



Photos courtesy
Suzanne Witkin,
Neal Mirsky and
Diane Jacques

WHEN SOUTH FLORIDA ROCKED!

BY SEAN PICCOLI
POP MUSIC WRITER

Charlie Pickett hates to admit that at his age he still has heroes. But if asked, the 53-year-old West Palm Beach lawyer will name them: The Kids, Z-Cars, Slyder, Critical Mass, Tight Squeeze and the Cichlids were just some of the South Florida bands of the late 1970s that motivated him.

Long before law practice, Pickett was a singer and guitarist who stepped onto this region's music circuit with a band of his own. Charlie Pickett & the Eggs had a lean, roots-rock sound that complemented the homegrown punk, hard rock and new wave music of the bands he enjoyed. And by the early 1980s, Pickett was a celebrated part of the scene. His band and others

Remember the Cichlids?
Critical Mass? The Kids and that kid,
Johnny Depp? They're all reuniting
for a concert on Sunday.
(Hello, Johnny? Johnny?!)

played original music for large, avid crowds at clubs such as the Button, Treehouse and the Agora Ballroom.

"The thing to remember, to me, there was a time, albeit a relatively brief window, when an all-local show would bring out as many as 550 people," says Pickett. "That's pretty damned amazing."

There was enough activity to attract national attention. Critical Mass, the Cichlids and Pickett all signed record deals and went on national tours. The Kids headed to Los Angeles to seek fame, with a young bandmate named Johnny Depp in tow. But breakthroughs of the kind that turn cities into meccas — Detroit in the 1960s,

■ BANDS CONTINUES ON 2E

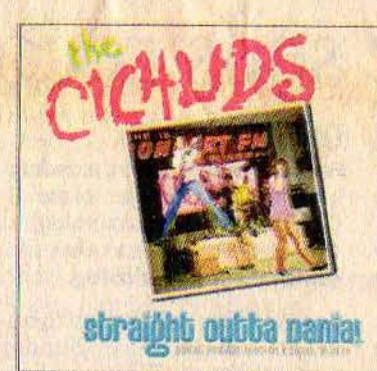
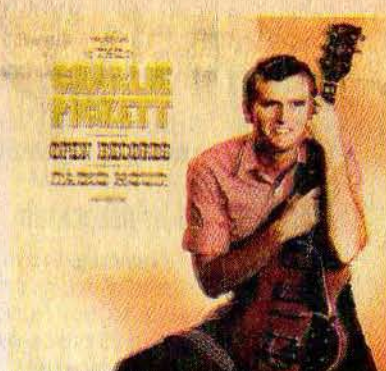
IF YOU GO

The Sheila Witkin Memorial Reunion

Concert features The Kids, Z-Cars, Slyder, Critical Mass, Tight Squeeze, Charlie Pickett and the Cichlids. There also will be a silent auction of memorabilia. Proceeds benefit Sheila Witkin Foundation and the Dan Marino Foundation.
Time: 4 p.m. Sunday at Club Cinema, 3251 N. Federal Hwy., Pompano Beach.

Tickets: \$25 and \$50 at Ticketmaster (561-966-3309, 954-523-3309, 305-358-5885) and the box office.

Info: 954-785-5224 or myspace.com/sheilawitkinmemorial.



Web site sells recordings by many South Florida bands

BANDS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1E

Seattle in the 1990s — didn't happen. After a brief romance, the music industry moved on. Most of the bands broke up. South Florida became the place often criticized today for its spotty support of local music.

Everyone including Pickett has thoughts on why. But this weekend, at least, Pickett and his heroes can set aside that conversation. They'll be too engaged reliving the moment on-stage. The occasion is a show on Sunday at Club Cinema in Pompano Beach featuring Pickett and six more South Florida acts from the '70s and '80s. The Sheila Witkin Memorial Reunion Concert, named for a band manager and booking agent who nurtured the scene in those days, will benefit charities and



Witkin

bring out some bands that haven't played in more than 25 years.

It is also expected to draw visitors from across the country, mainly former South Floridians who remember the period as one of great fun and creativity.

