

During the period of rock creativity that was the early '70s, Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen different than most bands. While there were many country-influenced groups, the Airmen had a more idiosyncratic sound—accessing Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys and boogie-woogie piano (serving as a predecessor to groups like Asleep at the Wheel). Band members also seemed to take themselves a bit less seriously than some of their contemporaries.

Like all groups, the Airmen eventually disbanded and they all went their separate ways, but the Commander (keyboardist George Frayne, who supplied the fast-talking vocals to “Hot Rod Lincoln”) has continued in the music business. His current group, Commander Cody and His Modern Day Airmen, has come out with a new CD, *Live from the Island*, that reworks many of the old songs.

The Commander talked with me by phone about the Lost Planet Airmen, his current band, and other topics. He has a rapid speaking style more identified with New York, where he was raised, than Texas.

How did you become interested in Texas swing and country music?

In the '60s, I was in a frat band [in Ann Arbor, Michigan], and in the frat band there's no such thing as rehearsal ... We had a record player and we put on the record player and played the song. So, we were looking for new material and around 1964, we discovered at the Farmer's Market two albums. The first one was *The Best of Buck Owens*, which had just come out. It had “I Got a Tiger By the Tail” and “Act Naturally”. We picked up both of those songs—we later found out The Beatles did [“Act Naturally”] too.

We started just playing those right away. In 1966, I came across the Bob Wills album with the Paul Davis album cover, which is beautiful, and I felt this is going to be good—let me check this out. At least, I like the album cover. We heard him go “Aha,” for the first time. and we figured out, “Wow, this is like cowboys' attempt to play jazz.”

Now, around about that time, I was sitting around and this crazy-looking guy with a fiddle wanders by—Andy Stein. We turned him onto the Bob Wills album. We said “Wow, this is great. We could do this.” At that time, our drummer had quit. We didn't have a full drum kit. We didn't have an electric bass player. We got a kid to play snare drum with brushes and we had an upright bass, so we start playing outside of frat houses. Nobody wanted this kind of music in frat houses.

Eventually, the whole thing broke up—everyone went off in different directions. [Lead guitarist] Bill Kirchen went off to San Francisco. I took a teaching job in Oshkosh, Wisconsin and we just let it go. I would go back to Ann Arbor from Wisconsin and we can just play on various things in these little clubs but it wasn't very serious until 1969 when Kirchen called me from San Francisco to tell me, “Listen, man, Jerry Garcia is learning how to play steel guitar. If we've got a steel player and drive out here, I can get gigs for the summertime playing that kind of music because it's really catching on here in the Bay Area, especially in Berkeley.” So, we went out in the summer, just to see what was happening, and by August 18th, we were opening for the Grateful Dead. So, that was that and we were on a new career.

Between 1969 and 1976 [Texas swing] was the emphasis of the band. We had the world's best steel guitar player [Bobby Black]. We had a classical fiddle player [Stein] who had studied Bob Wills extensively, so, we started collecting the records and listening to it and we're really interested in that.

Can you discuss the dynamics of the band? You guys seemed to come across as being less pretentious than some other groups at the time.

That wasn't any kind of intention or anything like that. It was more of an eight-piece band and the way a Western Swing band is run. The lead singer is singing something and then somebody else is filling behind him. Everyone else is playing out a very good solo, and then everything was very structured. Of course, you can play what you wanted during your lead but it was very structured and all the solos were very short and it required a lot of attention and concentration. So that's what we're up to, really paying attention to what we were doing and trying to be the best we could be at that time.

When we went to Berkeley, we found our rhythm section—[drummer] Lance Dickerson and [bassist] Bruce Barlow, who had just quit the Charlie Musselwhite Band. These were guys who could play blues like crazy and they had been playing together. So we just had a very solid combo, and we just wanted to play as tightly as we possibly could, being the best instrumentalists possible and emphasizing arrangements over noise and power. We didn't like being loud at all.

Bill Kirchen and Andy Stein did most of the arranging and direction of what we're going to do with everyone. We'd come up with the songs. Billy C. [Vocalist and harmonica player Billy C. Farlow] and I were writing songs, and Andy and Billy [Kirchen] were finishing them, and then we'd rehearse them and play them.

What made you get away from that style?

We really liked [our sound] and we played that kind of music until we were booed off stage at the CMA Convention in 1973, in which case we decided that, well, if these guys are going to treat us like this, we're not going to do their music anymore. Because their

attitude was, "Who are these hippies? Take a bath, find a rock concert, et cetera, et cetera." That was the end of our interest in Country and Western Swing. The people from Texas found out that I wasn't from Texas and they thought that I was stealing their music and they didn't get it.

The band broke up a couple of years after that, after we did our big Western swing album [*We've Got a Live One Here*] 1976 live in Europe. That kind of culminated the whole thing with country and western music. Andy Stein quit, the band broke up, I haven't used a fiddle player since. Well, I have but not on a full-time basis.

What broke up the band?

Our manager was stealing from us—stole our money from us. We'd gone a long time without any salary. Hoyt Axton wrote a song about my manager called "Where Did the Money Go?" We were asked, "Why didn't we get an L.A. guy?" But we thought we'd get one of our friends, and he would run the business, and he just sold us out completely. I was devastated.

How did your musical tastes evolve after the breakup?

After 1976, 1977, and 1978, we started to become friends with the English guys, Elvis Costello, Nick Lowe and Rockpile. Also, we started getting interested in making it more rock and roll and Bill got back together with me in 1979, and we put in for six years. We played together as Commander Cody and the Moonlighters and we now played sort of a Rockpile kind of thing with a western country feel.

