

Bob Ketchum's multimedia bio brings back '70s Rock memories

by Lynn Wasson



Ketchum at the board at KWHN/KMAG, which broadcasts his show "Album Review."
Inset: Whizz performs at a KISR Frisbee Festival in 1974.

From 1971 to 1975, all Fort Smith rock fans tuned their radios to one show at 11 p.m. Over the foreboding instrumental "Iron Butterfly Theme," a deep voice intoned it was time for "Album Review."

For one hour until sign-off, disc jockey Bob Ketchum played cuts from heavy rock albums by Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Traffic, Yes, Cream and Jimi Hendrix.

"Lots of Jimi Hendrix," Ketchum added.

Ketchum was introducing album-oriented rock to a legion of devoted listeners. Using the power of KWHN/KMAG FM's 5,000-watt AM signal and its nighttime, monster 100,000-watt stereo FM signal, he was a pioneer in a new style of radio programming, championing the concept of buying an artist's entire album rather than only a 45-rpm single.

His deep, bass voice introducing heavy rock music was as heavy as a wall of Marshall amps. Ketchum was the coolest! What hardly any of his listeners knew was that local radio's reigning wizard of rock had been, just a few years before,

a military high school graduate with spit-shined shoes and a burr haircut.

In an intense burst of creativity during his career in Fort Smith from 1969-75, Ketchum turned teens on to hard rock, promoted a string of successful concerts with major artists, played in popular bands and learned to record and produce records. Although his Fort Smith years ended with a divorce, financial struggle and an accidental gunshot wound, he considers it one of the pinnacles of the long, strange trip of his life.

Now Ketchum, who admitted he is "one archivin' SOB," is sharing his memories in an e-book biography called **Face the Music**, sold online at his website cedarcreststudio.com. Its CD format allowed him to include text, pictures, audio clips, video and a bonus: his self-produced album, **New Tricks from an Old Dog**.

For fans of recorded and live music, it's an amazing flashback to "pillow concerts" at the old municipal auditorium, an unforgettable Paris, Ark., show and a string of dances and early music festivals that bring the '70s vividly to life.

Interviewed by phone from his home-based Cedar Crest Studio in Henderson, Ark., overlooking Lake Norfolk, Ketchum's conversation is full of humor and humility. He was speaking with Entertainment Fort Smith on the eve of a shared birthday: Ketchum turned 65 and his son Robert W. Ketchum III was 14. Ketchum's marriage to his wife, Jane; the birth of their son, a close relationship with his older daughter, Missy, and his grandchildren are the joy he calls "a gift of a second chance at life."

Face the Music includes Ketchum's career after his Fort Smith radio years, establishing an audio/video recording business near Mountain Home in the house his parents built at Lake Norfolk. His personal life and career have been a bumpy but enthusiastic ride, pitting his unflagging passion for music with the tough realities of "the music business."

Local music fans will recognize bands and artists Paperkid, Joe Hamilton, Judge Parker, the Cate Brothers and many more who were recorded by Ketchum. Cedar Crest Studio also recorded pre-production tracks for the Swedish metal band Krokus.

The book's highlight for Fort Smith readers, however, will be Ketchum's retelling of memories they share with him. Besides "Album Review," radio listeners from 1969-75 may remember the station's truck with a Plexiglas window revealing Ketchum inside spinning 45s at live remote events and "battles of bands."

"The vehicle was a converted bread truck, an aluminum bob truck," he recalled. "Rance Rhodes put a mobile audio console in it. It was spartan - two turntables and a microphone. We put a piece of Plexiglas in the side and painted it red with the radio call letters. James Inman booked the remotes at places like Elmore's or Madcat's record stores; Central Mall or Phoenix Village," he said. "I don't have many memories of them because I was so busy doing it!"

Pillow concerts were a unique Ketchum invention. Backed by the owner of Sigler Music, the DJ turned concert promoter in 1971, presenting the British band Trapeze at the Fort Smith Municipal Auditorium to a crowd that far exceeded the 1,000 seats set up for the audience. After making a profit on the first show, he brought Black Oak Arkansas to town and sold 2,150 tickets.

Ketchum got around capacity limits on the auditorium by calling the next show a pillow concert, asking the audience to bring their own seating. In 1972, Trapeze was eager to play Fort Smith again and the bands Jukin' Bone and E. Bartlett were added to the bill.

“We had 2,000 in attendance,” Ketchum wrote. “The fire marshal was there, as well, and he didn’t look too happy. As I had figured, the pillow concert made it difficult for an accurate head count and by the time they had figured out we were past capacity and ordered the doors closed, there were hardly any stragglers outside.”

In rapid order, Ketchum brought Mitch Ryder with the band Detroit and had his first brush with near-disaster, the band Bloodrock. After advance tickets were on sale, Ketchum learned that Bloodrock’s frontmen had quit and the band’s direction had changed completely. Refunds were offered but few were taken and the concert broke even after all.

His concert swan song was bringing his friends Trapeze for a third area appearance – to Barnhill Arena in Fayetteville on a 1972 night of record snowfall. The band barely made it in alive and, of course, the show was attended only by locals who could walk in through the drifts. Ketchum’s (and Sigler’s) concert promoter era was soon to be over.

