

Road tripping with the Sonics



PHOTOS BY ERNEST JASMIN

STILL ROCKIN'. Tacoma rock legends, the Sonics, played to an ecstatic crowd last week in Portland.

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The Sonics are Tacoma's enigmatic garage-rock heroes. They infamously disappeared for four decades, influencing big shots like the Hives and the Black Keys in their absence, not to mention an army of lesser known garage bands that emulate their raw sound in beer-soaked taverns around the globe.

Our local legends roared back to life at New York's Cavestomp Festival in 2007; and during subsequent tour stops around these parts — in Tacoma, Seattle and Olympia — they have shown they are still a force to be reckoned with.

Tacoma Weekly was not about to miss the Feb. 15 show in Portland, where a rowdy crowd soaked up "The Witch," "Cinderella" and other face-melting jams they kicked out at the Hawthorne Theatre. It could be another two years before they are back onstage in the South Sound. And here is some of what we saw and learned down in the PDX.

HOW THE SONICS JOINED THE BRITISH INVASION (KIND OF)

The Sonics honed their chops locally at Tacoma Armory and Red Carpet Inn, a defunct rock hot spot that used to be on South Tacoma Way. But singer/keyboard player Jerry Roslie recalled their first big

show being in Portland, an opening slot for the Beach Boys at Memorial Coliseum.

But, thanks to Roslie, no one who attended that show likely remembers them as being from just up the road. "We pulled a trick on them," he said. "They kept yelling, 'Where are you from?' I got a bug up my keyster and I said" — in a prim British accent — "'On behalf of the band and myself I'd like to thank you for coming out tonight.' And they go, 'Aaaaaaaahhhhhh!! They're from England!' They just went nuts."

THE NEW KID

Northwest rock vet Ricky Lynn Johnson is out on drums. Los Angeles-based drummer Dusty Watson — a guy who has played with Dick Dale, Lita Ford and the Queers, among others — made his Sonics debut earlier this month at Seattle's Showbox at the Market.

Watson said he first met the Sonics in Italy two years ago when he was out with surf-rock band, Slacktone. They kept in touch, and he was asked to join the band late last year.

Backstage in Portland, Watson expressed admiration for Bob Bennett, the band's iconic drummer from the 1960s. Bennett lives in Hawaii and has only appeared at one of the post-comeback shows, at Seattle's Paramount Theatre on Halloween 2008.

"I always just loved the way Bob

attacked a snare drum," Watson said. "What an honor to be asked to hook up with these guys and play with them. It's crazy. I'm really excited about it. I'm really having a good time."

A DOCUMENTARY IN THE WORKS

Local filmmakers Randy Sparks and Justin Peterson have had video crews shooting all of the Sonics' Northwest performances since 2008. Little of that footage has surfaced so far. But a lot of it could wind up in a documentary that Band Manager Buck Ormsby said has started production in Los Angeles.

"They're gonna use some of the footage we already shot, and they're interviewing a bunch of people that are fans of the Sonics — other musicians," he said. "It's about time. They should be known all over — their history, where they came from and who they are."

Little of the locally shot footage has surfaced. But some has appeared in Sparks' short documentary "Tacoma's Rock N' Roll Legends," which he said may be aired by Click! Network later this year.

Sparks is also looking for rare 1960s footage of the Sonics, the Ventures, the Wailers and other Northwest garage bands for a longer version of the film. Anyone with leads can contact him by e-mail at randysparks@mindspring.com.

