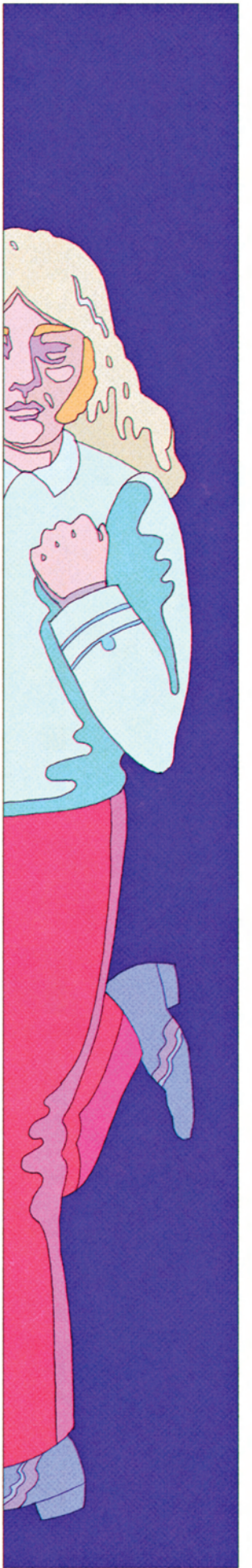
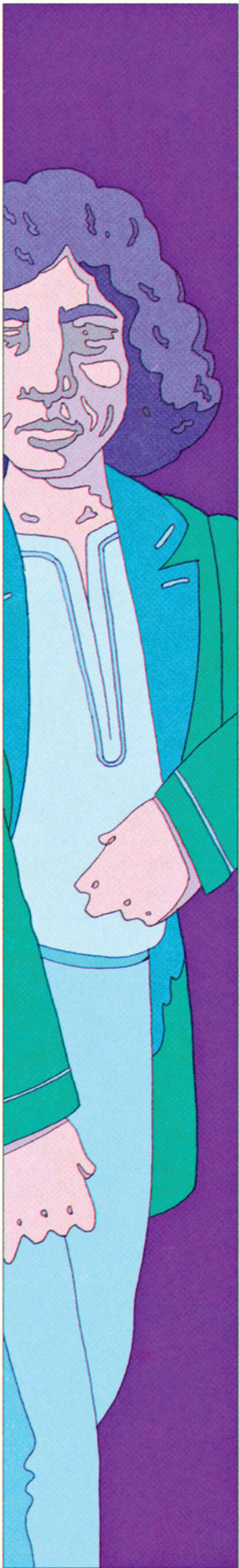
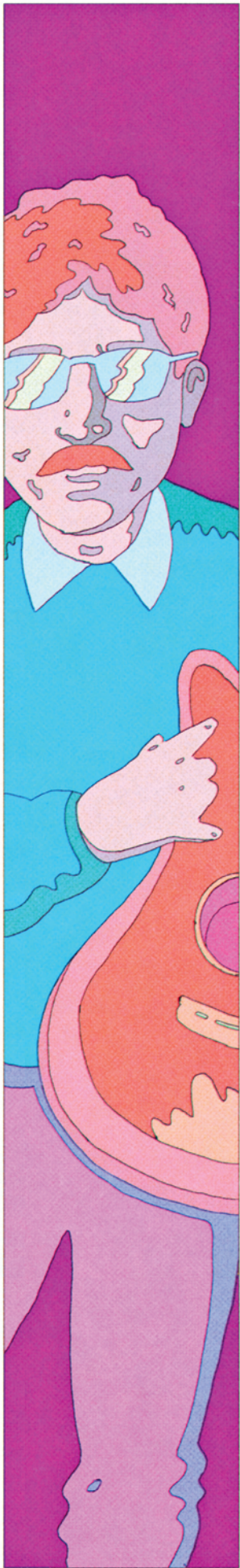
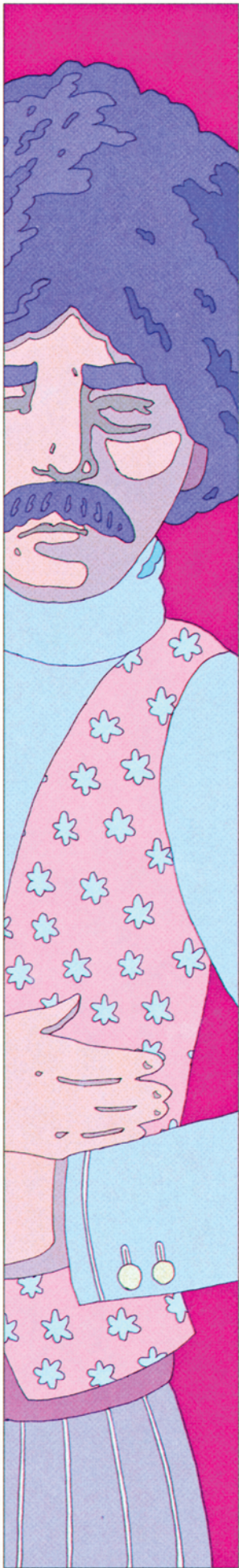
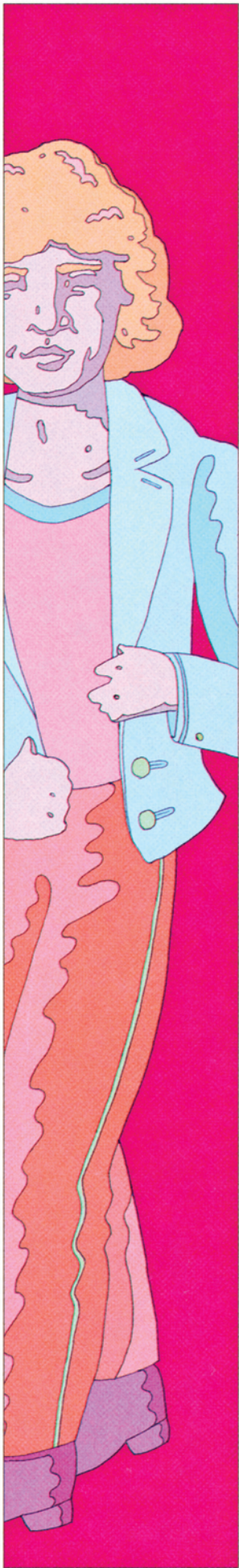




