

ROCKING AROUND THE DECADES WITH ROB AND ERIC

The pandemic has hit pause on 20+20—the planned 40th anniversary tour for their iconic 1980s band the Hooters—but Rob Hyman and Eric Bazilian insist the show will go on (20+20+1), while keeping musically busy in the meantime.

By Jonathan Takiff

Life was looking good—maybe too good—for Rob Hyman C’72 and Eric Bazilian C’75 when we first reconnected back in February to reflect on and toast their topsy-turvy careers in pop music: A marathon gig as songwriters, arrangers, band front men, and featured sidemen. And a verging-on-half-century-long friendship that began when they met in an electronic music class at Penn when Rob was a senior and Eric a freshman.

“If we’d been just one more year apart, we’d never have intersected, our lives would be drastically different,” mused Hyman.

The two are best known as the lead performers and composers for the Hooters,

a richly melodic, one-of-a-kind pop-rock, reggae/ska and folk-fusing group that earned “Best New Band of 1985” honors from *Rolling Stone*. Their major label debut album from Columbia Records, *Nervous Night*—featuring the infectiously danceable, keyboard-vamped (Hyman) and guitars a-blazing (Bazilian) anthems “And We Danced” and “Day by Day,” and the heavy hitting, apocalyptic thumper “All You Zombies”—quickly amassed two million sales, just in the US.

By that time, these guys were already veterans of two prior bands that had sprung out of their Penn experience, Wax and Baby Grand, both of which had garnered record deals before coming to dis-

appointing ends. And before breaking through with *Nervous Night* they’d spent five years performing around Philadelphia as the Hooters evolved from an islandy ska-punk brew (first heard on their indie album release *Amore*).

Those professional immersions schooled them early in the dark side of the music business—the pileup of advances and promotional expenses and unfulfilled promises that eventually cause most groups to call it quits. “Making music has always been its own reward for us,” said Hyman. “That’s what’s kept us going, through thick and thin.”

Making the thin years less lean, both have also written songs, first covered by other artists, that have become modern pop classics and are often licensed for films and TV shows—the musical equivalent of annuities, earning “enough to live on,” Hyman says. These signature songs have also opened the door to collaborations with the likes of Mick Jagger, Jon Bon Jovi, Ricky Martin, and the German rock band Scorpions.

For Hyman the annuity is “Time After Time,” a haunting ballad that was a hit first for Cyndi Lauper (who shares the writing credit and royalties), with Hyman singing backup. The song has since been covered by everyone from country legend



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Willie Nelson to jazz great Miles Davis and has maintained pop currency with 21st century takes by American R&B singers INOJ and Javier Colon, the punk band Quietdrive, Eurodance project Novaspace and British synthwave group Gunship.

Bazilian’s ticket to ride was (and remains) “One of Us,” introduced by Joan Osborne. A sly, spur-of-the-moment, one-take improvisation by the writer, —which is “how the best ones often happen,” he says—the song ponders the question *What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us?*”

But a musician can’t live on songwriting royalties alone. With a feeling of “let’s do this while we still can,” back in February the now 70-year-old Hyman and 67-year-old Bazilian were anticipating the launch of a major tour for the summer of 2020—billed as “20+20”—to mark their 40 years as the Hooters.

Hyman, who now also functions as the band’s manager with his wife Sally, had spent much of the last two years organizing the tour, which was to have started on Memorial Day weekend in their still most welcoming hometown, on a big bill at the Mann Center with fellow Philly-rooted duo Daryl Hall and John Oates. After that Hyman, Bazilian, and Hooters bandmates David Uosikkinen, John Lilley, Fran Smith Jr., and Tommy Williams, and their mostly Europe-based road crew of 14 were set to jump on the first of many “planes, trains, buses, and automobiles” for 35 rock-hall and festival dates abroad, before returning home for more gigs into the fall.

The tour was to feature an especially strong focus on festival and large club shows in Northern Europe—Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Norway—where the band is most popular these days. Ironically, European listeners first picked up on the Hooters “just when our American album sales were drooping and our label was losing interest,” Hyman noted.

