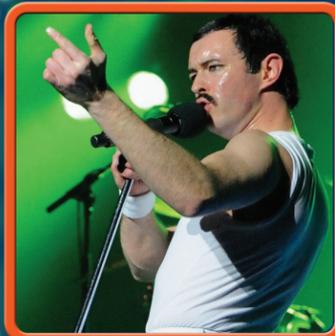




MATCH GAME

Tribute acts are making fans' dreams come true with faithful reproductions of music's most beloved artists

By Bill DeMain



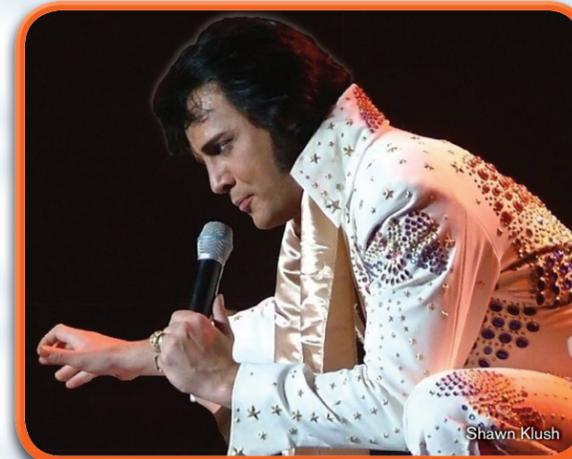
It's a Saturday night in Missoula, Mont., and Freddie Mercury is on stage in all his glory. Strutting and twirling his mic stand, he punches the air and leads the packed house of 1,200 at the University Theater in a singalong of "Another One Bites the Dust." It's a far cry from the days when Mercury's band, the mighty Queen, was playing stadiums for hundreds of thousands—but then, the real Freddie Mercury hasn't been with us since 1991.

This rock reincarnation is made possible by Gary Mullen and the Works—just one of the thousands of tribute acts around the world carrying the torch for classic bands that have broken up or become difficult to see live. "People have fantasies and memories about their favorite bands," says Mullen, "and they want them to go on." It's a desire that has made tribute bands big business, one of the few surefire moneymakers in the current music industry slump. From bars to Broadway, cruise ships to casinos, nostalgia-crazed fans are suspending disbelief to reminisce with fake Frank Sinatras, ersatz Elton Johns and counterfeit Kisses.

The big bang of tribute acts occurred in 1977, when the

smash Beatles soundalike musical Beatlemania opened on Broadway. When Elvis Presley died the same year, pretenders were swiveling their hips from Memphis to Manila before tears could dry on fans' cheeks. By the late 1980s a tide of ABBA impersonators began, spurred by the success of tribute act Björn Again. Today the tributes go beyond icons to include almost any well-known act you can name, from Huey Lewis & the News to Barry White to Blink 182.

So why would a musician put his own originality on hold to impersonate another? One good reason is a steady paycheck: Depending on the act and the venue, performers can rake in from \$2,000 to \$20,000 a night. Tribute bands also get to tap into the adulation felt by their idols. And over the last few years a few singers have actually been called up to the big leagues—Journey, Yes and Judas Priest have all recruited replacement frontmen from tribute bands. But the musicians are motivated above all else by a love for the music. "I'm a fan first and foremost," Mullen says. "This music will never die." It's our pleasure to introduce you to a few of the world's foremost tribute acts.



Shawn Klush



Tramps Like Us

FIT FOR A KING

"When I was a little kid, I'd see Elvis impersonators and go, 'They're doing it wrong,'" says Shawn Klush. "I couldn't articulate why, but I just knew it." While no one took a pint-sized Presley fan's critique seriously, Klush trusted his affinity for the King of Rock 'n' Roll. In his teens he began developing an impersonation of his own. "It came naturally to me," says the Pittston, Penn., native. "I was a fan. I knew all the music, watched the movies, read the books."

In a crowded field—there are currently more than 3,000 Elvis impersonators working in the U.S. alone—he has ascended to the throne, winning such awards as Grand Champion of the World Elvis Tribute Artist Competition and World's Greatest Elvis (as voted by 6.5 million BBC television viewers).

