



Southside Johnny Depp (center) and the Pompano Jukes (i.e., members of Slyder, Z-Cars, and the Kids)

This Ain't No Disco

Johnny Depp jams with his old bandmates and revisits South Florida's power-pop salad days BY EVELYN McDONNELL

It's a classic rock'n'roll story: Angst-ridden misfit drops out of high school to join a band. Skinny son of divorce finds a new family in a tight-knit community of struggling musicians. Dozens of clubs open their doors to a new wave of original bands, and the golden ring of stardom seems just within reach. The Kids—that's what the kid's band is called—tour the East Coast, move to L.A., open for Chuck Berry. But no hit record materializes, for them or for any of their peers, and everyone drifts away to day jobs. Ambitions get swallowed up by "the black hole of rock'n'roll," as one member of the little-known-but-much-beloved South Florida rock scene put it.

Then comes the twist ending: The skinny teen gets a job on a TV show and later becomes a world-famous movie star.

Johnny Depp drew fans from thousands of miles away to Club Cinema in Pompano Beach, Florida, on August 29 and 30, for the second annual Sheila Witkin Memorial Reunion Concert. But before they got to see Captain Jack Sparrow, the audience got a little history lesson, as nine late-'70s/early-'80s South Florida bands reunited

to raise money for charity. Sure, some sets proved that guys' hairlines recede long before their egos. But the shows also buttressed claims that decades ago, the area known primarily for booty-shaking boasted a live-music scene that, chord for chord, could've challenged Athens, Georgia, or Cleveland, but, thanks to geographic isolation and regional stereotyping, never got its due.

"We knew that there was magic at the time, and we felt like we were winning every day," Depp says in *Rock and a Hard Place (Another Night at the Agora)*, the documentary that unearths this largely forgotten scene (and that also screened over the weekend). "There's a whole chunk of time that can never be touched and will always be a beautiful memory."

Thirty years ago, the stretch of Atlantic coastline from Homestead to Palm Beach was booming, and live bands helped provide much of that boom. The Cichlids, the Reactions, the Eat, Crank, Psycho Daisies, Slyder, and others were stepping outside the Southern-rock and dance-music boxes—long before the terms *alternative* or *indie rock* were invented.

"As far back as the early '70s, if you wanted to play anywhere, you had to play disco," says Bruce Witkin, bassist-singer for the Kids, who co-organized the concert. "And if you didn't play [Lynyrd Skynyrd's] 'Gimme Three Steps' at a kegger, you'd get killed."

KC and the Sunshine Band and Skynyrd may be the Florida bands of record, but at venues like the Agora and Tight Squeeze (named after the band that was in many ways the foundation of the scene), groups made a different kind of noise. The August 29 concert featured the era's classic rockers—Tight Squeeze and Slyder—along with Charlie Pickett, the cranky, gifted guitarist who, mid-set, entertainingly traded his Gibson SG for a Hello Kitty ax. More punk-influenced bands performed August 30. Critical Mass bashed out "I Get Up, I Get Down," a catchy tune that at least deserves consideration for a future *Nuggets* comp. Psycho Daisy Lisa Nash joined the Reactions and sparkled like a goth Cher next to Alex Mitchell's aggro Sonny. Z-Cars were fronted by an English singer who once recalled Pere Ubu's David Thomas and performed



Florida, the land that new wave forgot (clockwise from left): Depp flies the flannel; Z-Cars' Ray Harris takes out some understandable frustration; Charlie Pickett puts the punk in Hello Kitty; an ecstatic Depphead



in bizarre costumes; at the reunion, a white-haired Peter Patrick just made witty fun of his old mates and swore a lot, while bassist Ray Harris and guitarist Christopher Bacon smashed their instruments.

The Kids headlined both nights, performing impressively competent, hard-edged power pop. Holding his instrument low, like Sparrow inspiration Keith Richards, Depp clearly knew how to play. After all, he wanted to be a rock star long before the cameras beckoned (also playing with '80s South Florida/L.A. band Rock City Angels, and the '90s-era P with Butthole Surfer Gibby Haynes). But he's a judicious riffer, not a flashy show-off. Sporting a holey T-shirt, bangs over his eyes like parted curtains, and a little dagger of a goatee, he looked every bit the part of the misfit made good—and, frankly, decimated the room with his dark, cerebral, sex-god aura.

One of *Rock and a Hard Place's* refrains is that the bands provided an alternative to the local cover-band circuit. "Anyone playing Top 40 clubs was an absolute enemy," Z-Cars' Harris tells me. And while some music scenes—Seattle's grunge, Athens' jangle and jerk—had distinctive sounds, South Florida's palette varied, though *Rock and a Hard Place* suggests one common influence: the syncopation resulting from Hispanic immigration. "What was so original about South Florida was the merging of Latin rhythm sections with rock'n'roll," says Diane Jacques, the film's writer-producer.

The documentary also poignantly captures the intense excitement that drove the scene—and the sad puzzlement, years later, over why it disappeared. "It

was a time of hope, great promise, and originality," Jacques says. "You had this whole community of artists; we thought the world was our oyster."

Jacques and director Aaron Wells began working on the film a few years ago, finding the musicians mostly via MySpace. "Not only was there a scene then, but there was a scene that hadn't been anywhere else," says Wells. "Why weren't these people discovered? What kept them from breaking free?" Mostly, the South Florida scene suffered from location. To this day, many touring bands don't bother driving the 660 miles from Atlanta to Miami. Growing in a sort of

"Anyone playing Top 40 clubs was the enemy."

Z-CARS' RAY HARRIS

hothouse bubble, the groups had an outsider energy that both fueled and ultimately extinguished them. "The willingness to make the wagon move forward was a little stronger, because we had so many obstacles to overcome," says Harris. "It seemed like such an insurmountable goal to get to New York or L.A. It was a full day's drive to get out of the state!"

But South Florida's rockers never overcame regional prejudice: The music industry thought Miami equaled disco and didn't take guitar bands seriously. "The A&R people didn't come to Florida," says Tight Squeeze drummer John Morello. "If they did, they came to

relax. They knew it as KC, Gloria [Estefan], disco—not rock'n'roll. We were this little subculture."

But common striving, rather than competition, cemented a scene that was already extremely familial. Bruce Witkin's mother, Sheila, managed the Kids and Tight Squeeze. (She died in 2007 and a charity was founded in her name.) "At one point, both bands lived together with Sheila," recalls Kids singer-guitarist Joey Malone. "We pooled our incomes and lived like a real family." "The Kids were our kids," says Tight Squeeze guitarist Coz Canler, recalling how the older band took the youngsters on the road. The lineage continues—on the second night, Bruce's 16-year-old daughter, Veronica, played with her L.A.-based band My Dolls. Flashing a blonde afro and Flying V chops, the younger Witkin may be poised to win the rock lottery that eluded her dad.

But she'll have to avoid falling into the black hole that Z-Cars drummer Bruno Martinez, who died last year in a car crash, wryly refers to in *Rock and a Hard Place*. The documentary and concert shed welcome light on unrecognized talents. But how often can a person relive (or mourn) his glory days? It was undoubtedly a bit humbling for some of the concert's musicians to realize that the screaming teens were there for the scraggly guitarist they used to call a "kid." Hopefully, they enjoyed the secondhand stardust.

Morello, who moved to South Florida from New York in the early '70s, as did Sheila Witkin and her son, is philosophical about what was, and what might have been. "It's not always about money and success," he says. "Sometimes it's about the road traveled."