



FINAL WILD SON

SID GRIFFIN emerged in LA garage revival pioneers **The Unclaimed**. Next came his band **The Long Ryders**, who should have been as big as **R.E.M.** **Kings of The Paisley Underground**, they looked and sounded like **The Byrds** or **Buffalo Springfield** with a pile of new wave edge and energy. Alt rock stardom beckoned, nearly achieved with the band signing to Island.

Since then Sid has written books, magazine articles, broadcast for the BBC and written the screenplay for a wonderful film about Gram Parsons. He still plays to this day with **The Coal Porters**, the band he formed when **The Long Ryders** split.

JON 'MOJO' MILLS speaks with the enigmatic southern gent, tracing a fascination with music that began as a child in the '60s and prevented him from becoming a lawyer.

Shindig!: Born in Louisville, how did your musical tastes evolve as a child?
Sid Griffin: I first got into music as I was all as a small boy. My sister had two Peter, Paul & Mary albums which were enjoyable but I was most taken by LPs my Mom bought of songs of The American Civil War. She thought this would encourage my interest in American History and it did, but it also ignited a love of folk music in me, which she never in her wildest dreams thought it would. Mom bought my sister and I the *Surfin' USA* LP by The Beach Boys and from then on I loved rock 'n' roll religiously, listening to AM radio, which was great until about 1969.

SD: What was happening musically as you grew up? Were you aware of the great local bands of the '60s like Soul, Inc. etc?
SG: I am impressed *Shindig!* knows Soul, Inc. There were other great bands like NRBQ (who formed in '66 and are STILL around!), The Oxford, The Monarchs, The Trendells, and the immortal Cosmo & The Counts too. Cosmo now runs Mom's Music.

SD: How old were you when you formed covers band The Frosties? Why '50s and '60s covers instead of hard rock or glam?
SG: The Frosties started when I was 14 years old. The Doobie Bros soon put out their first album and "doobie" means a joint. We drank toxically cold American fizzy lager in cans with frost on the side so we called ourselves The Frosties in a play on The Doobie Bros, but I admit Frosties is a silly name. Still, in Kentucky, it was a terrific in-joke. We played '60s stuff as we loved it. We hated hard-rock, still do, and associated it with big arena gigs. Glam meant nothing in Kentucky and little in the USA outside of NYC and California.

SD: What songs were in your sets? Any garage?
SG: Some Raiders of course and we played "Dirty Water" by The Standells AND a killer version – a very strong version – of "Good Guys Don't Wear White". The Frosties fooled around with "Pushin' Too Hard" but I don't think we did it live. We played about a dozen shows in total – at least that is what I remember. Tried "Psychotic Reaction" out live, also did "Nobody But Me". Although we did *The Human Beinz'* take, not The Isley Brothers' original version.

SD: What steered you towards LA in '77 at the age of 21 – bar attending college – was it punk?
SG: I told my parents if I lived in Los Angeles for a year I would be a California resident and not a Kentucky one. This meant I could attend graduate school at UCLA for a much smaller fee. But UCLA didn't accept my application and The University Of Southern California did and it is a private, fee-paying school, which

doesn't care if you are from Mars! Yet this was enough of a story to get me outta Kentucky and into California.

I had seen an article in a free magazine called *Phonograph Record* written by the late Greg Shaw, who later became a friend and even a sponsor of my early career, on The Sex Pistols playing The 100 Club here in London. He said the Pistols were not a good band in the conventional sense but they hit hard, they were young, they were fun, and they played "Whatcha Gonna Do About It" by The Small Faces and "I'm Not Your) Steppin' Stone" by The Monkees.

I thought, "Wow, this is a band my age who are not very good on their instruments but love the music I do and play '60s covers!" So I knew it was my time to get in a band professionally and seriously, or be stuck in a boring day job in Kentucky. So I drove across the country, 2200 miles by myself and when I arrived in Pasadena I turned on the radio and found Rodney Bingenheimer on KROQ. He played first the three Pistols' A-sides and then the three B-sides back to back. I was stunned.

At first I was a little chicken about the LA rock 'n' roll scene. There was a tired scene in the San Fernando Valley of people doing country-rock and glam rock like it was '73. In Hollywood it was really, really happenin' for punk or what would soon be new wave. I did not know of the very hip and aggressive beach scene around Costa Mesa and Huntington Beach till months and months later.

Bizarrely the very first gig I attended was Gene Clark and Roger McGuinn opening for New Riders Of The Purple Sage at the venue which was The Trip 10 years earlier!