The more provocative themes and mix of Celtic folk, Cajun, and sing-along pub ballad flavors that emerged in their second and third Columbia albums, *One Way Home* (1987) and *Zig-Zag* (1989), in songs like the jaunty TV preachers’ mocking “Satellite,” lovestruck “Karla with a K,” the ominous “Johnny B,” and their dub-beat remake of “500 Miles,” have won the group a huge and disparate following overseas.

Even heavy metal fans “go crazy when we bring out an accordion and mandolin



and our namesake Hooter,” a harmonica/keyboard hybrid, aka Melodica, said Bazilian. When I suggested that those sounds could strike a rootsy, familial chord for the Euros, he agreed but added, “It’s also because we rock them—*hard*.”

Many of the scheduled summer 2020 shows were already sold out in frosty February, Hyman marveled then. “We’re headlining a mix of 1,000 to 1,500 [person] capacity venues and some of the biggest festivals—major events that go on for three or four days.”

“A US band that’s bigger overseas is a rare phenomenon but not unheard of,” says veteran record producer Rick Chertoff C’72, a roommate of Hyman’s at Penn whose life and career in the music world is tightly intertwined with Hyman and Bazilian. “Historically, it’s been significant but less commercially successful

musicians, in rock, jazz, and blues who’ve earned ‘most respected abroad’ status,” he adds, name-checking edgy originals such as 1950s rocker Eddie Cochran, who died at 21 in a UK car crash; cool jazz vocalist and trumpeter Chet Baker; “Godmother of rock and roll” Sister Rosetta Tharpe; and blues icon Muddy Waters.

Chertoff and Hyman met as freshmen in biology lab, where they were dissecting frogs. They decided that going back to the dorms to listen to albums would be more productive. Chertoff would become the drummer in two college years bands with Hyman, first the bluesy Buckwheat, which was strictly a fraternity party thing, and then the jamming, prog-rock Wax, which also included David Kagan C’71 on vocals and guitarist Rick Levy C’71.

The latter band endeavor lured them away from classes to record an album in New York City for a fledgling label run by Bob Crewe, already famous as cowriter and producer of hit songs for the Four Seasons, among others. But that adventure abruptly ended for our guys when the label went bust, shut its doors, and ate their tapes. A long-lost, cutlive Wax studio session made a belated album debut as *Melted* in 2010, issued by LightYear Entertainment, a label run by a Penn friend who had been a big fan and publicist for the band, Arnie Holland C’71 L’74 [“When Wax Was Hot,” Sep|Oct 2010].

When Chertoff went to work after graduation at Arista Records, he signed and produced Baby Grand. With Hyman, Kagan, and Bazilian at the core, Baby Grand aspired to be the next Steely Dan, even utilizing one of the same studio musicians employed by the jazz-pop group’s founders Donald Fagen and Walter Becker. Baby Grand released a pair of albums in 1977–78 that “didn’t have a hit single between them,” Bazilian said (though “Alligator Drive” and “Never Enough”—later covered by new wave singer-songwriter Patty Smyth—had po-

tential in this listener's opinion), before going bankrupt and disbanding.

After moving to Columbia Records, Chertoff shepherded Hyman and Bazilian's three Hooters albums for the label. He wasn't involved in their 1993 album for MCA, *Out of Body*, or their most mature, life-affirming set—2007's *Time Stand Still*, self-produced by Rob and Eric on their own label—but in 1998 he did collaborate with Hyman on an interesting side project, the album *Largo*.

Chertoff also had a hand in Hyman and Bazilian's respective "annuities." In 1983, before their first Hooters set was recorded for the same label group, he showcased their talents on Cyndi Lauper's 16 million-selling breakthrough album *She's So Unusual*, which featured "Time After Time." Rob and Eric, who arranged and played on the whole set (also famous for their reggae-cized "Girls Just Want to Have Fun"), were effectively "the band before I had a band," Lauper would declare. Then in 1995, Chertoff called on the Hyman/Bazilian team to work the same magic for bluesy singer Joan Osborne. They shaped the studio band sound, arranged and collaborated as songwriters on nine of 12 tracks of her three million-seller *Relish*, including radio hits "St. Teresa," "Right Hand Man," "Pensacola," and the gangbusters "One of Us." *That* song and the album were nominated for multiple Grammys in 1996.

