

A Rockin' History

By David Lias

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Young people across South Dakota were experiencing, at best, the afterglow of Bill Haley & His Comets when Bob Ellison, a student at Vermillion High School, decided to start his own band.

Haley and his Comets, well known today as the earliest group of white musicians to bring rock and roll music to the attention of white America and the rest of the world, had reached its apex.

Its bright influence on the musical tastes of younger Americans had begun to fade when Ellison and three of his buddies from VHS formed their own band known as The Galaxies in 1963. Shortly after its start, a fifth musician was added to the band, and its name was changed to The Shattoes.

Ellison didn't know that he was about to embark on a historic adventure that would eventually lead to him being recognized as one of the pioneers of rock and roll music in South Dakota.

The Shattoes were inducted into the South Dakota Rock & Roll Music Association's 2011 Hall of Fame Saturday, April 16, 2011, in the Ramkota Exhibit Hall in Sioux Falls.

The band, with Ellison at its helm, saw many members depart to be replaced by other musicians. It survived the ever-changing culture of the '60s, and adapted by changing its name, modifying its look to keep up with every new clothing and hair style, and altering its music to stay ahead of the revolution in rock and roll that would take place in the decade after Ellison began the band.

Vermillion's Fab Four

The Galaxies' roster included Ellison, who played bass guitar and was lead vocal; Terry Ramey, guitar and vocals; Willie Ernst, guitar and vocals; and Roger Purcell, drums and vocals.

Shortly after it was formed, Howard Ernst joined the group as lead guitarist, and the band changed its name to The Shattoes. They forged ahead in an era of 45-rpm vinyl records, AM car radios, and only a few live rock and roll performers in the state.

"We just thought it would be a good idea to form a band," Ellison said. "We just sort of fell into it, and began banging out our music, rehearsing in the old Odd Fellows Lodge in Vermillion – my dad was a member of the Odd Fellows, so that's where we would practice back in 1963. And things just kind of snowballed."

There was plenty of something back then, however, that's become endangered in South Dakota today in comparison: dance halls and ballrooms. And, it seemed, an unending number of events held in them nearly every weekend that demanded a live band.

"Everybody finds out that there is a band here that could be hired for sorority or fraternity parties, or high school proms," he said.

It was a challenge Ellison and The Shattoes couldn't resist.

"Just about every town either had a ballroom or a dance hall or armory or something like that, and on the weekends they would be packed with kids who wanted to dance to live music," said Don Fritz, of the South Dakota Rock & Roll Music Association. "Bands always had places to play, and now you don't necessarily have that opportunity any more. It was just a great era to grow up in."

A rich history

The association's goal is to preserve the history of that time in South Dakota



The Shattoes, a rock and roll band begun in Vermillion in 1963, was inducted into the hall of fame of the South Dakota Rock & Roll Music Association Saturday, April 16, 2011, in Sioux Falls. Pictured are Bob Ellison, the band's founder, Terry Ramey, Howard Ernst, Roger Purcell and Will Ernst.

(Photo courtesy of Bob Ellison)

when local bands like The Shattoes had a profound cultural influence in the region.

The Shattoes were one of about half a dozen bands inducted into the hall of fame in 2011.

"All of the original Shattoe members are from Vermillion, and they had a lot of success. We decided to induct them because they are certainly very deserving of being inducted," Fritz said. "They are one of the best groups to ever come out of the state. They had a couple records and they had quite a bit of success."

2011 marked the third year the music association had inducted local musical groups into its hall of fame. The organization's board of directors makes the annual selection after considering up to 100 different bands.

"We look at the success they had, and different things about them, and then we arrive at who we are going to induct from that discussion," Fritz said. "There aren't really any certain criteria that we use."

The association began its hall of fame in 2009, and considered bands from the early 1950s to be the initial inductees. In 2011, it was time to focus on local bands that were formed in the 1960s.