Let's discuss your piano style. You're known for your introduction of boogie-woogie piano into the rock and roll scene. Who are some of your influences?

Count Basie and Freddie Slack [the piano player for Will Bradley's band, who played the solo on their version of "Beat Me, Daddy, Eight to the Bar"].

How were you introduced to the boogie-woogie style?

My mom made me take piano lessons as a little kid—that didn't go pretty well. In ninth grade, I had a music class with Mr. O'Reilly. Mr. O'Reilly would start out the class quieting down everybody. He would play a song that he called "The Army Boogie", which was boogie-woogie, and everybody really liked it. I said to my mom, "This is great." My mom happened to have been a big fan in the '40s. She had gone down to Greenwich Village and she had heard the Eddie Condon Band and she knew the piano player. And she had that guy teach me how to play boogie-woogie.

He's trying to teach me how to play jazz and he gave me a jazz book, and he taught me the important things. He showed me how to play boogie-woogie, he showed me the blues progression. He gave the essence of how to do solos and showed me how to make chords. I couldn't keep time very well. I got a metronome and I swore it kept speeding up on me. So, when I went out to college I thought, that was it. Until three years later, [Lost Planet Airmen guitarist and vocalist] John Tichy invited me to join his frat band. We were just playing "96 Tears" and stuff like that.

We couldn't play piano back there. There wasn't an electric piano that worked except for the Wurlitzer Electric. You couldn't play the frat parties because you couldn't keep the frat men from putting their drinks on the piano and these things were tube-operated and I couldn't play a gig without blowing a fuse. It was too expensive, so I ended up with a Farfisa combo compact [organ]. That took the boogie-woogie out of the question completely so we forgot about it. Then, later on—and when we started getting into western swing—then we started finding places and figuring out how to mike real pianos in coffee clubs.

It would seem to be extremely difficult to play in that style and sing at the same time.

The left hand has to be completely unconscious. If you're seeing octaves you have to half-focus on your left hand, if you're not on the key of C. You have to watch that, but then your right hand has to be totally automatic and you have to have all the licks down that you play without looking at your right hand, because you can only look at one hand at once. Then most the lyrics in boogie-woogie songs are very, very simple. So, the singing part is the easiest part of the boogie-woogie.

In addition to music, you're also well known as an artist, with a master's degree in Sculpture and Painting from the University of Michigan. I know you've made a specialty out of musician portraits.

I decided that I was going to draw every single musician that ever lived. Of course, I had to stop it because I don't know a lot on the modern musicians. When it comes past Elvis Costello then I've got to quit doing it.

How do you pick people to draw? Is it from the music? Is it from the personality of the musician?

I originally wanted to do all the jazz guys, and I've done all the jazz guys. I wanted to do all the blues guys, so I did all of the blues guys, but when it comes to doing the rock guys, I'll choose and pick the guys I wanted to or not. Now, most of it also has to do with how interesting their faces look, like in Paul McCartney's face, it's not interesting whatsoever but John Lennon's face is interesting. So I've done more portraits—done lots of portraits of John Lennon and I did one portrait of Paul. A guy like Muddy Waters has a lot more interesting face than Fabian or anybody from the Contenders. Pete Townsend, on the other hand is a guy with a totally distorted face. So I've done a limited [number of] rock and roll guys.

Is it difficult making the transition between art and music, between a visual and auditory media?

Well, being stoned really helps.

I smoke a lot of marijuana and it's really easy to change your groove around when you're stoned. I especially enjoy painting while I'm stoned, and I keep doing that until this very day. On the other hand, I don't smoke weed at rock and roll gigs anymore, whatsoever, because I've been more interested in remembering all the words for the song. Don't forget I'm an old geezer—I can't afford to forget the words.

Can you describe the makeup and sound of your current band?

Steve Barbuto is a good drummer. He has been with me for about 20 years. Mark Emerick has been with me for about 12 years, on and off on guitar, and he's on this specific gig. Randy Bramwell [bass] is a Berklee School of Music guy who has been playing with me for 30 years. Professor Louie from Professor Louie and the Crowmatix—a Woodstock guy since the last three band albums, played with The Band guys—has a real great range as a producer and has a studio in Woodstock where we recorded an album. I like to get him with the band on Hammond B-3 and when I get him, I get his wife. Her name is Miss Marie—and she comes along and plays tambourine and sings beautifully. [Professor Louie] plays accordion also.

[The material on the new CD] is mostly old songs. There's a couple of newer songs but still material done with the way that the band is today. I wanted to do a live album of what I'm doing today so that people can hear it on CD. The way I explain it to everyone is that the same budget that used to get you a truck, eight musicians, four roadies, two secretaries, a manager, and a lawyer on retainer now gets you four old geezers.

It's more rock and roll now. In the old days you could fill up the space with everyone concentrating—and there would be lots and lots of things going on. With four pieces you've got to increase the volume too. All the treatments are different than the originals. Everything is more of a rock and roll sound because it's basically a four-piece band now.

This version of "Lost in the Ozone" has a Zydeco feel to it.

Well, that's because it has the accordion on it.

Does the band sometimes vary the feel from night to night, or is that the basic style?

No. That's straightforward. There are no tricks. No changes—just a rock band.

We don't do anything that's politically correct. We'd started off the thing getting high and we still get high. I didn't see the light or discover Jesus or find my way or anything like that.

Commander Cody's art (along with his stories about music) are featured in his book, *Art Music & Life* (Qualibre Publications, 2009).

<http://blogcritics.org/music/article/interview-rock-pioneer-commander-cody/>