Four decades ago, a Penn-dominated rock band was poised to take the pop-music world by storm. What happened? **By Geoff Ginsberg**



It's early 1970 in Old City, Philadelphia.

From deep in the recesses of a wholesale clothing store, a soulful, pulsating beat, topped off with a thick layer of slide guitar, drifts out to the street. In a small corner of the back room, five young musicians are locking in on a song that, truth be told, is practically writing itself. Though they're still getting to know each other, their unique chemistry has been apparent since the moment they turned on the amps and played the first guitar riff.

The band consists of a chain-smoking singer with a voice like honey; a driven, chick-magnet lead guitarist; a brilliant keyboard player with 20/20 musical vision; a fun-loving drummer with an uncanny sense of what sounds good and what doesn't; and a laid-back but musically adventurous bass player. The first four are Penn students, decked out in the era's ponytails, cascading curls, suede boots, wide-brimmed hats, beads, and bell bottoms. The fifth, with his short hair, button-down shirt, and khakis, looks like he just stepped out of *Happy Days*.

Although the band has only recently been formed, the musical connection is deep—magical, even. At this point, their audience consists only of mice and cockroaches, but to a man, they know that this has the potential to be something big. And they're right: Soon they will be playing the best venues in town and recording in world-class studios with top engineers.

And then they will disappear.



