

“THEY SAID I COULD SELL CRAZY!”

Black Oak Arkansas were one of America's biggest bands of the '70s, fronted by **Jim 'Dandy' Mangrum**, a wild singer who set the standard for what an outrageous rock frontman should be. So why aren't BOA universally revered today?

Giles Hamilton talks to Jim Dandy to find out...

MOST MUSIC FANS WILL define Southern rock by pointing to the work of three acts – The Allman Brothers Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd and ZZ Top. Yet to my mind the band that gave the genre its initial identity throughout the '70s seems to have been cruelly obscured by time.

Black Oak Arkansas played Southern rock all right, but the subtleties of their approach meant the band was about much more than that. All of the group's finest albums – and there have been a surprising number – are an astonishingly eclectic blend of musical styles from the late-'60s, both black and white. In the space of a handful of songs, sometimes within a single number, you can hear the rhythm and blues of Stax; country and bluegrass from the Ozarks; psychedelia from Austin, Texas; gospel delivered from the churches of Arkansas; rock'n'roll from Memphis; and catchy pop courtesy of the British Invasion.

BOA's first three albums – 1971's 'Black Oak Arkansas', 'Keep The Faith' from '72 and 'If An Angel Came To See You, Would You Make Her Feel At Home?' from the same year – are nothing less than potted histories of American music. Yet there's nothing po-faced or worthy about BOA frontman Jim 'Dandy' Mangrum and his cohorts. The band's ethos was wrapped up in a poncho of fury, fuelled by wild living and hard loving, just as you'd expect from a bunch of good ol' Southern boys.

BORN IN Benton Harbor, Michigan on 30 March 1948, Jim Mangrum was raised a Southern Baptist in Black Oak, Arkansas. But, as he turns 70, the singer now lives in Memphis, Tennessee, less than 60 miles from the town he grew up in.

“We had all those influences you mentioned,” says Jim. “But what we really had was a lot of heart.”

BOA's roots lie in a high school band, The Knowbody Else, formed by Mangrum and his classmate Rickie Lee Reynolds. The group, which also featured soon-to-be Black Oak members guitarist Harvey 'Burley' Jett and bassist Pat Daugherty, recorded an album for legendary R'n'B label Stax. But when 'The Knowbody Else' was released on Stax subsidiary Hip Records in October of 1969 it sank without trace. Black Oak Arkansas rose from out of the ashes.

“Ahmet Ertegun [the founder and president of Atlantic Records] saw us play at the Topanga Corral club in Topanga Canyon, California around 1970,” says Dandy. “We were one of only a handful of acts he signed. He'd had a lot of success with Cream and Led Zeppelin and was on the lookout for more talented rock bands. I told him we weren't worthy! It was amazing. Nothing we did happened on purpose, and anything I ever tried to put in place myself never did work. Whenever I planned anything it just messed up God's plans for me!

“We really didn't know that much,” he continues, “because we came out of a town [Black Oak, in

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BLACK OAK ARKANSAS



BOA rocking to a man, August 1973. L-R: Harvey 'Burley' Jett (guitar), Rickie Lee Reynolds (guitar), Tommy Aldridge (drums), Jim 'Dandy' Mangrum (vocals), Pat Daugherty (bass), Stanley Knight (guitar)

Arkansas, of course] of just 300 people. If we'd known what they were doing in New York and LA at the time, then we would probably have been doing it too. People called us unique, but God shaped it. I never really worried about being accepted. We followed our hearts and were just having a good time. We were very enthusiastic and that was what everybody wanted a dose of. They wanted our enthusiasm to rub off on them."

THE MUSIC business was just getting its sea legs at the time BOA got underway. The whole thing was still pretty much uncharted territory. The idea of formula radio and focus groups designed to bring in the largest demographic of listeners was still in its infancy. The industry was still run by mavericks with a deep-rooted passion for music. Bands knew of no other way of getting their music out than by taking it to the people. Black Oak's first three albums, all released on Atco, were delivered within a period of just over a year. Incredibly, the material was of a uniformly high standard across all three records. 'Black Oak Arkansas', released in March 1971, is surely one of the great debut albums. The breadth of influences on display is simply breathtaking as the album moves from the country bluegrass of 'Uncle Elijah', through the '60s psychedelia of 'Memories At The Window' and 'The Hills Of Arkansas', the fiery garage rock of 'I Could Love

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You', the gospel flecked 'Lord Have Mercy On My Soul', and the downright filthy rock'n'roll of 'Hot And Nasty'. The latter number served as a template for the kind of punchy rockers with which the band would go on to achieve international fame in the mid-'70s. The album closes with an instrumental, 'When Electricity Came To Arkansas', a live favourite that allowed the virtuoso players in the band to flex their muscles.

