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Published: 2012/08/24
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The New Riders' Michael Falzarano & Buddy Cage: Cruisin' Down 17 Pine Avenue



There's no good timing for bad news – but this timing was exceptionally lousy and the news was even worse.

But first, a little history.

Since their renaissance in 2005, the [New Riders Of The Purple Sage](#) have proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that you can't keep a good band down. Original New Riders David Nelson (guitar/vocals) and Buddy Cage (pedal steel) are playing some of the most inspired music of their careers with the killer duo of Ronnie Penque (bass/vocals) and Johnny Markowski (drums/vocals) providing the chug and Michael Falzarano navigating with his rhythm guitar work and vox.

Don't even begin to think of them as some sort of "revival" or "oldies" act that plays their hits by rote for an hour, tips their hats goodnight, and then retires to the bus: the present-day New Riders are as strong a jamband force as they come. They can lay down classic cosmic cowboy twang; they can venture off into the deep corners of the psychedelic universe; they can rock, rumble, roar, and soar. Their flight plans are based on not only an impressive catalog that dates back over 40 years but on new material, as well.

The current-day NRPS line-up released *Where I Come From* in 2009, putting the world on notice to the fact that not only was the band full of life and creative energy, but they had the talents of an old saddle partner as well: legendary lyricist Robert Hunter was pumping out the words as fast as David Nelson could put chords to them, along with the songwriting talents of Markowski, Penque, and Falzarano and arrangement input from Cage. All was good.

Over the last year or so, some new tunes began to surface at NRPS shows and talk of another album began to buzz. The buzz became a reality with the arrival of *17 Pine Avenue* in early March of this year – [a set of solid songs featuring seven new Hunter/Nelson tunes](#). The Riders had raised their own bar another notch; shows around the release date were selling out; things were rolling, bigtime.

And then the news hit: the Rider's appearance at a Rex Foundation benefit on 3/24 was notable for the appearance of

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guests Mookie Siegel, Barry Sless and Professor Louie. It was also notable for the absence of pedal steel monster Buddy Cage.

Buddy Cage does not miss gigs. I remember talking to Tim Carbone about a recording session he produced a few years back where Cage showed up sicker than three dogs with the flu and still managed to nail the groove in typical Buddy serve-the-song fashion. That was a *recording session* – a sorry-I-feel-like-shit-see-you-tomorrow recording session for the average person ... for Buddy Cage to miss the Rex Foundation gig, it had to be something bad.

And it was: multiple myeloma.

Blood cancer.

Google undoubtedly saw a spike in searches for the definition of multiple myeloma and its symptoms after the announcement of Buddy's illness. In the meantime, New Riders fans (and the Riders themselves) wondered what it all meant for Buddy. He had started treatment; other than that, not a lot was known as far as where the trail ahead led for the New Riders.

Michael Falzarano and I had planned on a phoner to talk about *17 Pine Avenue* before Buddy Cage was laid low. I backed off to give Michael and the New Riders a chance to deal with the disruptions in their world; we eventually had an opportunity to get together.

It was no surprise that our early conversation revolved around Buddy Cage. Michael acknowledged the outpouring of love and concern for Buddy. His description of the New Riders/Dead family scene was heartwarming: "Fortunately, we have a team of people and players around us. We're all close friends and we all love each other ... when someone needs something, everyone steps up."

And Falzarano's take on Buddy's illness and what it meant for the future was guarded but positive. With a new album to tour behind and shows booked through New Year's, the New Riders had plenty to do.

I had the interview with Michael Falzarano transcribed and ready to turn into the Jambands.com mothership when I needed to amend it – for the best of reasons: an e-mail arrived from Buddy Cage himself.

I quote:

"I had/have some health issues but I'm back to work. You know the protocol with propeller-driven engines being lift-off – it's customary to yell, 'CLEAR!' So ... 'CLEAR' IT IS!"

Buddy and I ended up on the phone shortly after that. He had a few thoughts to add to Michael's about *17 Pine Avenue* and about the year ahead. Dovetailing treatments between show scheduling, he's looking to be on hand to rip it up with his bandmates as much as possible.

While Buddy chose to focus on the music rather than his illness, he did acknowledge the positive vibes that the New Riders community had blessed him with – a reminder of what the scene is really all about.

The first portion of our New Riders feature is some straight Q&A with Michael Falzarano. We'll close things out with some "Quotes From The Cage."

Part I: Michael Falzarano

Michael, not to take anything away from the various forms of the Dead family that are still performing live, but you guys don't have a whole lot of other peers who are still creating and going into the studio with brand-new material like this.

I agree 100%. Seven years ago, when we did those first five shows, it was only *supposed* to be those first five shows: play the catalog, have some fun with those great songs that John Dawson wrote back in the day ... just have some fun.

And then it began to grow – and as any musician will tell you, if you want something to grow, you have to plant some seeds ... you

gotta do some new stuff. We took the position that we were going to try to stay as true as we could to the legacy and the history of the band but move forward at the same time. Everybody in the band knows how to put a song together – and when Robert Hunter started writing with David Nelson, things began to take on another life.

At this point, we could probably – *if* we had the budget ... which we don't (laughs) – go into the studio tomorrow and record three or four more albums worth of new material and still have some left over.

I wondered about that, as David and Buddy have both told me before about Hunter's amazing flow of words once he gets going.

Oh, yeah ... (laughs) I know Hunter sent a lot more tunes to David. Plus, Johnny, Ronnie, and myself all write. I know I'm not exaggerating when I say we could record several more albums. But you can do only so much, you know?

My original plan for *17 Pine Avenue* was to do a double disc, because we have so many songs ready to go. But to be honest with you, we couldn't afford it. It's just not the way it works. But we're really pleased with the way the album came out and the great reviews we've been getting. We're just pushing forward – that's the main thing.

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chris chandonnet

August 25, 2012, 16:02:02

when cage is down wer" all down !!! when he"s up wer all up
!!!!!!he rocked this tour ,and you"d never know what was going w
him at all .bless him w all of us behind him .we love you BUDDY

Uesfan

August 27, 2012, 15:52:15

Ok, here it is; These guys do it better than anyone. The shows are exciting, innovative, true to the tradition. Buddy, you are a treasure, you have never ceased to amaze us over the past 40 years. Thank you, thank you, thank you all. Coffee is on me, time to go!!!

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