THE TIME AND THE PLACE

"It was just the perfect storm: It was the time, the place, the clubs, the radio station and the promoters, and people like Sheila Witkin who were out there really providing support, financial and emotional, for the bands," says Neal Mirsky, a radio executive in Massachusetts who worked at a South Florida rock station, WSHE-FM (103.5), that played local music in the early 1980s.

"It was the most special local music scene I've ever experienced, and I've been doing this for 30 years," Mirsky says.

He won't be the only returning ex-local. Bruce Witkin, who owns a small record label in

ONLINE

For more on the concert, including interviews with members of the Cichlids, visit Sean Piccoli's blog, The Screech of Brakes, at sun-sentinel.com/musicblog.

Los Angeles, will be performing at Club Cinema on Sunday with other founding members of his band from back in the day, The Kids. The Los Angeles-based Witkin is the son of Sheila Witkin and is organizing the benefit in honor of his mother, who died in April.

"She was a pretty integral part of the scene," says Witkin — an opinion seconded by others who knew her. "She was everybody's Jewish mother," says Mirsky.

But her dedication alone wasn't enough to put South Florida rock on the national map. With a few exceptions, "Miami was pretty much ignored by the music industry," Witkin says. The general dismissal of South Florida as a retirement community and vacation spot drove The Kids to California. The band didn't fare much better out West, however. The Kids were pop and new-wave, and by the mid-1980s glam-metal bands sporting big hair, spandex and pointy guitars ruled the Sunset Strip.

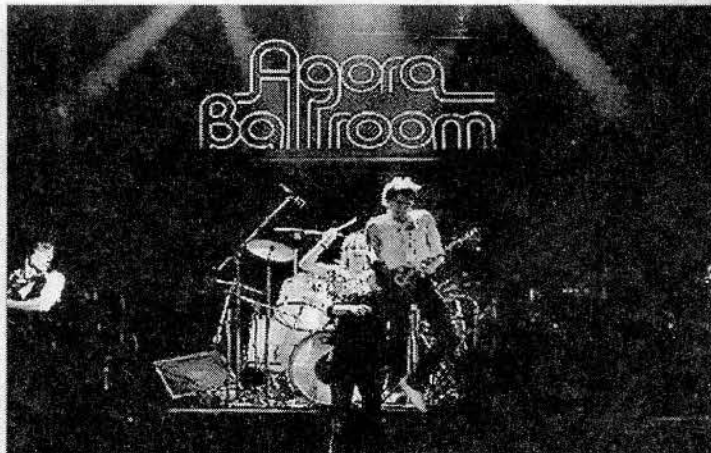
Witkin remembers seeing a video by one such band, Quiet Riot, playing *Cum on Feel the Noise* on MTV, and feeling his moment had passed. "I had this sick feeling in my stomach that we were about a year behind," he says.

The Kids drifted apart. Witkin stayed in Los Angeles and carved out a career as a musician, producer and founder of an independent label, Unison Music. His old bandmate Depp went on to screen stardom. Witkin says Depp's acting commitments are likely to prevent him from playing the reunion.

"He'd like to," says Witkin, "but we're not sure, and we're preparing for him not to."

A CONCERT FILM

Cameras will be rolling, however, even without Depp onstage. Diane Jacques, a South Florida-based movie



HEROES: Slyder, performing at the old Agora Ballroom in Hallandale, will play Club Cinema on Sunday. Photo courtesy Suzanne Witkin

producer, is planning to film the concert for a documentary about the South Florida music scene of the '70s and '80s — a time that she says was "magical" and one of the happiest of her life.

She remembers many bands, numerous clubs that made a home for just about every style of music, and at least one important national connection: Criteria, the legendary Miami recording studio that often hosted sessions by major rock acts and routinely brought famous musicians into contact with awestruck locals. The latter sometimes found themselves sharing club stages with visiting stars in impromptu jam sessions.

As a documentarian, Jacques is also interested in why the scene ended "abruptly," as she puts it. She believes the 1984 U.S. law raising the legal drinking age to 21 from 18 had an impact. The change barred a young, music-oriented constituency from the clubs. (In later years, local governments would allow teens inside clubs for concerts provided they were not served alcohol.) But she adds, "You'll hear a lot of different opinions."