Rarely in the music business has a flame burned hotter and then been so thoroughly extinguished as the one that burned for Wax. The band had three distinct eras in its brief existence; it was the second version that almost shot the moon. Several members of the band and its team went on to have highly successful careers in the music business, which makes Wax's flameout all the more remarkable.

Yet the story isn't over. The recent discovery of a long-forgotten recording, coupled with the serious illness of one of the band's founding members, has brought Wax back together. And this time they've got an album—*Melting* (Lightyear Entertainment)—to show for it.

It began in late 1969. Guitarist Rick Levy '71 and his childhood friend, bassist Beau Jones, had recently graduated from an Allentown-area garage band called the Limits, which covered mostly simple, catchy songs. (Their manic version of "Suzie Q" is as fun as it is raw.) Though the Limits continued to play after Levy came to Penn in the

fall of '67, they disbanded when Jones was drafted into the Army and stationed at a (supposedly) top-secret missile base in Clementon, New Jersey. Eventually he was allowed to live off-base, and soon found himself in a house full of crazed college students at 1308 Rodman Street. One of his roommates was Levy, who had been drifting in and out of bands, including the bluesy Mrs. Wigg's Cabbage Patch.

The pair started a new band: Uncle Beau's Day Camp, which quickly became Wax. The original direction of the band was folk rock (à la Fairport Convention), with flute player Steve Morris '70, Limits drummer Ned Earley, and lead vocalist Susan Hamlin CW'72.

The Rodman Street house may have been a dump at the edge of a seedy neighborhood—Hamlin remembers the winter wind "blowing the snow in through the cracks in the kitchen walls"—but it spawned some lifelong friendships. One housemate was a *Daily Pennsylvanian* writer and *34th Street* editor named Arnie Holland '71 L'74, who would become Wax's "sixth mem-

ber" from inception to resurrection. He booked the band on campus, traveled with them off campus, did the bulk of their publicity, and was their No. 1 fan.

"There were all kinds of people coming in and out, and wild parties going on all the time," recalls Holland. At one point, the non-stop partying prompted one of the roommates to move out, whereupon David Kagan '70, who had been the lead singer for Mrs. Wigg's Cabbage Patch, moved in. Kagan, who went by *Cohen* in those days, was a little older and a tad more intellectual than his new bandmates, versed in literature and classical music. He also upped the ante on the debauchery.

"When David moved in the parties got even wilder," says Levy, an assertion that no one challenges.

One day several members of the band got arrested a few doors down for "crossing the street and looking like a bunch of freaks," in Holland's words. The Rizzolera cops rounded them up, tossed them in the back of a paddy wagon, and hauled them off to the South Philly police station. "Levy and Kagan were nervous, but I was terrified," says Holland. "As usual, Beau was as cool as a cucumber." When Holland finally got back to Rodman Street, he opened the door and saw that his LSAT scores had arrived in the mail.

"I took it as a cosmic sign and decided on the spot that I would become a lawyer and defend my friends," he says. "I would never let anything like that happen again."

One of the gigs he booked for the band—behind Houston Hall, in the area now known as Wynn Commons—paid immediate dividends. In the audience was a soft-spoken, ambitious 18-year-old from Gladwyne named John David Kalodner, who would go on to sign some of the biggest names in pop music, including AC/DC, Phil Collins, Cher, Aerosmith, and Foreigner. He was a regular at Hassle Records at 20th and Sansom streets, an area known as Sansom Village, which was the closest thing to Haight-Ashbury that Philadelphia had. After the gig Kalodner persuaded Hassle owner Bill Sisca to come over to 1308 Rodman to meet the guys and hear them play. The two promptly became Wax's managers, and their talent, if not their experience, represented a major coup for the upstart band. Sisca was only 21, but he was

already running a small chain of record stores. Moreover, he truly *believed*—as did Kalodner—a managerial trait that no amount of experience can replace.