While his high-energy show has the requisite white jumpsuits and karate moves, it's Klush's voice and charisma that have connected with audiences both at home and in far-off countries where Elvis himself never got to perform. "I play in front of 9,000 people in Australia and they lose their minds, and sometimes I feel guilty," he says. "Because it's supposed to be that guy and it's not. So I remind everybody why they're there. This isn't about me, it's about him. That keeps me grounded."

BORN TO RERUN

Last year, Bruce Springsteen tribute act Tramps Like Us recreated the Boss' 1978 show at the Capitol Theatre in Passaic, N.J., a concert many fans regard as the single greatest live performance of his career. "I remember hearing that show broadcast live on the radio when I was a kid," says Tramps frontman Mark Salore. "It changed my life." Springsteen's classic shows changed other people's lives too, and that's the reason Salore believes his band has found a massive following eager to recapture Springsteen's glory days. "Bruce's shows are still great, but they're a lot more scripted now," Salore says. "Back then he was still hungry, and the shows were more magical."

Since forming in the early '90s, Tramps have made it their mission to connect with that magic. "I don't try to imitate Bruce," Salore says. "But when you sing a song like 'Born to Run,' it demands a certain kind of passion and commitment, and the sound just happens organically." The group's spirited performances have helped them earn onstage cameos from Springsteen sidemen Steven Van Zandt, Clarence Clemons and Vini "Mad Dog" Lopez. The band will next attempt to recreate Springsteen's marathon 38-song, four-and-a-half-hour 1980 New Year's Eve concert in Uniondale, N.Y. "We're in training for it," Salore says with a laugh.

ROCKET MAN

In the tribute-act game, appearances can be vital to success. "I've tested the show without the outlandish costumes and there is nowhere near the same response," says Elton John tribute artist Joel Mason. "Audiences really love to see that image. It sparks the memories of that golden period in the '70s when he looked like a superhero."

As a young pianist and singer, Mason was so taken with John that he spent long hours learning his songs note for note. Coincidentally, he also bore a striking physical resemblance to his idol. "After years of playing in bar bands and hearing people ask me, 'Do you do any more Elton?' I decided to change my whole direction," he says. Following the yellow brick road wasn't easy at first. "It took me out of my comfort zone," Mason says. "But I wanted it so bad that I stuck with it."

Then there were the costumes. "I invested thousands in stage outfits replicated by a designer, and I even own a few pairs of glasses that belonged to Elton," Mason says. "The costumes are an icebreaker. They give the audience an excuse to giggle at the silliness of it all, and open the door so we can interact." That



Joel Mason

interaction has extended to John himself. "I shook hands with him backstage at one of his shows," Mason says. "He did a double take."

LIVING LOVING MAIDENS

"People don't expect an all-girl band to deliver the swagger and the power and the no-holds-barred sexual thrust of Led Zeppelin," says guitarist Steph Paynes. Therein lies the allure of the tribute world's most compelling gender-switched band. Formed in the late '90s in New York City after Paynes became obsessed with Led Zeppelin's self-titled 1990 box set, the quartet loves confounding the expectations of male rock fans around the world. "Guys could admire the male energy and power of Zeppelin,



Lez Zeppelin

but there was something undeniably female there too," Paynes says. "So we as women are taking on the male aspects, as opposed to them taking on the female aspects—how perfect is that?"

It doesn't hurt that Paynes and company are also top-notch musicians. From the full-on stomp of "Kashmir" to the dynamic gearshifts of "The Song Remains the Same" and "Stairway to Heaven," they capture the freewheeling spirit of mid-'70s Zep. "It's like being a classical musician, taking a great canon of work and interpreting it," says Paynes. "When I get out there, I'm gone in another zone. I might as well be Jimmy Page, because I'm sure that's what it was like for him." Last year, the band recorded its own full-length studio recreation of Led Zeppelin's eponymous debut album with the real group's sometime engineer, Eddie Kramer, behind the board.

DRESSED TO KILL

Paul Mueller—who plays Gene Simmons, Kiss' fire-breathing "Demon" in the tribute



Kissmania

act Kissmania—remembers well the day he first tried to emulate his hero's flame-on routine. "I'd studied videos of Gene and researched different fuels, and there I was with my stomach in knots, thinking, 'One screw-up and my life could be seriously altered,'" he recalls. "My wife said, 'You stand in the pool to do that.' But I did it, and since then, I've done it thousands of times."

