

In the Spotlight.....

TOM LOWRY



by Andrew Kehe

Considering Tom Lowry's extensive resume of talents, interests, commitments and accomplishments, here's a question he probably doesn't hear too often.

"Hey, why don't you get off your butt and do something?"

Between making signs, building furniture, camping, scuba diving, traveling, remodeling, building modal railroad sets, and riding his bike as many as 70 miles a day, there's not a lot of time left in the day for the "retired," 66-year-old native of the Lancaster area.

Except maybe for playing the blues.

"Obviously, I have a lot of hobbies," says Lowry, who has counted among them the weekly Thursday Jam at Champions in Highspire. "I hear people say, 'I don't know what I'm going to do in retirement,' and I tell them 'really?'"

"Sometimes it gets to the point where it's almost stressful."

You wouldn't know it by his calm demeanor and skillful delivery of his honky-tonk, boogie woogie style of keyboard playing that he says "lends itself to the blues really well." If you've lived around Lancaster anytime over the last five decades or have been a regular at the jam since 2009, you'd concur.

Influenced and encouraged by his mom, dad and dozens of performers from a variety of genres, Lowry's been singing, playing keys, harmonica, banjo, rhythm guitar and even some trombone since joining his first band, Bleak City Museum, during the Johnson Administration.

After graduation from Hempfield High and a brief stint doing the "normal" thing of going to college at Penn State, came significant runs with St. Elmo's fire, Rain Before Daybreak, Big Red, The Speedboys, the All Night Blues Band, Susie's Bar & Grill, The Flyboys, Blue Light Special, and Wake Up Call – all popular Lancaster area bands.

Take a breath here.

He cut an album with St. Elmo's Fire (later called Wholly Bear). The Speedboys, with whom Tom was known as Bobby Lowry (Speedboys' novelty was everyone in band's name was Bobby), garnered some national attention over a seven-year span (1978-1985), including favorable reviews in Rolling Stone and The Village Voice. The band released two self-produced albums, and Lowry played on two additional albums after 1985 featuring a mix of original and new band members.

For their accumulative work, Lowry and The Speedboys were inducted into the Lancaster Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame last January.

Today, Lowry performs with Blues On The Loose, which will play on June 9 in the Dauphin County Music and Wine Festival at Fort Hunter.

All paths lead back to the Thursday night jam, which he knew existed but knew little about until trying it out at the 40 & 8 Club the night before he retired in 2010 from his 34-year career with RCA and later Bosch.

"I wasn't blown away, but I was expecting it to be fun and to be good and it was good," Lowry said. "I went home feeling good about it. I thought it was cool. I met a lot of really nice people.

"The most surprising thing about it was how they run the jam. Everything down this way is open mic – house band and you come up one at a time. I thought this was a cool way to do it and they had enough good players to do it."

There was a feeling among jam regulars right away that something special had just walked through their door.

“I remember thinking, ‘Oh my God, listen to this guy,’” said Rocky Rothrock, who first heard Lowry play when the jam moved briefly to the Liquid 491 Club. “He’s obviously one of the best keyboard players I’ve ever worked with. And I like to work with him because he doesn’t really have an ego, he’s not trying to show off up there. He just wants to go up there and play and work with people.

“He’s as good as it gets.”

Lowry’s reputation as a skillful keyboard player and all around versatile performer has spread to Benny Turner, brother of the late, iconic bluesman Freddie King. Turner invited Lowry to join his band for a show in November in Charlotte, N.C., and will again play with Turner on April 7.

The opportunity to play with Turner provides Lowry with a chance to take his playing to a new level, he said, and serves as somewhat of a litmus test as to where he can take his playing from this point forward.

“It was an honor to play with him,” Lowry said. “It was exciting, he’s a well-known name in the business. He presents somewhat of a style change – basically it’s the same things, but Benny’s a bass player and he likes to play lead bass and he’s quite a showman.”

So now, Lowry’s talents are being put on display with big names in the genre. It shouldn’t surprise anyone, least of all Lowry, even though his checked ego would never let him express it.

But many decades ago, he knew he had what it takes to at least partially support himself playing music.

“I guess maybe in bands while I was in high school I knew,” he said. “In high school I got the bug and realized how much fun it was. I felt like I was pretty good, but I probably sucked.”

Most would say his first inclination was spot on.

(Kathy Gregoire helped research this story)