“Billy had a way of talking about the band that would really get people excited,” says Levy. Plus, “he was an ex-Marine with balls the size of a battleship.”

Sisca and Kalodner were “focused on a record deal from the get-go,” Levy says, and “wanted the band to move in a more commercial rock direction, which was happening naturally anyway.”

By then Ned Earley had moved to New York, and he and his future wife, Sue Hamlin, left the band. So did Steve Morris. At that point Levy recruited Kagan, a natural talent with charisma and a powerful, wide-ranging voice, to be the new singer/frontman. Kagan knew that he could “sing and project”; he just needed the right set of circumstances and musicians. Given that his other career option at that point was becoming a substitute teacher, it didn’t take much persuading.

The next two additions were Rob Hyman C’72 (keyboards) and Rick Chertoff C’72 (drums), who had met over a biology-lab dissection and were playing in a rootsy blues-rock band called Buckwheat. Both say that it was Kalodner who asked them to join up. Chertoff, who had lined up a summer job driving a dry-cleaning truck, says he told Kalodner that if he could get them a summer’s worth of gigs, he would join. As it turned out, Kalodner “had a very organized, ambitious plan, so I said sure.”

“Rob and Rick came in and the band changed,” says Levy. “That’s when the magic started—and we just took off from there.”

Kalodner and Sisca delivered some impressive bookings: the Electric Factory (with the likes of John Mayall, the Flamin’ Groovies, and Manfred Mann’s Earth Band); opening for the Byrds at Playhouse in the Park; playing for 25,000 people at the very first Earth Day celebration in Fairmount Park; and opening for Chicago (the band) in Allentown (the city).

Yet their performances on campus were, in a way, the most quintessential. Doris Cochran-Fikes CW’72, now director of alumni secondary-school committees at Penn, has vivid memories of Wax playing the Locust Walk fraternity

scene, and of the crudely painted sheets advertising their appearances hanging from the windows.

“They would set up their gear on Friday afternoons along the old Beta House wall that campus organizations used to paint to advertise coming events,” she recalls. “The Green would be crowded with Penn students wearing bell bottoms and work shirts, playing Frisbee and just hanging out.” With bandana-wearing canines scampering about, cheap wine flowing from brown-bagged bottles, and the smell of marijuana in the air, Wax played “magnificently loudly, keeping us rocking and bonded,” she adds fondly. “They were very talented musicians, and Penn students loved them especially more because they were ours.”

“Wax was very much a Penn band,” says Holland. “In that era music meant a lot in all of our lives, and Wax was the hottest band on campus. When Robbie and Rick came in, it became something else: Wax was the hottest band in Philly. We all thought it would explode—and it almost did.”

It was an exciting time in rock and roll. Not everything had been done yet, and the better bands were often highly original. Loosely speaking, Wax might be considered progressive rock (a genre that didn’t even exist then), though that label often means only that the music has pretensions to complexity and the musicians are technically proficient (and play as many notes as possible in the time allotted). You can hear echoes of Procol Harum, the Band, Traffic, and Frank Zappa in Wax’s repertoire, but on the whole the sound was unique.

“We’ve been called everything—jazz, blues, rock, hard rock, acid rock, country,” Levy told *The Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1971. “We pick up pieces of whatever sounds good.”

One thing you will not hear is needless showing off. While there are long instrumental sections, the music is structured and composed, with a cohesive group sound at all times. Kagan has a warm, harmonious voice and delivers lyrics with feeling. Levy’s guitar solos have a jazzy edge to them, and avoid the psychedelic excesses of the era. Hyman’s piano

playing in those days, while intricate, was percussive in nature—more Elton John than Keith Emerson. In the engine room, Jones plays very tuneful, sometimes surprising bass parts, and Chertoff is all over his drum kit like Keith Moon, but with the touch of Levon Helm.

At its essence, Wax’s music captures the sound of freedom and youth. The hallmarks are an eclectic mix of musical talents and songs that turn on a dime.