"We look at how long they played, what parts of the state they were from, how many people attended their dances, and the different places they played," Fritz said.

Every rock and roll band experiences personnel changes over the years, he added, and The Shattoes were no exception.

"But in their 14 years, they had less people come and go than a lot of bands that performed for that long of time. I know of some local bands that had over 100 different members," Fritz said, "and Bob Ellison was really the guy that kept that group together."

"He's a very talented guy; a very nice guy," he said. "He's had some very good people in his band, and they had a lot of success."

Wave of popularity

Ellison describes the 1960s as one fun-filled adventure after the other.

"It was quite an event with a lot of bands starting up at that time," he said. "When you're young, and you start seeing all of the rock groups that were starting to click, and make it back in those days ... The Beach Boys and different groups like that were enjoying success, so we patterned ourselves after them to start with. We just thought it would be exciting if we could make it big like they did."

"It's a vision that you have when you are young, but starting up a band was just something I wanted to do," Ellison said in a phone conversation from his Omaha, NE home. "I went to the University of South Dakota for part of that time, and got a bachelor's degree and a master's degree."

The British invasion led

by The Beatles occurred at about the time that The Shattoes were formed. Soon, the local band's interest shifted from the surfer music that was already popular.

"They (The Beatles) served as a second set of roles models for our group," he said. "They came over at the same time we formed, and excited everyone about rock and roll."

The Shattoes found itself riding the crest of the wave of the popularity formed by that new style of rock and roll.

"There was an ebb and a tide with just about every group," Ellison said. "I changed musicians and our music changed over the years."

In the early- to mid-1960s, the band kept busy playing at ballrooms, high school proms, and college dances. The band was introduced to entertaining a ballroom of people for the first time by being the main act at The Arkota Ballroom in Sioux Falls on Dec. 26, 1963.

"We were paid the handsome sum of \$80 that evening," Ellison said.

A few months later, The Shattoes were the opening act for The Beach Boys at the Shore Acres Ballroom in Sioux City, IA. That served as just one of several opening act appearances that would follow for the Vermillion band.

Ellison and his fellow musicians grew more and more busy. Later in the 1964, The Shattoes signed a recording contract. Its first release, "Surf Fever," recorded in Minneapolis, MN, received airplay on radio stations throughout the Midwest.

At the same time, the band kept up a grueling concert schedule in the region in its early years. In 1965, it was voted Outstanding Dance Band by the National Ballroom Operator's Association.

"We were always busy," Ellison said. "I played every weekend for 14 years. I never had a weekend off."

Constant change

There was also never a time, it seems, when Ellison didn't successfully cope with the constant changes in the music industry.

Beginning in the mid-60s, The Shattoes began evolving as one member of the band would leave and be replaced by a different musician. Eventually, Ellison changed the name of the group to The Chateaux Band.

Tommy Bolin was one of the first new members who played with the group before going on to play with the James Gang and Deep Purple. He became famous as a solo act in the late 60s and early 70s.

In the late 60s, The Chateaux Band merged with The Seven Sons from Sioux City, IA and played all over the Midwest as an opening act for The Fifth Dimension, Sonny & Cher, The Righteous Brothers, Three Dog Night, Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels and other major performers.

"That was a real popular time for us," Ellison said.



The National Music Museum's founder, Arne B. Larson, poses with Fred Rogers in November 1973, when Larson taped two episodes of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." Rogers holds the NMM's echo cornet made in 1896 by C. G. Conn, while Larson holds one of the museum's double flageolets, which was made in England in the 19th century.

(Photo courtesy of the National Music Museum)



Through Time...

Arne B. Larson
dies in 1988.

The NMM acquires the John Powers Saxophone Collection (Aspen, CO) and the Cecil Leeson Saxophone Collection and Archives (transferred from Ball State University) in 1994.

Michael R. Tuma is commissioned by the NMM's Board of Trustees to create the courtyard statues as part of the South Dakota Centennial in 1989.

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