



Singer Debbie, who has dropped her last name, and drummer Bobby Tak, leaders of The Cichlids.

— MIKE O'BRYON/Miami Herald Staff

Hanging Out With Dania's Cichlids

By STEVE SONSKY
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Sometimes, the sole object seems to be how outrageous they can be. Ask Debbie, for example, what she looks forward to in her burgeoning career as a rock and roller and the answer is, "more shrimp deli trays."

"That's what I really got into the business for," the 22-year-old rasps in the throaty, gutsy voice that is her career and her blessing. It is a sexy voice, especially so when it is power-amplified, in concert, at rock and roll volumes.

"Shrimpy deli trays," the rasp persists. "You know what I mean? Those trays they give you backstage, before concerts, with all that food on it? The ones with shrimp are great."

Debbie — there is no last name any longer, this is showbiz and just plain "Debbie" is it — is the sex symbol, lead singer, primary arranger, main songwriter and heart and soul of a Dania-born band called The Cichlids. Named after a colorful, quarrelsome family of South and Central American freshwater fish, the group has lived

This rock and roll aggregation flirts with the punk look and sound, but under its sometimes outrageous surface it's just a band with the same goal as most others — the top of the heap.

up to those traits of its namesake species. In doing so, it has emerged on the club and college concert circuit as probably the best-known little-known band in South Florida.

DEBBIE PROBABLY isn't serious about the shrimpy deli trays. Then again, maybe

she is. This is a band, after all, that debuted just 15 months ago in a music store parking lot; a band that, according to drummer and co-leader and songwriter Bobby Tak, initially expected its brand of basic, throw-back rock and roll music to be greeted with violence. Teenagers were used to hearing tried and true Top 40 tunes after

they plunked down their cover charge in a bar — not unknown songs by an unknown group.

"I expected to get beat up in the parking lot after shows — things like that," Tak, also 22, recalls. "You know, a lot of times if they don't like your band, the imbeciles [in the audience] at some of these [rock]

clubs take it personally."

The Cichlids certainly never expected to find themselves, in just months, the beneficiaries of a swirl of local publicity: the darlings of a near-cultish local following; opening for national acts at Miami's Gusman Hall; the main attraction in a "New Wave" night at the Sunrise Musical Theatre; signed to a record contract; and, embarking on a national tour.

WHEN ALL THIS did happen, they found it all a little hard to handle. And it began to unravel. Two of the four band members that cut the album dropped out. Debbie and Tak, leaders of the group, the survivors, had to go recruiting replacements. There are two new Cichlids now — another guitarist named Derek Craig and a bassist named Bob Rupe.

So the band is back in local clubs now, practicing, trying to make four individuals into a cohesive group again. It takes time. It takes patience. But nobody ever said the road to stardom was going to be easy.

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Cichlids: Sometimes the Struggle Isn't Easy

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The Cichlid look is punk without the overt menace, punk without safety pins through the cheeks and chains around the torso. Soft punk, perhaps. "Pop punk," in the words of Leslie Wimmer, an observer of the local music scene and co-owner of Open Books and Records in Fort Lauderdale, a shop specializing in independent and imported recordings.

"I think they sort of blend the, quote, punk image, with something that's very safe and accessible," she says.

Take Tak, for example: tall, wiry, intense, he looks like someone who was in a gang as a kid and tortured cats (he admits to it, in fact), but probably not people. He has short-cropped black hair and is prone to tight jeans and T-shirts. He looks like Humphrey Bogart but gets mad when you tell him so. "What does that mean — that I'm gonna get cancer?" he says tastelessly, trying to be outrageous.

DEBBIE IS STRIKING, though in a vampy, near-androgynous way. Her short, Hennaed hair is whipped up in the front, almost in a pompadour, and then teased straight back. Her ears are fully exposed. Thin lips are highlighted by ruby lipstick that makes them seem permanently pursed. She is small, only five foot three, but she is curvaceous, made to seem all the more so by impossibly tight garments. But the main attraction, onstage or off, are her riveting eyes — pale green, but interrupted by floating islands of brown. "They're tweed — or herringbone," she likes to joke. Occasionally, she'll cover them with sunglasses. "But not until it's dark outside," she says, embracing another outrageous affectation.

The outrageous Cichlid look is obviously deliberate. It is, in fact, obviously cultivated. The Cichlid look is a throwback — just like their music is. Theirs is a music highlighted by hard, driving electric guitar riffs and strong vocals, put together in brief two- or three-minute packages. Nothing fancy, just basic, old-time boogie.

"WE'RE A ROCK and roll band," Tak says. "Not a rock band. There's a difference. I consider a rock band to be a group like Boston or Foreigner. But rock and roll is The Ramones, The Cichlids, Creedence Clearwater Revival — a band where technical virtuosity is not substituted for integrity, energy and feeling."

"And in a rock band the members are over 30," he sneers with an obvious distaste that would send chills down an aging Abbie Hoffman's spine.

"Basically, they're just 'New Wave,'" says Gary LoConti, manager of the Agora, a Hallandale club that has championed the Cichlid brand of music in the Broward area. "Every music writer in the country is trying to define what that means,



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Cichlids Singer Debbie, 22, Strikes 'Punk' Pose
... she is band's main attraction onstage

but what it means to me is that it's not the slick, overproduced Los Angeles sound. It's going back to original rock and roll, when most bands were garage bands, '64 or '65 style bands — or even '57. Early rock and roll. It's spontaneous. It's unprogrammed."

IT'S ALSO POPULAR. "They consistently draw 500 to 700 people each Tuesday night on our New Wave nights," says LoConti. "That's better than [the club does with] national acts. It's a cult following, it's a New Wave crowd."