Each band member was “incredibly open to what the others were writing, playing, and conceptualizing,” says Kagan. And, adds Levy, “somehow it worked.”

“It was five guys throwing in ideas with no editing involved,” says Hyman, and a lot of ideas were thrown into each song—something you don’t worry about when you’re young, the ideas come easy, and you don’t have the sense to worry about them drying up. Chertoff still can’t believe that “the ideas were coming so fast,” or that “we could remember those arrangements without practicing all the time.” Which, he quickly adds, “I guess we did.”

In the spring of 1970, Sisca and Kalodner booked Wax into Philadelphia’s Sigma Sound Studios with engineer Joe Tarsia (who by now has garnered more than 150 gold records). The idea was to come up with a promotional record that could be played on the radio. They recorded the simplest and most straightforward song they had, the slide-guitar-oriented “It Don’t Matter At All,” which also happened to be the song that just about wrote itself that first day at the clothing-store rehearsal space. The managers had it pressed on a 7-inch, 45-rpm record—one side in mono, the other in stereo, as was customary for a promo record then. (The record was never sold in stores, nor was it intended to be.)

The band’s ambitions were definitely ... waxing. As Levy told *The Philadelphia Sunday Bulletin Magazine* in November 1970: “Besides creating music, the whole purpose is to be really big. We do want to make a good contribution to the whole music thing. We also want the recognition we deserve.”

Eric Bazilian C’75, whose later collaboration with Hyman would lead to fame and fortune in the form of the Hooters, was in high school when he read that article.

"I was somewhat surprised at seeing such an in-depth story on a local band I'd never heard of," he recalls. "I remember being quite impressed with how professional the article portrayed them as being."

A few weeks later Bazilian got to see Wax perform as one of the opening acts for the Byrds. "My first impression, besides Rob's sideburns, mustache, and bell bottoms—and the fact that Rick Chertoff looked like Keith Moon—was just how long and hard they had obviously worked on the musical arrangements," he says. "Every song was like a suite, with tempo and meter changes prescient of the progressive rock that had yet to reach the

mainstream." It never occurred to him that, several decades later, "the bearer of the aforementioned facial hair would figure in as the primary collaborator in my life's work as a musician."

The live gigs and the promo-record version of "It Don't Matter At All" were fast earning Wax some important fans. One was Cassidy, a disc jockey at the fledgling WMMR-FM. Another was the legendary DJ Hy Lit, who recommended them to a producer named Bob Crewe—an industry giant who had produced smash hits for Mitch Ryder & the Detroit Wheels and Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons. Crewe was starting his own label, the Crewe Group of Companies, and

in November 1970 he showed up at Wax's rehearsal space at Third and Market. Crewe, says Levy, was "movie-star handsome like Troy Donahue or Tab Hunter, but very flamboyant at the same time," and the fact that he arrived in a stretch limo didn't hurt. After Wax performed three songs—the good-time jump-blues number "Elmira Lane"; "Things She Likes To Do," which had a (very) early Elton John feel to it; and "On and On," which sounds a bit like the Who would a few years down the road—Crewe agreed to sign Wax to a recording deal on the spot.

They quickly found their way to a young lawyer, Lloyd Remick W'59, who was charmed by the heavy Penn connection.

"It was a great group of kids," says Remick. "They were incredibly motivated and talented and very bright—not only with the music; they had the smarts to ask a lot of questions about how the music business works."

After intense negotiations, Remick arranged for a \$50,000 advance—half up front and the other half when the record came out. Oddly enough, though, Wax did not want Crewe to produce them. Crewe was famous as a producer of huge hit singles, while Wax saw themselves as an "album" band. According to Chertoff, Wax had Remick "write into the contract that Crewe would not produce the record, but that we would produce [it] ourselves. That showed incredible chutzpah for a young band" whose entire team's collec-



Davis, president of Columbia Records, and followed his boss to the fledgling Arista Records. There he brought Barry Manilow the song "Mandy," which would be the young singer's first hit record. Chertoff then went on to pro-

As a band, Wax fell short of its dreams and expectations. As individuals, the band members went on to enjoy a remarkable amount of success in a variety of music-related ventures.