But during that time, he joined several bands that made their mark regionally and launched players still respected today. Rock Island, later renamed Rock Bottom, featured bassist Harley Vinsant, guitarist Jimmy Atchison and Ronnie Thomas on Hammond B-3 organ. The band opened for several name-act concerts and played gigs all over Arkansas and Oklahoma, later adding Steve Hawkins on guitar.

He also apprenticed at Ben Jack’s Recording Studio, absorbing more about engineering. Hanging out there even got him (as a studio musician) on a hit record.

Ketchum formed the band Whizz with Dave Hopkins, Eric Dennis, Dave Ervin and Jimmy Watson. A later Whizz with Hopkins, Dennis, Watson and Mel Myers played an infamous gig in Paris – a town with no fire marshal – opening for Styx at the old Logan Theater. Styx had just hit the charts with “Lady.”

It would spoil the book to reveal more about the concert, so let’s just say it was ... explosive.

“I’ll bet even Styx would remember that night,” Ketchum chuckled.

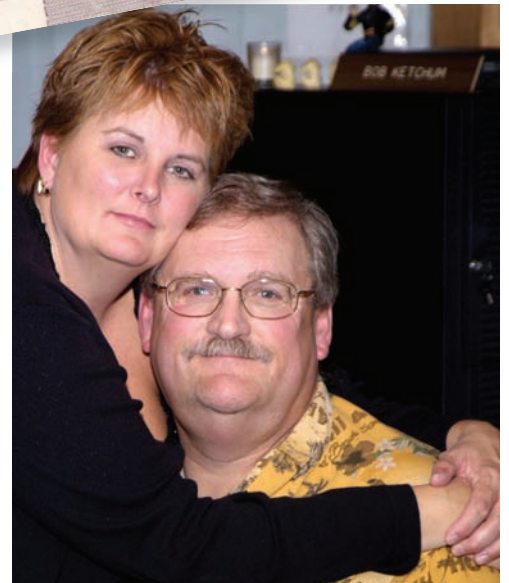
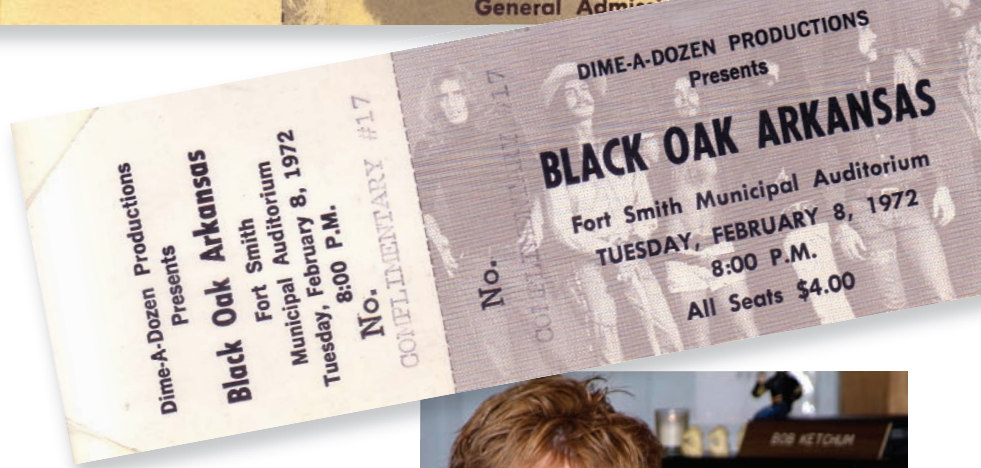
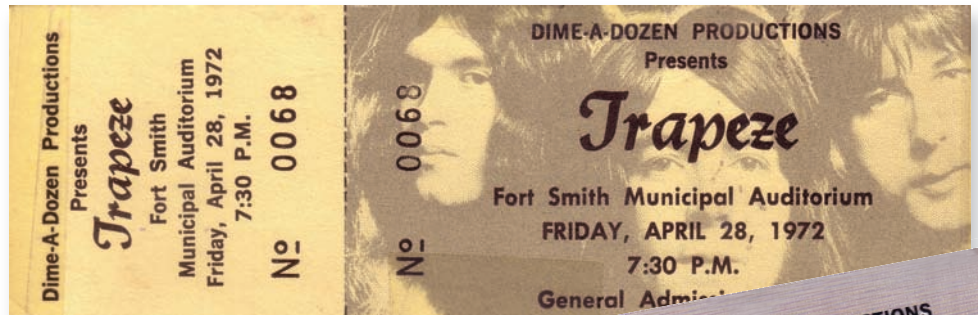
It’s one of the many music stories that make **Face the Music** compelling to read, hear and see. But beyond the music, Ketchum is brutally honest about his life, warts and all, which made this reader like him all the more and root for the good life he enjoys today.

Although he didn’t wind up on the cover of Rolling Stone, Ketchum counts himself rich in friendships. He has organized reunions with Whizz and other bandmates and musicians.

He is the sentimental one who preserved all the tapes, memorabilia, film and video and loves the thrill his old friends get from enjoying what they thought they would never hear again. His e-book grew from those archives and, of course, his undying love of music. Bob Ketchum rocks on!



1971: KWHN’s mobile studio truck at the station on Garrison Avenue. The building has been razed.



Ketchum in 2010 with his son, Robert, and with his wife, Jane, on his 60th birthday at their Lake Norfolk home where he operates Cedar Crest Studios.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOB KETCHUM