In a concert, it's frenetic. And Debbie is indisputably the main attraction. Rupe and Craig, still unsure of themselves perhaps, are your basic workmanlike strummers, and Tak, though relatively energetic, is certainly no Ginger Baker at the drums. But Debbie, whether singing, or playing the guitar, or both, jumps, gyrates and bops around the stage without letting up, encouraging, at the Agora at least, her legion of young devotees to approach the threshold and bop with her. The kids do not dance with each other. They don't even look at each other. Be they male or female, they face the stage; they are dancing with Debbie.

"As far as I'm concerned, Debbie's the talent," says Steve Alaimo, vice president of Hialeah's TK Records, the label that cut the Cichlid album *Be True to Your School*. "She's a terrific singer and a good little songwriter, too. She has the potential to be real good. She could make it big. Everybody who sees her is real impressed with her."

Both Tak and Debbie draw on a wry sense of humor, everyday experiences and their personal points of view in writing their songs. The humor of their *Tourists Are Pink* is self-evident in the title. One of Tak's favorites is his *Planned Obsolescence*, based on a house-sitting experience in which a friend's house literally fell apart before his very eyes:

The washer done broke/The drier makes toast/The toaster's in the backyard/Think I need a new car/ Freon for the AC/Someone's gotta free me/Think I'll buy it overseas.

And Debbie's latest, called *Sitting Ducks*, espouses a pro-nuclear point of view that is a far cry from the no-nuke philosophy of many liberal rockers:

You can run your lights/You can warm your shower/But you can't fight the Russians/With solar

power.

Both Tak and Debbie grew up in South Florida. Both now live in Wilton Manors. The Cichlids formerly lived communally. That's no longer the case.

When Debbie isn't rocking, she's usually home with her boyfriend, writing songs or totally belying the rocker image by knitting.

Tak is an addict of Parker Brothers' Risk! board game and a baseball (Boston Red Sox) fanatic. He still works another job — deejay at a strippers' club in Margate — to supplement his income.

RAISED IN A traditional Jewish household, he turned off the beaten path and knew he wanted to be a rock musician when he was 10. "It was the thing in life my father hated most of all," he explains. "When I was 16, I got thrown out of my house and playing the drums was the only way I knew how to make money."

It wasn't a traditional career. "I did backup for a stripper and other schmaltzy stuff, like in Holiday Inns," he recalls.

He first met Debbie at Fort Lauderdale High School. They were both class of '75. She graduated. Tak? "We won't go into that," he says.

Debbie, meanwhile, sang in bands all through her adolescence. Like a lot of teenagers in the early '70s, her tastes were mostly folksy, favoring Cat Stevens, Judy Collins and John Denver.

"THEN I WENT through a transitional phase," she says. "Heavy metal garbage, I call it. But the band that really brought me into rock was Queen. Then, once I heard the [punk rock] Ramones, I knew that was it."

In 1976, she dropped out of college (she was planning to be a doctor), finding it too restrictive. Two years ago she took up the guitar. When the Cichlids were born as an all-girl band, she was there. Now she is the only remaining original member.

It was early in 1979 that Bobby Tak saw his old school acquaintance Debbie singing in a bar. "I thought she was hot s---," he explains. "I bugged her and bugged her until she finally decided it would be easier to let me play with her than to get rid of me."

Allan Portman, a guitarist, and Susan Robins, who played the bass guitar, joined a short time later. They were the Cichlids who debuted in the parking lot of Musicians Exchange on June 17, 1979, and cut an album seven months later.

A YEAR LATER Portman was gone. "Philosophical differences," says Tak. "We're still good friends."

And in July, less than a dozen shows into what their manager had billed as a "national tour," Robins bowed out. She was fed up, according to Debbie and Tak, with life on the road. Without a bass player, the tour had to be aborted. The group had only made it as far as Tampa.



Drummer Bobby Tak, One of Original Cichlids
... two original members left the Dania-based group

"What it comes down to is that [life in a rock and roll band] is not a finishing school," Tak says they learned.

When they returned to Broward, Debbie and Tak decided they needed new management, too. They had a parting of the ways with longtime manager Robert Mascaro, whose last name Debbie had been using as a stage name.

Now there is no Robert or Debbie Mascaro with the Cichlids. As far as the band's future record commitments to Hialeah's TK, they won't talk. But it is rumored they were unhappy with the company's promotion efforts on the first album. Sales never did really take off. Outside of South Florida, the Cichlids remain largely unknown.

"NO COMMENT," is all Tak or Debbie will say of future record possibilities.

"I don't know where they're coming from," says TK's Alaimo. "They're still under contract. We're supposed to have a meeting with them soon. You probably know more than me, to tell you the truth."

As far as the Cichlids album not

taking off, Alaimo has this to say:

"Do you know what it is that makes a hit? It's not promotions, or billboards on Sunset Boulevard. Songs make hit records. Hit records make hit records. People still think that if you push somebody hard enough, they'll automatically become a star. But it's not like that anymore. People are too sophisticated now, too knowledgeable. It was true maybe 15 years ago, with a Fabian, but not now. It's not in the promotion, it's in the songs. People never get tired of great songs."

"If [The Cichlids] had a song like [The Knack's rocking] *My Sharona* in their album, they'd have been huge," he went on. "They didn't. It's not like the album was never put out. We got good reviews in the trades. We got enough exposure in the U.S. and Europe that if it was going to be something, it would have been. The first thing that happens in this business when something doesn't happen, is that someone wants to blame someone else for it. Their album wasn't a monster hit. But it was a good first effort. They'll be all right. You'll see..."