For Rick Chertoff, the recording experience at the Record Plant (see main story) turned out to be a life-changer.

"The foray into the studio completely hypnotized me," he says. And as he watched session drummer Rick Marotta through the thick studio glass, he had an epiphany.

"I couldn't even hear him playing," says Chertoff. "I could only see him, but I was mesmerized. The way the stick rebounded off the drum, the way his hands worked, I knew I would never hit a drum that way. I intuitively realized that the studio was somewhere that I could contribute, where I had something to say."

After Wax he promptly landed a job working for Clive

duce such landmark records as Cyndi Lauper's iconic *She's So Unusual*, Joan Osborne's classic debut *Relish*, and Sophie B. Hawkins' smoldering "Damn I Wish I Was Your Lover."

In all these cases the artists were previously unknown to the masses, and it was Chertoff who heard something special in their music and helped them find the tools to connect. Though his resume as a producer is surprisingly light in terms of quantity, his success ratio is astonishing. He has received five Grammy nominations in such categories as Producer of the Year, Record of the Year, and Album of the Year.

One of the bands he produced with Arista was Baby Grand, the post-Wax incarnation that featured David Kagan, Rob Hyman, and Eric Bazilian. While Baby Grand released two albums, they didn't sell well.

"I grew tired of searching for the holy grail of rock and

tive experience in the recording studio amounted to one song.

"Since Crewe was looking for something different, that was actually fine with him," says Chertoff. "Now I feel like that was a blown opportunity to learn from a master, but things were happening so fast, who could blame us for thinking we knew better?"

Perspective, adds Levy, "was hard to come by for talented and stoned 22-year-olds."

Less than two months later, Wax found themselves at the Record Plant, the legendary New York recording studio. They were in pretty good company. On one side was John Lennon, working on *Imagine*. On the other was the Who, doing the sessions that would become *Who's Next*. It was a heady experience for the Penn lads, and even though they didn't interact with the musical giants flanking them, the mere fact that they were *there* gave the band confidence and momentum—stardom was clearly within reach. Having rented a spacious apartment on East 61st Street, they had spent a good chunk of their advance on new equipment, including a wall of Sunn amplifiers and a set of chrome Fibes metal-shell drums. With Bill Sisca listed as producer, the band spent December 1970 and part of January 1971 recording. In Chertoff's estimation, they "got to work with some of the best engineers anywhere," including Shelly Yakus, Jimmy Iovine, and Roy Cicala.

(Chertoff also had a powerful epiphany in that studio, one that would lead, within months, to a major career change. See sidebar for details.) When Kagan fell ill with throat issues, he was prescribed steroids—the first time any of the band members had even heard that word. His voice recovered, and the band spent a full month recording and fine-tuning a dozen of their best original songs.

Then disaster struck, in the form of the Internal Revenue Service. Crewe, it turned out, had some serious financial problems, and the IRS shut down the Crewe Group of Companies. The Wax LP was shelved—permanently, as it turned out. Worse still, the band did not own the tapes. After all that work, they were left without so much as a cassette to listen to.

When the shock and disappointment of losing the record deal set in, so did other hard realities. Jones was told he "could be sent to South Korea at any time"—better than going to Vietnam, certainly, but not exactly what the mellow, laconic bass player was hoping for. (That would be Conscientious Objector status.)

Levy had a different set of issues to contend with.

"I graduated in January '71, was getting married, and I was looking at a situation where I had to make a living right away," he says. "Rob and Rick weren't sweating out adulthood yet, as they still had another

year to go at Penn, and they were looking to take the band in another direction."