Of course, being in a Kiss tribute band requires more than the ability to spew fire from your mouth. There's the three-hour process of putting on the band's familiar makeup and outlandish costumes. There's also a complex stage set that includes flash pots, walls of amplifiers and a massive illuminated sign hung over the drum riser. Mueller jokes he's glad the band can afford a few roadies. "Once you're in 7-inch heels, you don't want to get up there and move amps around," he says.

All this dedication to detail serves the real mission: delivering spot-on versions of rock classics like "Black Diamond" and "Hotter Than Hell." "You get on stage, and it's like you're instant rock stars," Mueller says. "You're in front of thousands of people screaming to see Kiss, and we're giving it to them."

RING-A-DING RINGERS

Barbra Streisand and Frank Sinatra may have recorded a duet in 1993, but they never appeared on stage together—until now. "Audiences love the 'What if?' aspect of it," says Sebastian Anzaldo, who recreates the late Chairman of the Board's smooth baritone vocals on stage with Streisand-alike



Sharon Owens and Sebastian Anzaldo

vocal partner Sharon Owens in their duo show. "We try to help audiences get lost in the illusion of it all," says Owens. "And in character, we imagine the kind of playful repartee they might've had together."

Anzaldo, 53, says he attempts to channel Sinatra during his middle period as a Las Vegas staple. "When you get down to it, it's an acting job," he says. "I try to capture the spirit of Frank at that age." Owens admits that she came to Streisand reluctantly. "I was not a fan at first," she says. "But back when I was doing theater in New York, people used to tell me I looked and sounded like her." On the advice of a drag-queen friend, she embraced her inner Babs and moved to Vegas. "I never imagined I would be an impersonator," Owens says.

"And I'd like to get back to being Sharon someday. But it sure is nice that the phone is ringing—I went from a starving actress to being completely in demand."

SOUND AND VISION

A few years ago, rock legend David Bowie appeared in a TV commercial for Vittel bottled water in which he found himself trapped in



David Brighton

a house filled with his alter egos, from Ziggy Stardust to the Thin White Duke. Rather than don the elaborate makeup and costumes himself, Bowie handed the job to trusted note-perfect tribute performer David Brighton—including the singing. "It takes an enormous amount of time and study to do this," Brighton says. "Especially since Bowie has training in dance, acting and mime. I was just a rock guitarist who knew how to move a bit."

Brighton is no stranger to the match game: Before portraying Bowie, he played George Harrison in several touring companies of Beatlemania. But the many incarnations of Bowie have offered his favorite challenge. "It's very liberating," he says. "When you're in disguise, you feel a freedom to do things you might not ordinarily do."

With Brighton carrying on the glam-rock tradition that Bowie has long since abandoned, fans are able to indulge in some blissful time travel. "You look out in the audience and see glazed eyes and dreamy looks, and you realize that they're at some Bowie show in their memory," Brighton says. "That's my favorite part of the gig."

HE WILL ROCK YOU

If Gary Mullen's story were a movie, you wouldn't believe it. Imagine: Computer salesman and father of three goes out with pals on weekends and sings Queen tunes at a local karaoke bar. He battles cancer, beats it—and then, armed with a new go-for-broke approach to life, takes his Freddie Mercury impression on a U.K. TV soundalike contest, *Stars in Their Eyes*. His performance receives more than a million call-in votes, the most

THE FAB FIVE

There are plenty of Beatles tribute bands out there—and these are a few of the best.



Rain

RAIN

Rain first made its name in the early 1980s, attracting veterans of the Broadway show Beatlemania into its ranks. Its lavish multimedia production now features '60s-era video montages, Sgt. Pepper costumes and rousing takes on everything from "She Loves You" to "Get Back."

1964: THE TRIBUTE

"What's better than looking out in an audience and seeing three generations of families, all singing and having fun?" asks Mark Benson, who plays John Lennon in this band that concentrates on the head-bobbing euphoria of early Beatles shows.