No surprise, a month after our initial conversations for this story, hell froze over for the Hooters and the world. Sparked by the rapid spread of COVID-19, their grand tour was threatened then decimated. First the big Philly show was optimistically pushed to early September (and later postponed *again*). Then, like falling dominoes, all 35 concert dates booked for June, July, and August fell by the wayside.

When the Deutschland bureaucracy officially cancelled Oktoberfest, the guys knew their Euro summer was *kaput*. But, turning lemons to lemonade (a favored



pursuit in the often upbeat Hooters musical world), they delivered the news to fans with a posted video performance (at hootersmusic.com) of the heartening song "Silver Lining," a relative newbie from 2010 that counsels *Take the burden from your back/Somewhere there's a sun that's shining/In your deepest shade of black/May you find a silver lining*.

As things stood as of July, all but a few of the European shows have been rescheduled for 2021, Hyman says. And as a longtime music journalist friend (me) pointed out, that means the Hooters could still legitimately call next year's delayed outing their "40th anniversary party," since an anniversary celebration is traditionally marked at the *end* of a calendar year of togetherness, not the beginning. (And if you go west around the world in 81 days, you've crossed the International Date Line, so it's really only 80 for a few hours, right, Mr. Verne?)

"We've never broken up, but we took a 'one-year break' that turned into eight."

Easing the pain of this summer's tour postponement, and helping to explain their long-lived partnership, Hyman and Bazilian cheerfully allow that they've never put all their eggs in one basket. Or let their dreams outrun reality. Or spent too much time in each other's face.

"We like each other, but we don't spend every waking hour together," says Bazilian. "We've never broken up, but we took a 'one-year break' that turned into eight (from 1995 to 2003), as we pursued side projects and raised our families." Rob and Sally Hyman have two grown sons, Matt, 28, and Nicky, 26, NYU and Pratt grads, respectively. Eric and Sarah Bazilian have three children, all Penn grads or gradsto-be: Emma C'10, who is 32, Simon C'18, 23, and Maia, 19, a sophomore this year, are the fourth generation of Bazilians to attend the University.

With six-and-a-half albums worth of Hooters material to perform in concert, the gents say they've given up the chase for another hit single. "We already have a big brood of beautiful musical children to attend to. Now it's time to let them give us grandkids," Bazilian jokes.

But they're still striving to fine-tune their material with fresh twists and sonic quotes, Hyman adds, with tweaks that keep the band and the audience in the moment and nod to their musical influences, from Jamaican singer-songwriter and producer Prince Buster to the Beatles to British folk-rockers Fairport Convention.

The band has had its share of "personnel issues" through the years. "What group hasn't?" Hyman ponders. "We've had the maturity to work through them," he adds. "Four-sixths of today's band are the same guys that were on the *Nervous Night* album."

"We've been together so long we're friends again," parries Bazilian.

When we met, pre-lockdown, in February, it was at Hyman's well-appointed Elm Street Studios in suburban Conshohocken, Pennsylvania. He and Bazilian were mixing and finessing a 2018 video concert shot at the massive *Rock of Ages* festival in Seebrohn, Germany, that they had planned to offer as a souvenir item for the summer showgoers. "Putting this thing out is not a money maker, but the fans expect you to have new merch," Hyman explained. With the tour put off, they've been contemplating other ways to physi-

cally share or stream the nearly two-hour show for a charity project—a popular pursuit in this season of struggle.

I whimsically suggested they stage some sort of safe-distancing Drive-in Movie Event—real or virtual—to reference the look and plotline of their first hit MTV music video for "And We Danced." That video was shot 35 years ago at the nearby Exton Drive-in, just a few days after the Hooters had opened the US portion of the landmark *Live Aid* concert in Philadelphia on July 13, 1985. (They haven't pursued it, but other musicians, including Garth Brooks, Brad Paisley, and Los Lobos, would also get the drive-in concert idea this summer, then actually find locations to pull it off. The Exton is long gone.)