By the spring of that year, artistic differences, fueled by disappointment, stress, and confusion, had morphed into animosities. Though there were no big blow-ups or angry resignation letters, in June 1971 Levy and Jones left the band they had founded.

"Beau was totally caught up in working on his Conscientious Objector status, and I just needed to regroup my priorities altogether," says Levy. "We felt lost, devastated."

Wax moved on without them for almost a year, but the magic was over. Initially Wax did not replace Levy and Jones, but instead added another drummer and keyboard player.

"We were going for a more Allman Brothers/Grateful Dead jamming sound," Chertoff says now. (How exactly you play guitar-oriented music with no guitarist is not clear, even to the principals, who can't quite reconstitute the necessary braincells to remember what the heck they were thinking.) "I'm not sure what we sounded like—we just played very loud and bluesy, but beyond that I am really not sure," says Chertoff with a laugh. "I wish we had recorded something—it would be interesting to hear what we were doing."

Levy, who had gotten married and moved back to the Lehigh Valley, saw the band he had founded perform just once after he left it.

roll success," says Kagan, and when Baby Grand folded, Kagan called it a day on his music career and happily moved into magazine publishing.

Hyman and Bazilian decided to go in another new direction, mixing reggae with rock in a new band, the Hooters. After building up a huge local following, and releasing an excellent indie LP, Chertoff produced the Hooters' second album and helped them reach multi-platinum status. They are one of the biggest-selling groups in Philly history and continue to play regularly, especially in Europe, where they just completed a 30th-anniversary tour. Hyman and Bazilian have also contributed key songs to some of Chertoff's most successful projects, earning Grammy nominations of their own. Hyman, for example, wrote the classic "Time After Time" with Cyndi Lauper, and Bazilian penned "One Of Us," Joan Osborne's Grammy-nominated mega-hit.

In the early 1970s, after Beau Jones finally received a Conscientious Objector discharge from the Army, he and Rick Levy immersed themselves in Transcendental Meditation and became TM instructors. Levy and Jones also stayed active in the music business, working mainly

with oldies acts. Levy has played with and/or managed Herman's Hermits, Jay & the Techniques, '60s pop idol Tommy Roe, and the Box Tops. Jones also played with Jay & the Techniques, as well as Little Eva and other artists. Jones and Levy played through the decades with the Limits, whose old recordings have been licensed by Cleopatra Records and are coming out as *Garage Nuggets '65-'68* and *Songs About Girls*. Levy (ricklevy.com) has also produced music education DVDs for elementary-school children, and is on the board of the National Association of Musicians, Vocalists and Entertainers (NAMVE), an organization dedicated to securing health-care coverage for musicians.

After graduating from Penn Law, Arnie Holland moved west and started working his way up the record business. He eventually took over RCA Video Products and turned it into Lightyear Entertainment. Best known for movies (*Aria*, *Godspeed*) and videos (*The Jane Fonda Workout*, *Lou Reed Live In New York*), Lightyear has also released scores of albums by artists as diverse as jazz singer Nina Simone and classic rockers Mountain. —Geoff Ginsberg

"It was interesting and great to see the guys play," he says, "but deep down it was bittersweet at best."

For Kagan, that iteration was "completely different" from its predecessors. "The last version of Wax was more funky and performance-oriented," he says.

The band recruited Bazilian, a Penn freshman, to play guitar. Though he and Hyman would later spur each other on to international success with the Hooters, Wax had lost its momentum. The band members moved on, and let Wax go quietly into oblivion. Hyman, Kagan, and Bazilian resurfaced a short time later with a new band, Baby Grand. That was pretty much the last anyone heard of Wax for a long, long time.

IN 2009, after what can fairly be described as an epic level of success, John David Kalodner retired from the music business. One day, while looking through some old stuff in his basement, he came across a box marked WAX. It was the first band in which he had believed, and when he opened the box he found a master tape.

