



Mark Sandman onstage in 1994.

NO GUITAR, NO PROBLEM

They were a band like no other – either before or since. That was the inevitable description of the rock trio Morphine, from critics to TV hosts to fellow musicians like Henry Rollins and Los Lobos’ Steve Berlin. The band’s self-described “low rock” hit you in your pelvis instead of your head, as stated by drummer Billy Conway, in this 90-minute documentary of the group’s rise and abrupt end.

Formed in ‘89, Morphine grew out of (and overlapped) the blues quartet Treat Her Right, led by singer/songwriter/bassist Mark Sandman, who simultaneously played in several groups in the Boston area. Sandman switched from a Telecaster played through an octave divider to a Premier bass with only two strings, played bottleneck style. He recruited Dana Colley, who played tenor and bass saxophones, but usually baritone. Drummers Conway, from Treat Her Right, and Jerome Deupree alternated tenures and sometimes

played together. That’s right – a rock band with no guitar and no keyboard. As Sandman said, “Even though it was kind of sparse sounding, it seemed full to us.”

Sandman’s concept was minimalist, noir, and low-fi



Morphine Journey Of Dreams

(they often recorded parts on portable home cassette boards) but truly visionary, combining primitive rhythms and hypnotic riffs with jazz sensibilities and Sandman’s literary bent.

Music documentaries often get knocked for not showing complete songs, interrupting performances with narration or interviews, but director Mark

Shuman makes that m.o. work, constructing the story of the band instead of making a concert film. Along with archival interviews with Sandman, there are current interviews with Colley, Conway, and Deupree, along with manager Deb Klein, soundman Phil Davidson, tour manager Mark Hamilton, producer Paul Kolderie, and Sandman’s girlfriend, Sabine Hrechdakian, as well as admirers Berlin and Rollins, and an archival interview with Joe Strummer of the Clash. There is plenty of music, but the interviews provide an insightful, intimate picture of Morphine, as they progressed from playing small clubs to festivals with 60,000 fans.

The band recorded five albums, with its sophomore effort, *Cure For Pain*, their masterpiece. Before album number five, *Night*, was released, the group set off on a European tour in July ‘99. But at the second gig, outdoors in Palestrina, Italy, after a soundcheck that nearly induced heat stroke, Sandman’s knees buckled during the set’s second song, and he fell backwards. He died of a massive heart attack at age 46.

Shuman handles Sandman’s death with sensitivity rather than voyeurism or sensationalism. A special feature is Colley reading from the diary he kept, beginning with their first days on the road. His words are a cut above the expected “road stories,” bordering on poetry without lapsing into self-consciousness – like the documentary itself. – **Dan Forte**

house-ready rock. His guitar work is stellar as usual and the band features Rob McNelly on guitar, Tommy McDonald on bass, and Tom Hambridge (who also produces) on drums. If all that talent isn’t enough, there are also guest shots from guitarist Walter Trout and master harmonica player Jason Ricci.

You get a chunky shuffle with biting Strat solos on “Wasted Time” and Chuck Berry-styled rock on “Route 90” with some blistering solo work from Zito. “Bad News Is Coming” is a minor blues with some soulful playing and singing from Zito.

Country Blues make an appearance on the title cut with Zito’s slide mixing perfectly with Ricci’s harp playing. A nice surprise is “Redbird,” with its spacey opening with chiming and droning guitars before segueing into riff-heavy rock reminiscent of Hendrix, then fading out with more chiming guitars and soloing.

Side note: Zito’s son, Zach, is the featured guitar guest on “Chip Off The Block,” which tells the story of the apple not falling far from the tree. – **John Heidt**



Cactus Black Dawn

Guitarist Jim McCarty (not to be confused with the Yardbirds’ drummer of the same name) initially turned heads in the mid ‘60s, as a member of Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels.

He joined the Buddy Miles Express for three albums; then in 1970, when a project melding the Jeff Beck Group with Vanilla Fudge was nixed due to a Beck motorcycle accident, Cactus was born, with McCarty, drummer Carmine Appice, bassist Tim Bogert, and singer Rusty Day. During the hard-rock early ‘70s, few rocked harder.

Beck, Bogert & Appice eventually came together, so McCarty formed the Rockets (with Detroit Wheels drummer Johnny Badanjek) while doing session work, including an Albert King album, and he later recorded two Jim McCarty and Friends CDs.

It wasn’t until 2006 that three remaining Cactus founders reunited. This is the group’s first studio release, with Pete Bemy replacing the retired Bogert and the addition of Jimmy Kunes’ vocals and Randy Pratt on harp.