Entertainment

White Lightnin's rock & roll rumbles to the top

Midnight Ramblings
STEVE KRAUSE

LYNN — The accolades are streaming in these days for White Lightnin'.

It may be the Lynn area's hottest band at the moment — thanks to a victory in last week's North Shore Rock & Roll Rumble at Grovers in Beverly.

The trophy the group received is merely symbolic of their excellence *today*. It doesn't begin to tell the story of how a group of rag-tag West Lynners started from scratch and kept working until they made people stand up and take notice.

The core of the group comes from Pine Hill — only one of the six members lives elsewhere — and all remember starting up in 1979 as teens with no musical experience.

"Actually, for about a year, all we knew how to play was 'Smoke on the Water,' " says lead singer Emmet Corcoran of 24 Forest Hill Ave. "To this day, there are a group of songs we'll *never* play. That's one of them. 'American Woman,' 'Stairway to Heaven,' and 'Freebird' are the others."

The group's first name was Revelation, and its first real gig was a Sacred Heart CYO dance. A year later, Classical High put on its "Classical Night Live" show and the fellows did a "Blues Brothers" act with a few horn players from the school band. They liked it so much they decided to keep the brass. By that time, the name Revelation was out and the band members settled on White Lightnin'.

Three of the four kids in the horn section left the band, leaving only sax player Joe Geary, who admits "when I first started out I was terrible. I'm really thankful to the guys for staying with me."

A Classical senior banquet filled in the last missing link for the group. That's when Corcoran — heretofore a glorified roadie — took to the mike and sang. It was so impromptu that Alan Rheault had to be sent home to pick up his portable keyboard.

The present lineup includes: Tony Gallo, bass, backup vocals; Rheault, keyboards; Greg Gallo, guitar; Corcoran; Glen Ahearn, guitar; Geary; Brian Fay, drums; roadie Kevin Wessell; and sound engineer Warren Hinds.

And they've come a long way from CYO dances. White Lightnin' will be the house band this year at The Bayside in Nahant, and their credits include two shows at Boston's Channel on New Music Nights and an opening gig for David Johansen at the Salem Theatre.

And, most importantly, the band was also judged as the best local band in last year's Midnight Ramblings readers' poll.

It hasn't been all that easy, though. They started out penniless, and most of the mone made from shows goes back into equipment. And, concessions must be made.

Corcoran, for instance, enrolled as a theater major at Salem State but found the rigors of rock & roll kept him from being in any plays.

"I had to switch," he said. "So much of majoring in theater involves doing stuff outside the classroom. I just couldn't do it."

So he switched his major to business — putting him in line with the rest of the band's future merchants.

"Well, I was the *only* one of the group *not* majoring in business, and I was the one handling bookings...," he says with a puckish grin.

Like most mid-to-late '70s teens, the band has no use for the disco-inspired music of today. You could call them anti-Top 40, and one of the band members expressed his horror that Peter Wolf actually did a WHTT commercial.

"I want to emphasize one thing. We're just regular guys, really. No spandex pants, no glitter, no fog machines, no nuthin," says Geary emphatically, a sentiment echoed strongly by the other band members.

They eschew disco in their shows, darn near boycott heavy metal, and concentrate on the type of rock & roll that could be best called blue collar — Springsteen, J. Geils, Bob Seger, a few Doors tunes. Beer-drinking music.

Their stage act includes about one-third original, and the band would dearly love to put some effort into that category.

"Part of winning the contest was some free recording time," said Corcoran, so the band will be working on some of their original tunes. However, the club scene demands recognizable, danceable covers more than it does originals, so the band has to act accordingly.

"We sneak them in there, though," says Corcoran. "Lots of times, people will come up and compliment us on them, without even knowing we wrote them."

Since covers can be a necessary evil on the club scene, White Lightnin' takes pains to inject their own personalities into them. For example, during the long, slogan-filled interlude in the Doors' "Roadhouse Blues," Corcoran and the band break into Van Morrison's "Gloria" — itself lasciviously covered on the Doors' "Alive She Cried" album.

Like most young rock & roll acts, they're enthusiastic about their music. Unlike a lot of young rock & roll acts, the enthusiasm is justified. Their original numbers are tainted with the rhythm and blues influences that helped make rock & roll great in the mid-to-late 1960s — and has very little of the sheen that seems to pervade today's product. For a bunch of guys who could barely collectively play a G-chord when they were 14, they're pretty adroit musicians today. Corcoran comes from a musical family (I tried to go through a whole article without mentioning this, but couldn't) and seems to have inherited his share of the talent (brothers John and Brian are also entertainers).

White Lightnin', besides being a Burt Reynolds movie, is a potent kind of southern moonshine. The group lives up to its name. Its rock & roll is potent, and bound to make you take notice.

Members of White Lightnin' posing at Lynn's railroad station. From left are Brian Fay, Alan Rheault, Glen Ahearn, Emmet Corcoran, Joe Geary, Tony and Greg Gallo. Geary proudly notes that he's the only member of the band not from Pine Hill.

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