Soon after our first studio conversation, I enjoyed a very long-distance follow-up FaceTime chat with Bazilian, who was by then back (and locked-in) at his home-away-from-home in Stockholm, Sweden, a flat he's taken for three years with his Swedish-born wife and the sometime presence of their three offspring.

Besides cementing bonds with Sarah's family, the Stockholm spot has allowed the hyperactive Bazilian to plug into the Euro rock scene, working with the likes of Gotthard ("the biggest hard rock band in Switzerland") on their recent single "Bad News" and collaborating in Slovenia with production partner Martin Stibernik on an album with Eurovision song contest finalist Manu. Another international effort is "What Shall Become of the Baby?" a really terrific album project that pairs Bazilian with Mats Wester of the seminal Swedish folk-rock band Nordman.

In the US, Bazilian has been collaborating with and promoting another female pop talent—Alexis Cunningham, strong on voice, tunes, and attitude—with her group/album project as Alexxis and the Medicine. "After seven years of woodshedding, we're finally ready to launch," he says.

Because Bazilian can play every band part himself, he's also been keeping busy in the pandemic, writing and recording

in a basement home studio "almost every day," he says. A most playful and chameleon-like creator, he's been known to sometimes get wrapped up in "nutty concepts like a series of iconic covers sung with a Philly accent—think 'Saddest Faction' and 'Bridge Over Trouble Woerters,'" he says, "recorded under the pseudonym Biff Hoagie and the Passyunk Ramblers."

Is there even a speck of commercial potential here, or just lots of laughs? It doesn't matter; he's only trying to please himself. "I've never done anything that wasn't for my own satisfaction that satisfied somebody else," he says. "I've tried pandering and it failed miserably. I'm only good at doing me."

With just a little streaming-service searching, it's possible to find two well-wrought solo albums by Bazilian, *The Optimist* (2000) and *A Very Dull Boy* (2002). Finally nearing completion in forced isolation is a long overdue follow-up tentatively titled "Songs in the Key of B"—even though "not all really are," he snorts.

According to Hyman, every time Bazilian returns to Philly he's "lugging a new instrument." His latest acquisition is an *oud*, a lute-like, pear-shaped (and paired strings) instrument long favored in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. It's now sparking him to compose in complex Balkan time signatures. "I get a few pointers here and there, but basically I've been self-taught on everything," from mandolin to saxophone to harmonica, Bazilian says. That's been true "since I turned 12, when I realized I could figure tunes out better than my guitar teacher."

Hyman used to be busy running his elaborate recording studio complex. The business hasn't been helped by COVID-19, nor by contemporary artists (like Billie Eilish) who record multi-Grammy Award-winning music in their bedrooms and then brag about it.

He's also a major collector and restorer of classic electric keyboards, including

several examples of the heavy vibes, heavyweight Hammond church organs co-opted by Philly jazz legends like Jimmy Smith, Richard “Groove” Holmes, and Shirley Scott, and by British classical rockers like Procol Harum (think “A Whiter Shade of Pale”). Hyman’s warehouse also holds “way too many” (he groans) examples of the dinky, early electric pianos and synth keyboards that likewise scored British Invasion albums—Hyman and Bazilian’s coming-of-age inspirations, along with the ska and reggae originals Rob discovered on vacations in Jamaica. Hyman has been putting some of those instruments to work writing and recording a series of classically toned pieces “that will hopefully see the light of day soon.”

Hyman has also recently reconnected at a socially safe distance with Cyndi Lauper. “She invited me to join her in an online fundraising Zoom event with about 100 people. We’ve also done some online writing. Hopefully more will come from that.”

And he’s hoping his pal Rick Chertoff can rekindle interest, after the theater world’s restart, in a stage adaptation of their 1998 album *Largo*. It’s an ambitious trek through Americana-flavored music and situations inspired by and borrowing themes from Czech composer Antonin Dvořák’s two-year visit to America and resulting folkloric symphony *From the New World*.