It turns out that in May of '71, well after the record deal tanked and right before Levy and Jones left, Wax had gone into a New York studio, set the dials, and torn through their material, completely live. Not only had none of the band members ever heard the recording; they didn't even remember doing the session. They simply assumed that high-quality recordings of Wax didn't exist.

Kalodner, who is a bit of a recluse at this point, sent the tape to Hyman, who then shared it with his former bandmates. Then, in the summer of 2009, Jones was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. Word reached his old friends, prompting some of those who had lost touch decades earlier to start talking again. Levy arranged a big get-together in Allentown with some old friends, including Hyman and Arnie Holland, who now runs Lightyear Entertainment, a movie and music imprint. After everyone had arrived, they turned on the tape and started listening to the music they had made a lifetime before.

What they heard made them giddy. For Holland, listening to the music

with his "brothers" evoked a mix of "jubilation and wistful nostalgia."

"The band was amazing," he says. "The live tape is excellent."

Kagan says he "couldn't believe how original it still sounded—it wasn't derivative of anything."

It was more than just appreciating the quality of the music. Reconnecting with old friends "who had shared such a seminal experience was both joyous and emotional for all of us," says Levy. "The magic was still there. It sounded great, better than anyone remembered."



At Long Last, Wax Has Melted

On September 1, nearly 40 years after disbanding, Wax is finally releasing a CD, *Melted*, based on a recently discovered recording from May 1971 (see main story for details). It will be available for downloads September 14. For further information and to download Wax music: www.meltedwaxmusic.com, www.lightyear.com

To contact Rick Levy with remembrances, photos, or film of Wax: rick@ricklevy.com; (904) 806-0817

While they are all careful to share credit, each member of the band heard things they did not remember. Several mention Jones's unusually melodic and pleasing bass lines. Now, with any bitterness and disappointment long behind them, they remembered all the fun they had. They also agreed on something else: that the recording was great and that people should hear it.

"We have to do something with this!" said Levy. ("Every group needs a guy like Rick Levy," says Chertoff. "Someone who gets things done.")

Holland, whose Lightyear label is distributed by EMI, said: "I got into this business because of Wax—let's put it out!" Ironically, while the digital revolution may have "decimated the record business," he says, "in this case it allows us to put the record out—digital shelf space is free."

The next person they contacted was another old friend, Bill Sisca, who had gone on to a wildly successful career directing music videos and infomercials. He agreed to handle the business end. Team Wax was back in action—and this time they had a record deal that didn't fall apart. Hyman, along with yet another Penn guy, John Senior C'77, set about mastering the tape at Hyman's Elm Street Studios in the Philadelphia suburb of Conshohocken. (Senior, who also did the graphic design for the Wax album, is the man who inadvertently gave a certain post-Wax band its name by repeatedly calling the melodic Hyman played a "hooter.")

Their excitement has been tempered by the sobering fact that Jones has brain cancer. (He has been receiving cutting-edge treatment at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania for his tumor.) But he has been "remarkably resilient," according to Levy, and has handled adversity with characteristic calm. His friends and former bandmates are united in their affection for him and—much to their own surprise and delight—for Wax.

Looking back, it turned out, was not so bad after all. They could hear the freedom. They could hear the youth. *Their* freedom, *their* youth.

Hyman laughingly describes Wax as "a no-hit wonder." But who knows? *Melted* (which includes both the live-in-the-studio recording and the 45 promo version of "It Don't Matter At All") is being released on September 1, and downloads will be available two weeks later.

A few months ago, Levy contacted Bob Crewe, now 80 years old. His enthusiasm for the band still comes through in an email.

"WAX ... I loved them in the '70s ... Just heard some of their stuff and they still get me way excited. Maybe this time?" ♦

Geoff Ginsberg C'91 is a Philadelphia-based freelance writer who has operated around the periphery of the music world for longer than he's capable of remembering.