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Interview With A Legend: Jimmy Castor, Set For Funk Fest

by Steve Propes | Hometown Music | 08.04.10 | | Text Size: +

1:30pm | When I read Jimmy Castor was skedded to perform at the second Funk Fest this weekend, I called everyone I knew so I could score an interview with this influential musician, whose varied styles I always appreciated.

As vocalist, songwriter, musician and bandleader, Castor has proven to be one of the most adaptable hit musicians of the latter part of the twentieth century, moving from the "kiddie" sounds of doo wop to a sound he dubs "pop funk."

Recording for a variety of labels, both major and minor, he managed to come up with a half dozen pop hits and 17 soul and R&B hits between 1966 and 1988.

But his career began in about 1956 when a neighborhood teen group named Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers hit big with "Why Do Fools Fall In Love," a song that changed the worldwide sound of pop music.

Castor, who grew up in the Harlem and Sugar Hill sections of New York City was a student at the High School of Music & Art, where he learned everything from Solfège, a system of learning musical scales to the classics, like Bach and Beethoven, who according to Castor created a groove. "I took that test, not many people of color were in that school. People of other persuasions supported me," like classmate James Burroughs of "Taxi" and "Will & Grace" fame.

Everything changed when Lymon hit the charts with his infectious harmony. "Frankie was my neighbor. We were in the store when he said he had cut a record." As they were the first purely teenaged group with a national rock and roll hit, "the Teenagers reached the masses."

As a result, Castor formed a group called the Juniors and wrote "I Promise To Remember," which he recorded with his group. It was soon was a cover hit for the Teenagers, who were booked for various concerts worldwide. Problem was Lymon disappeared on occasion, so Castor was used as a fill-in lead singer. "I had the look and I had the high voice, Frankie was 13 going on 30. He could sing anything, one or two takes."

When Frankie wasn't there, "people from the Teenagers came to get me in a helicopter." In one memorable weekend, they appeared in Hershey PA, Toronto and Montreal, which Castor described as "an airplane gig," flying in and out in a chopper.

Though Lymon was the chief attraction, his absence was apparently never noted and the promoters didn't spoil the illusion. "They were big stars. One time, I threw a comb out of a bus and the girls fought to get teeth of that comb" as souvenirs.

Castor also sang with Lymon's brother, Louis Lymon as a member of the Teen Chords, a group that also had several hits and he also cut a second doo wop for a small Harlem label ("Harlem was my life."). So what was the next career move of this budding teenaged super-star?

He went back to school, that's what. "My mother and my grandmother always told me, 'you have to do this or that. Mother made go to school, so I worked only weekends.'"

For the remainder of the 1950s, though Castor played alto sax on certain sessions (like the hits "Rinky Dink" by Dave Baby Cortez or "Where or When" by Dion & the Belmonts), he basically returned to being a student and didn't record under his own name again until the Twist Era of the 1960s. During that time, he watched Frankie Lymon's stellar career peak and his one-time friend and example, slowly succumb to drugs and die in 1968. "He began to smoke weed, getting high. I knew my mother would beat my ass if I tried that."

Castor's next major chapter began with his first top 40 hit, "Hey Leroy, Your Mama's Calling You," which charted well on the both pop and R&B charts for the Smash label in late 1966.

"Leroy was made up, needed something that rainy Saturday morning," Castor recalled, asserting those who can't relate to Leroy can relate to their mama calling. "Smash wanted me to be Jr. Walker, so I recorded 'The Magic Saxophone.'"

Castor next recorded some sides for the Jet Set label, owned by Jackie Kennedy's cousin, Dimitri Villard and Bennett Cerf's son, Chris Cerf, who owns a big publishing company." After stints on Decca and Capitol, Castor began appreciating a new funk pioneered by Sly & the Family Stone.

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Hometown Music
• A graduate of Wilson High (1960) and CSULB (1965), Steve Propes has been collecting records for many decades; was the KLON R&B DJ from 1981 to 1990 (with a short return in '93); has interviewed hundreds of singers, players, DJs and label owners; hosted Steve Propes Rock & Roll House Party on Charter Cable; founding member of the So. Cal Doo Wop Society; author of seven published books on R&R history and hosts the Steve Propes 45s Show is heard live on www.wprtd.org on Saturdays from 9 to 11 a.m. and on www.rocktradio.net, playing from his collection of over 35,000 45s, about 1,000 CDs and hours on interviews on tape.



Since 2000, Steve has reported for and written a police column for the Beachcomber and contributed to various music publications like Record Collector News, which can be found at record stores and record meets.

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The Jimmy Castor Bunch was because "I had really fallen for Sly, the horns and the arrangements" - the Bunch taken from Sly's Family monicker.

In 1970, Castor was signed with RCA by Aaron Russo, currently Bette Midler's manager. "We were wearing suede boots. We were the Jimmy Castor Bunch, I had everybody singing. They put me in the black department and used my voice. We needed another song I had been playing live all the time, 'My Brightest Day'."

Castor then remade "I Promise To Remember," but needed a b-side. Someone suggested he just play that caveman record." Castor recalled, "I studied anthropology," and from that created the lyric, "what we're gonna do right here is go back. I did that one take."

"Troglydte" came out and "I went back to Canada, and we put this LP out." Two Washington DC radio stations began fighting over 'Troglydte.' We came back from the ice in a U-Haul. That was a million seller." It reached #6 pop and #4 R&B in mid 1972. In early 1975, Castor scored again with "The Bertha Butt Boogie" and "King Kong," which was inspired by a walk around the Empire State Building, later that same year. "I've always considered my act a pop funk act. I need the pop charts."

In all, Castor has had at least 50 single releases, including "Godzilla" in 1985 and at least 15 albums.

In all, Castor also noted, "I've been sampled 3,000 times," citing acts like the Spice Girls, Kanye West, Fat Joe, Christine Aguilera and Beastie Boys as lifting some of his riffs.

This Saturday, Castor and the Bunch will be performing at the Second Annual Long Beach Funk Fest at the intersection of Broadway and Pine. The Fest starts at noon and the music wraps up at 9 p.m.

This will be an historic performance, and after the set, he'll be available to sign CDs and such. I plan to bring my 45rpm copy of "Hey Leroy, Your Mama's Calling You," but I'm not sure I want to take my pristine and very rare original 45 of the classic, "I Promise To Remember" on a trip to any funk festival.



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