“Rob and I felt *Largo* was some of our best work ever,” says Chertoff in a separate chat from his home in upstate New York, “though the album stumbled out of the gate even with an all-star cast” that included the Chieftains, Cyndi Lauper, Taj Mahal, Joan Osborne, and the Band’s Garth Hudson and Levon Helm. “We’ve gotten development interest from Oskar Eustis, the Public Theater chief who shepherded *Hamilton*, and done some workshops. The stage adaptation is in the able hands of Eric Overmyer, a writer best known for shows like *St. Elsewhere*, *The Wire*, and *Treme*.”

Meanwhile, covers of Hyman and Bazilian’s signature songs keep popping up in films and TV shows, offering new interpretations—and helping to pay the rent. Halsey performed “Time After Time” with a haunting, minimalist piano arrangement to score the touching “In Memoriam” segment at the last Emmy Awards TV show. Soon thereafter, in the dramedy *Where’d You Go, Bernadette*, the song reemerged as a meaningful on-screen singing duet by the characters played by Cate Blanchett and Emma Nelson. I heard it anew this summer, the Lauper/Hyman version, scoring the Hulu romantic comedy *Palm Springs*.

Earlier this year, Bazilian’s “One of Us” set the mood for an episode of the heady HBO series *High Maintenance*, “Backlash.” The bemused evocation is sung on screen by different spiritual characters in both the opening and closing scenes and is now embraced by the composer as “my second favorite use of the song,” Bazilian says. Still first in his heart is Dr. Evil’s performance—and brash lie, “I wrote that,” afterward—in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*.

Bazilian also pulled out and played a “One of Us” cover for me that had “recently come to my attention, sent by the singer’s manager,” he said. “Kind of sounds like the Prince version [on his 1996 triple album *Emancipation*], but you should hear it because it’s also got a significant Penn connection.” It was a performance by the student vocal group Counterparts, and the recording “took them to the finals—and honors—in the 1998 national championship of collegiate a cappella at Carnegie Hall,” Bazilian noted. The lead singer was a Penn senior named John Stephens, better known these days as contemporary pop/R&B star John Legend C’99.

I also was directed to seek out a 2018 episode of *The Goldbergs*, the TV sitcom based on creator Adam Goldberg’s real-life experiences growing up in Cheltenham, Pennsylvania, in the 1980s. “We’d been trying to get them to use stuff on the show since it began,” Bazilian ex-

plained. “For the fifth season they finally said, ‘We want you to perform “And We Danced” on the show.’ We said, ‘Have you seen us *lately*?’ They said, ‘We can make it work.’ So we all flew to LA. They took us to the production side. They had outfits, they had wigs for us”—the Hooters had *big* hair for a couple years in the 1980s—“and there were no close-ups. The episode is called, no surprise ‘The Hooters.’” (Exercise fanatics, Hyman and Bazilian do look just as lanky now as they did way back when.)

At our initial meetup, the two were also buzzing and sharing tales from their recent run as a performing duo in *Night of the Proms*, a multi-artist “Classics Meet Pops” arena extravaganza with symphony orchestra, band, and chorus accompaniment that sold out 17 arena shows in Luxembourg and Germany at the tail end of 2019. Alan Parsons and a Euro-touring edition of Earth, Wind and Fire shared the pop-side duties with Hyman and Bazilian.

“So different than what we’re used to, touring with the Hooters,” Hyman said. “You do four or five songs a night, hardly break a sweat. We even had time off to do some songwriting, which we haven’t had a chance to do for a really long time.”

“And yet, that experience still made us miss the bone-aching, sweat drenching work that is touring with our band of brothers,” he confessed with a laugh. “The Hooters’ travel regimen is a killer. But the time on stage, striving to connect and make each night of music the best we’ve ever had, is our favorite thing in the world. We’re sure hoping we can get back on that horse again, next summer.”

Jonathan Takiff C’68 has long celebrated Rob Hyman and Eric Bazilian’s talents as an entertainment reporter/critic for the *Philadelphia Daily News* and *Philadelphia Inquirer* (1971–2018). He also spun their early platters as a weekend DJ on WMMR (1971–80). Daughter Hilary Takiff Weiss GFA’03 is the blurred playground figure seen swinging like a metro-nome behind musicians at the open and close of the “And We Danced” video.