BOOTLEG BEATLES

When legendary Beatles producer George Martin calls your tribute band "terrific,"

you've received a blessing from on high. This U.K.-based quartet has been nailing every Beatlesque detail, from the Vox amps to their Cuban-heeled boots, for three decades.

FAB FAUX

They don't dress like the Beatles, but this New York City quintet led by talk-show band regulars Will Lee (from *Late Show With David Letterman*) and Jimmy Vivino (of the *Conan* house band) delivers note-perfect versions of Fab Four favorites.

BEATALICA

With songs like "Sgt. Hetfield's Motorbreath Pub Band," "Masterful Mystery Tour" and "Blackened the U.S.S.R.," this mash-up band somehow makes the bizarro collision of the Beatles and Metallica sound like a natural fit.

ever for the series. Tribute-group fame and fortune follow. "I'd been in bands and had dreams of being a rock star," the Glasgow native says, "but I put them aside to settle down, marry and have kids. Suddenly, this door opened. Scary as it was, I took the leap into the unknown."



Gary Mullen

Leaping around on stages from London to Las Vegas in his fake mustache and bolero jacket, Mullen moves like Freddie. But when he unleashes his voice, the impersonation transforms into complete Mercurial possession. "It just comes out the way it comes out," Mullen says with a chuckle. "I think the underwear helps me get the high notes!"

Mullen's tribute is so dead-on that he recently dubbed the late singer's voice for a Japanese TV ad that uses images of the actual Mercury. His highest compliment arrived in the form of a note from Mercury's mother thanking him for keeping her son's memory alive. "Can't top that," he says.

SUPER TROUPERS

Rod Stephen is quick to point out that Björn Again is not a straightforward tribute band. "We are a satirical parody of ABBA," he explains. "A tribute band tries to emulate every chord, every look, every detail. Certainly there are aspects of that in Björn Again, but we also take the mickey out of ABBA by poking fun at their clothes and their offstage relationships."

Since 1988, Australian-born Stephen's winning formula of sugary pop, satin robes and faux Swedish accents has helped Björn Again gross over \$55 million from more than 3,500 performances in 50 countries across the globe. In fact, there are four separate Björn Again troupes to handle demand. More important to Stephen, it's earned him the endorsement of ABBA themselves. "When we first ran the idea by [ABBA founders] Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, what

they really liked was that we were having a little dig at them," Stephen says. "We won their trust, and when they released the hits collection *ABBA Gold*, they invited us to Sweden to tour and promote the album for them. That was huge."

The band has other high-profile fans. "Last year Metallica invited us to play at a big heavy-metal festival," Stephen says with a laugh. "We were a little worried about how we'd go over. At first there was disbelief in the audience, and then people saying, 'Yeah, this is all right.'" **M**



Björn Again

DEAD RINGERS

Some tribute singers get called up to the big leagues



Journey: Neal Schon, Ross Valory, Arnel Pineda, Deen Castronovo, Jonathan Cain

JOURNEY

When Arnel Pineda got an email from Journey guitarist Neal Schon in 2007 inviting him to audition for the group, the Filipino singer thought he was the victim of a hoax. But Schon had seen YouTube videos of Pineda and was stunned by his vocal resemblance to former Journey frontman Steve Perry. Pineda has been touring and recording with the band ever since. "It's surreal, like some kind of miracle," he says.

YES

One weekend in late 2008, Benoit David was singing for his Montreal-based Yes tribute band Close to the Edge—and a month later he was rehearsing for a world tour with the real members of Yes. Bass player Chris Squire was tipped off to David's vocal talents and tapped him as a substitute for ailing singer Jon Anderson. "I can't replace Jon," says David, who will be touring with Yes this spring. "I just do my best."

JUDAS PRIEST

When Tim Owens was 18, his bedroom walls were plastered with pictures of Judas Priest. Ten years later, he was in pictures of Judas Priest. The former frontman of the Akron-based tribute band British Steel replaced Priest singer Rob Halford in 1996. He recorded two albums with the group before Halford replaced his replacement by returning to the fold in 2003. Owens now fronts the metal act Charred Walls of the Damned.

BOOTSY COLLINS | AVRIL LAVIGNE | STEVE EARLE | NIKKI SIXX



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ALISON KRAUSS
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