

After 20 years, Big Star reaches its zenith

by James Covey

"I never go far / without a little Big Star," Paul Westerberg sang with the Replacements, and these days, more and more music fans are singing the same tune. In April of this year, original Big Star members Alex Chilton (lead singer/songwriter) and Jody Stephens (drums) joined with two new members on loan from the Posies, Jonathan Auer (guitar) and Ken Stringfellow (bass) to play a live gig for the first time in about twenty years. Big Star only ever recorded three albums, the last of which, *Big Star Third/Sister Lovers* was not even released until 1978, four years after it was produced, and the same year that original guitarist Chris Bell died in a tragic auto accident. By that time, bassist Andy Hummel had permanently left the

music scene. But in the almost two decades since, the legend of a band that never put an album on the Billboard chart continued to grow, and profoundly influenced artists such as R.E.M., Teenage Fanclub, the Posies, and Matthew Sweet. Now a CD of this year's reunion gig at Missouri University has been released under the title *Columbia*. Jody Stephens talked to me about Big Star's past, present and future from his workplace, Ardent Studios in Memphis.

JC: I'd like to go right back to '71. You and Andy Hummel, the bassist, and Chris Bell were together before Alex Chilton came along?

JS: We were. We were together for probably a year, maybe a little longer, a year and a half, before Alex moved back to Memphis from New York, and joined the band.

JC: Now that you guys are back together do you ever play some of those more mellow tracks, like "Thirteen", "Try Again", "Watch the Sunrise"?

JS: As a matter of fact we did play "Thirteen" in Columbia, it's just, the performance didn't turn out the way we'd have liked for it to have turned out so we didn't include it on the album.

JC: Now, with Radio City, at what point did Chris and Andy leave the band? Was that before the record was recorded, or after?

JS: Chris Bell left the band after the first album. Chris put...his heart and soul into the first album and, after its

release, the press tended to focus on Alex. Alex was in the Box Tops, and sang the song that was the number one song in the nation for 1967, and it's certainly understandable why so much of the focus was on Alex. But I think Chris just felt overshadowed by that and left the band and started a solo career of his own. And Andy Hummel — the band essentially broke up after the first album.

We were kind of coaxed into getting back together to perform at a rock writers' convention here in Memphis. Alex and Andy and I got together for that one performance, and everybody had a great time. People still talk about it, that people were, you know, getting smashed and dancing on tables. It was a wild time. It's probably why people thought it was a great performance! So the response was really good to that, so we thought "well, we'll give it another shot". I don't think that lifestyle was something that Andy was looking to lead...so he left after that, and Alex and I did a third album.

JC: I was about to ask if Andy contributed much to Big Star Third, 'cause the way I understood that, that was basically you and Alex and a bunch of session musicians.

JS: They were some local musicians that we picked up... But yeah, it's primarily Alex's record. You know, I didn't even play drums on all of the songs. Jim Dickinson, the producer, played drums on "Kangaroo" and maybe something else that I can't think of...



you know, it's sort of, drums falling all over themselves, but it's appropriate for the track. For me the third album was more of a chance to get to know the recording and production process and watch Alex work in the studio.

JC: But you wrote a song called "For You" on that album which shows up on the new live set, and you sing that one, right?

JS: Yeah. I did. First song I ever wrote. I just happened to learn a few chords on guitar and kind of put them all together and wrote some lyrics and that's what came out.

JC: Now, the reunion which took place this year, that was suggested by a couple of college radio DJs, is that true?

JS: It was. I guess I was the first to get a call, from (KCOU DJ) Mike Mulvihill, who just kinda threw out the question of, um, if I can, you know, get Alex, and a couple of other folks to play, would you be interested? And I said, "Well, sure", just thinking the easy way out being, I'll just leave it up to Alex...based on what I'd heard secondhand about Alex's feelings toward that period of time, I really didn't think Alex would agree, so I said, "Sure, call Alex, and if he'll agree, I'll do it, you know, be glad to, be fun!"

JC: And then you folks started looking for replacement members, and I've heard names, everything from Mike Mills (R.E.M.) to Paul Westerberg to Matthew Sweet...

JS: Yeah, all those names were brought up at the suggestion of Mike Mulvihill and Jeff Breeze. I really didn't want to be a part of soliciting anybody's participation, 'cause I just thought that there was too strong a possibility that it wouldn't happen. And, people would get excited and start putting a lot of effort into it and then it would just fall apart. That was my take on it. I let them approach these people, who had conflicting schedules. So I said, "Well, you should call Jon Auer and Ken Stringfellow from the Posies. They'd be perfect for it." So they called, and those guys are super nice guys, and they were really eager to do it. I'd known them for a couple of years, and thought they were just a natural way to augment the band.

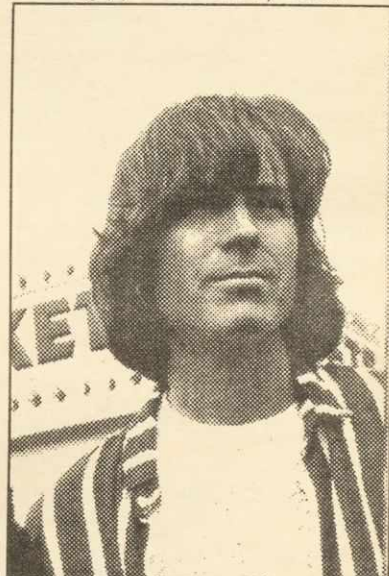
JC: Yeah, they certainly fit in rather naturally to the group, it seems. I've been listening to the record, and I think they filled in perfectly.

