214 N. Fourth Ave., Ann Arbor

When: July 24, 9:30 pm

Who: Local musicians and former Odd Sox-ers, including K.C. Groves, Rollie Tussing III, Chris Buhalis, Dave Boutette, Corn Daddy, the Jim Roll Band, Jack Spack Jr., Katie Geddes, and Dan Beckett.

Cost: A cover charge to help Frank.

Organizer K. C. Groves says, "We're doing this half to help a fellow musician and half because we love Frank's music. These songs need to be kept alive."