Drug abuse was an issue. Some musicians died of overdoses or saw their creative energies sapped by addictions. Changing tastes in music also took momentum from South Florida's punk and new-wave scene. Pickett believes the re-

gion had too little music-industry infrastructure — not enough labels, managers, agents or music publishing

MANY RELOCATED

firms with the expertise and ability to break South Florida acts nationally.

The migration of talent to other, more promising cities was another factor. "Not a lot of bands came out of Florida without moving," says Michael Chatham, who played in South Florida bands before he relocated to New York City. But Chatham, now an art director at a daily newspaper, knows that South Florida bands didn't fall completely out of view. Chatham's evidence is the interest in a Web site he runs: the Pete Moss Memorial All Night Record Shoppe, named for a late friend of his who also was a musician. The site sells recordings by many South Florida bands and gives an affectionate account of their

histories. Chatham has sold CDs of Pickett, the Cichlids and other South Florida groups of the era — the Eat, the Reactions, the DT Martyrs — to buyers as far afield as Japan, Germany, England and Canada.

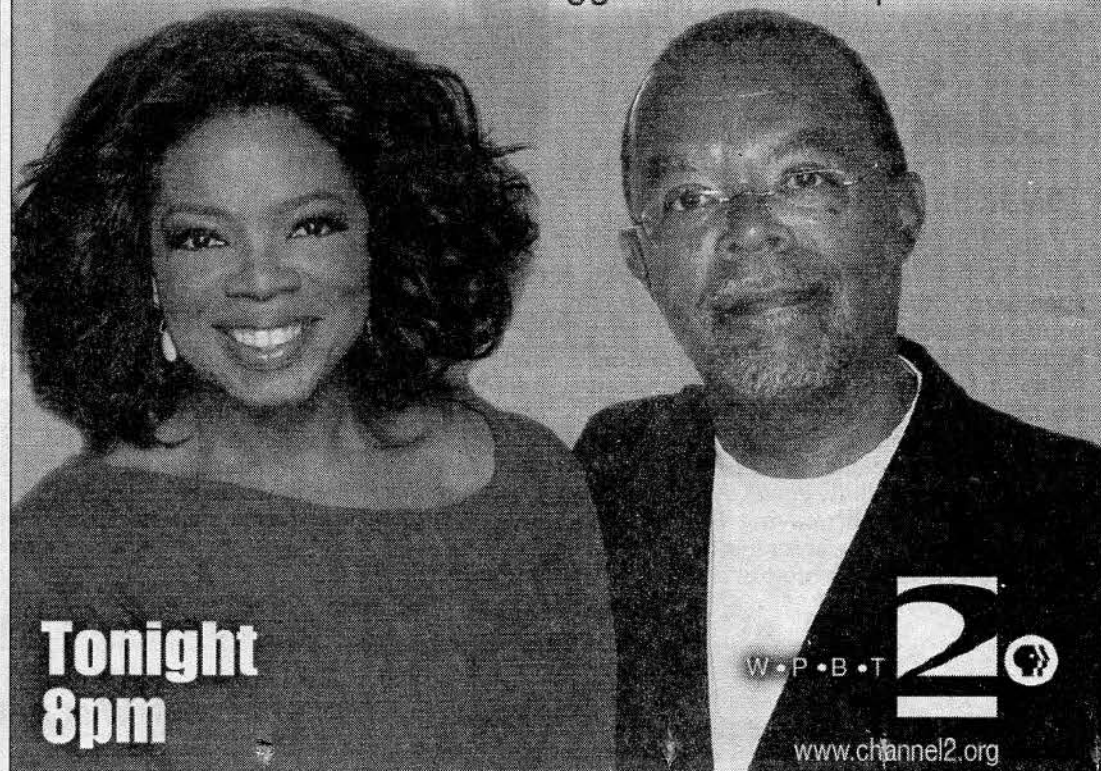
Chatham, who plans to attend Sunday's concert, says that some of those groups were making exceptional, innovative music without earning much more than cultish admiration for their efforts. As one example, he says, "There's nothing about the Eat that isn't just as valid as Nirvana was in terms of the punk ethos and incorporating Beatles hooks. What's the difference? Timing."

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