From then on out I saw X, The Alley Cats, very early Devo, The Motels, The Dils... and most of the SF bands too, like The Avengers and Romeo Void. What I saw and experienced was so different from Kentucky. It was cool, free and liberating. Peter Case, then of The Nerves, said it best: "California then was like having your parents' house to yourself for the entire weekend with them outta town and all your friends over having a huge party." That sums it up for me.

SD: What did you get up to with your first LA band Death Wish?
SG: What a funny story. The Death Wish name was from a *Newsweek* cover of Gary Gilmore being put to death in Utah in '78, it was the first death penalty killing in the USA for a while and quite a lot of people tried to stop it. Oddly, his brother was Mikal Gilmore (yes, Mikal) and he was a respected member of the Hollywood scene who later became quite a good writer and critic.

The thing about Death Wish is I knew we were not a good band but you gotta join a band of some ilk sooner or later, and they were the first to accept me.

One of my Kentucky pals came out for a visit and said, "If you wanna make it, quit Death Wish as you are wasting your time with those guys." So I did, which was sad in a way as they were terrific guys, but a rotten band.

SD: You were there on the crest of the wave at the turning tide of the nascent garage revival. How did you meet up with Shelley Ganz and what drove you to the psychedelic garage sound and look?
SG: It was April '79 when Shelley Ganz came to my horrible little apartment and

"Wow, this is a band my age who are not very good on their instruments but love the music I do and play '60s covers!"

pushed past the trash to audition me as a guitarist. I can do those simple but snotty '60s fuzztone leads without any trouble and he was thrilled by this. He had an absurd '60s haircut like Ronnie Wood did in *The Birds* in '65.

The Unclaimed was a name Shelley borrowed from Gurf Morlix's back in Hamburg, New York, and our look was that of *The Music Machine*. Shelley was incredible onstage, but none of us could sing. None of us. Barry Shank and I came out with the most disgraceful backing harmonies ever! There are two high-quality colour live films of the band back in '79-80 and they prove this.

The Unclaimed looked great and played great, my guitar work was bloody good for a kid doing psychedelic riffs.

SD: What are your memories of Moxie Records and working with the garage obsessed Dave Gibson?
SG: Dave Gibson was a big overweight guy with an even bigger heart. When he died, I cried. He was obsessed with '60s garage band rock and his *Boulders* series came straight from his own record collection.

The first Unclaimed EP [released on Moxie in '80] means a lot to me, but I know it isn't all that great. My two songs were entirely original, they went over well live but "The Sorrow" by Shelley is "Train For Tomorrow" by The Electric Prunes and "Run From Home" is a rip-off from The Five Canadians. I have a million funny Unclaimed stories but I must confess it still bugs me that I contributed two original originals to the

record and Shelley simply wrote new words to already existing garage-rock songs. 'Twasn't fair and in LA it took only a few weeks for our record collector friends to spot his plagiarism.

SD: What made you move on?
SG: Shelley Ganz was really *iber*-strict about the '60s thing. He was seriously thinking about doing interviews and referring to President Lyndon Johnson and not Jimmy Carter! This was hard for me to handle and anything pop or melodic in *The Unclaimed* was *verboten*, so me and Barry Shank thought we would jump ship and do something else on our own.

SD: The Long Ryders formed in '81. What were your initial intentions for the band?
SG: The early Long Ryders was me, Barry Shank on bass [he wrote "Ivory Tower"], and Greg Sowders on drums. Then we found Stephen. I remember at one point Barry said he was now not sure about the name Long Ryders and thought we should change our name to The Rainhearts. We initially only wanted to do slightly more melodic garage band music than The Unclaimed and not be so dark and minor key. Plus Shelley Ganz was always against new material, he really was only happy playing obscure '60s covers. So Barry and I wanted to be songwriters and this meant a new band was called for. Nothing against Shelley personally, he was an OK guy.

SD: If not keen on The Unclaimed's purist '60s garage obsessions, The Long Ryders look equally as cool and mid-60s on the sleeve of your debut mini-LP *10-5-60*.
SG: The first EP cover was me and photographer Ed Colver deciding to send a signal. It was a new thing we had going. I always bought anything I saw if it looked '66 and Greg Sowders was always up for dressing up like it was a costume party – so we had the threads already. I guess. It was me who told the guys to look sombre

The Unclaimed's 1980 EP "It means a lot to me"