Hot on the heels of this blistering *tour de force* came second album, 'Keep The Faith', released in January 1972. Throughout the grooves you can feel a band that's gaining in confidence as the three guitar line up of Rickie Lee 'Ricochet' Reynolds, Harvey 'Burley' Jett and Stanley 'Goobar Grin' Knight is given greater prominence. 'Fever In My Mind' showcases some especially nimble fretwork. Other highlights include 'The Big One's Still Coming' and 'White-Headed Woman', but there really isn't a weak link on the whole record.

UNSURPRISINGLY, GIVEN the speed at which BOA were releasing records, third album 'If An Angel Came To See You, Would You Make Her Feel At Home?' sometimes misses the mark. Released just six months after 'Keep The Faith', it featured what would become a live staple, the positively deranged 'Mutants Of The Monster', fan favourites 'Spring Vacation' and 'Full Moon Ride', and a

serious psychedelic workout titled 'Our Minds Eye'. The album was the first to feature drummer Tommy Aldridge, who replaced Wayne 'Squeezebox' Evans. Despite its musical ups and downs, though, the album became the first BOA release to penetrate the *Billboard* Top 100 as the band's hard work began to pay off.

"We bought a hunting and fishing lodge in the Ozarks, which was far out," explains Jim Dandy. "It was great for our children, wives and girls as we were always on the road, playing 300 nights a year - when we weren't recording two albums a year, that is! Two albums a year is at least one too many. You shouldn't put a time limit on creativity. But we kept working hard because we never thought we were going to last any time at all. It was a surprise to everyone that we managed to do it for as long as we did."

By this time Jim was gaining something of a reputation as the wildest of wild-eyed frontmen. His frenetic live performances, where he gamely played a washboard while still somehow managing to be unashamedly and overtly sexual, started to draw attention from both fans and those who disapproved of such antics alike.

"I never worried about that," he laughs. "I don't know how to say this, but the sex thing was because... well, back in our tiny little town of 300 people we'd heard about sex, we'd heard about bucking. But we didn't *know* about it until after we got out of Black Oak! We left that

place pretty horny, let me tell you, and as soon as we were out of there we started making up for lost time!"

IN 1973 BOA were arguably at the peak of their powers. Their live performances were raucous affairs that the band's ever-increasing fanbase loved. Any lingering concerns that this groundswell of support wasn't being reflected in record sales were swept aside by the live album 'Raunch 'N' Roll Live', recorded over two nights in Portland and Seattle on 1 and 2 December 1972 and released in February of '73. The record is a thrilling, warts-and-all testament to just how exhilarating the band was live, highlighting the unmistakable rhythmic swing that drummer Tommy Aldridge and bassist Pat Daugherty created together. Despite only making it to number 90 on the US album charts, the LP was nevertheless certified gold, which goes to show just how many records were being sold at this point in time.

Black Oak were on a roll and by the time fifth album 'High On The Hog' was released in September 1973 they were really hitting their straps. The band's musical template with which they would forever be associated had been established; fast and furious blasts of high-energy rock'n'roll topped off with Dandy's Deep South snarl. There was absolutely no fat on the bone on 'High On The Hog', with songs rarely going over the three and a half minute mark. Here was a band sounding remarkably fresh and uncluttered, shorn of the self-indulgence of many of their peers. From the opening number, the infectious blast of 'Swimmin' In Quicksand', the pace doesn't let up. Perhaps there's less variety than in their earlier work, but 'High On The Hog' nonetheless spawned the infectious 'Jim Dandy To The Rescue' single that scaled the *Billboard* Hot 100, reaching number 25 in February '74. The song was originally an R'n'B hit for LaVern Baker back in 1956, but given that Jim Mangrum had been using the stage name of Jim Dandy for some time already, the tune - where the singer shares vocals with female blues belter Ruby Starr - was an obvious fit.

"My daddy had called me Jim Dandy since I was nine years old," he says. "That's not the kind of nickname any self-respecting man would have picked for himself!"

Dandy admits that he'd never heard the song before, but someone else had...

"I got to be great friends with Elvis," he explains. "He was the most cosmic human I ever saw. He'd shake and you'd see a ripple go through the crowd. Before I witnessed Elvis I wanted to be a stock car driver. But anyways, his people called me one day and told me to expect a call from The King at two o'clock. I was scared to death! Right on time he called, not a moment later, and told me it was my destiny to record that particular song. I thought to myself, 'You don't have to get heavy. I'll do the song!' I just turned it into what I thought it had to be."

THE SAME year that 'Jim Dandy To The Rescue' was lighting up the airwaves, Black Oak Arkansas played at the infamous California Jam alongside Deep Purple, ▶

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