JS: Well, they'd done a single, kind of a tribute to Chris Bell. They recorded "Feel" and "I Am The Cosmos", two of Chris' songs. And the recording was so close to the original it

was scary. So, that was, given that, how could these guys not be a part of this?

JC: You said earlier that even in 1978 you were aware that there was a sort of legend growing about your band. We mentioned Teenage Fanclub and the Posies, and I'm just wondering at what point you became aware of that phenomenon.

JS: I guess the first of it was the Replacements, the *Pleased To Meet Me* album. That's the first real indication of what kind of impact the band was having, maybe would have. It seemed very, still very cultish, as if they were just a handful of people who knew about the band and were interested in the band. It's not until recently, really, that I understood that a lot of people had heard the material and there were a lot of fans out there. And it's still seemingly just an industry secret.



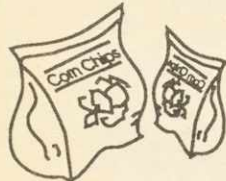
JC: When you did that performance in Columbia, it must have been a long time since you'd been backing up Alex on drums, and I'm just wondering how it felt when you went out on stage for the first time in such a long time.

JS: It was definitely the first time in a long time with Alex or anybody — it had been almost three and a half years since I'd played with anyone, or practiced for that matter. I took about five weeks prior to the gig to do some woodshedding. Playing drums is physical — I mean, you have to be in shape to do it. But musically, it was kind of like learning how to ride a bicycle. Once you've learned, it's just there, there's that instinct. I was playing parts that I created, so it was very easy to slip back into those kind of grooves very naturally. I wasn't, like, trying to copy what somebody else was doing. So it was easy — I felt at home, felt like I was back in the fold.

GREAT OCEAN
NATURAL FOODS

"Good Junk Food"

Snacks which keep
you
going
and
going.



We also carry
natural wonders
for your
skin and hair



an easy walk from campus

6112 Quinpool Rd.
Across from the IGA,
beside Tim Horton's

open every day
425 - 7400

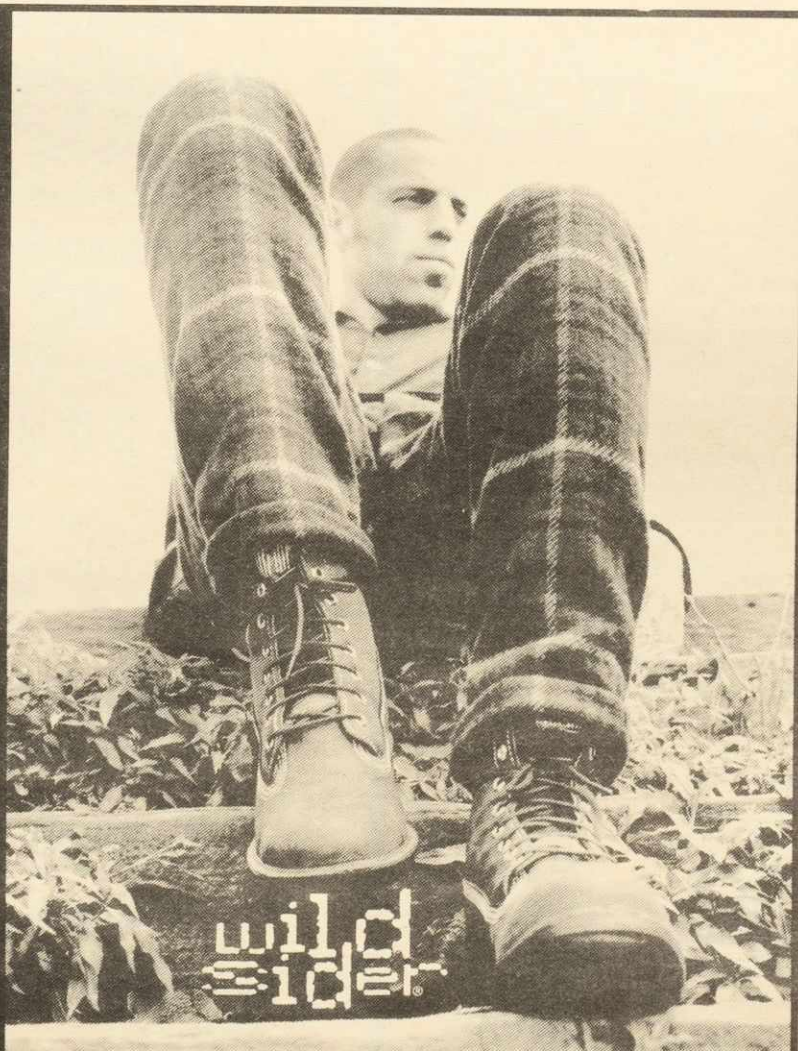
SHEARLOGIC
HAIRSTYLING

WOMEN \$16.00
MEN \$11.00

SHAMPOO, CUT, AND STYLE
G.S.T. INCLUDED

All of our staff are master hairstylists.

Fenwick Medical Centre
5595 Fenwick Street
492 - 4715



AVAILABLE: HER SHOES BY D.J. & THE TANNERY BY D.J. 5472 SPRING GARDEN ROAD