

Last 'laugh': Lost tapes of the Beau Brummels inspire more rock archaeology...

David Barton
Bee Staff Writer
(Published Sept. 26, 2000)

Despite all the records Jeff Hughson has bought, sold, traded, reviewed, promoted and loved in his lifelong career in the music business, "Beau Brummels Live!" is special. That's because this is his record. No, Hughson is not, nor has he ever been, a member of the Beau Brummels, the classic Bay Area group best known for its 1964 hits "Laugh Laugh" and "Just a Little."

But he always has been a fan, and for the first time in his career, Hughson's love of music and business experience has come together in a particularly concrete way. The same can be said of his friend and business partner, Dennis Newhall, a former Sacramento DJ and knowledgeable music lover.

"We're both music collectors and music lovers," says Hughson, 48. "And we knew there was this great music that had never come out. We had access to these tapes of the Beau Brummels, and we'd seen what Alec Palao was doing with these archival tapes of Northern California bands (including the recent "The Sound of Young Sacramento" compilation), and we thought, 'This is credible stuff.' "So we decided to become a real record company," he says. The two formed Dig Music, a name Newhall came up with that plays off the anachronistic slang of "dig" and underlines the archaeological nature of the work they plan to do.

Dig Music -- which also includes third partner Martin DeAnda, who Hughson and Newhall say has the business savvy they lack -- has as its mission the unearthing and restoration of previously unreleased recordings by Northern California rock bands from the glory days of the 1960s and '70s. The tapes that inspired their initial release may not have seen the light of day were it not for the duo's enthusiasm for the Beau Brummels. Certainly, there is little public outcry for a live album from a band that folded nearly three decades ago.

But, Hughson says, "The tapes themselves were just so damned good." The recordings capture a band that, while past its brief commercial prime, had grown in skill and depth in the six years since it had broken up in 1968. The songwriting of Ron Elliot had not produced another hit along the lines of "Laugh Laugh" or its follow-ups, but songs like "Lonesome Town" and "Restless Soul" are good examples of the folk-rock style that would come to dominate California rock in the early '70s. The recordings were made over four nights in February 1974 at the Shire Road Pub in Fair Oaks, a popular club where the band was preparing to record an ill-fated, eponymous reunion album that would be released the next year to widespread indifference. The Shire Road Pub gigs caught the band at a point where the members were rediscovering their internal chemistry after six years apart, but had not yet gotten caught in the Los Angeles machine that would squeeze the energy out of the songs by the time they got to vinyl. "It's a great band," Hughson says. "They've matured into the material, they're coming together with enthusiasm -- they're having a ball, and you can hear it. The songs that ended up on the 1975 album sound better on our CD." As an additional selling point, the 20-song CD features 10 songs that were never released by the band, making it the long-lost Beau Brummels album. Plus, for sheer novelty value, how many CDs open with the words, "Good evening and welcome to Fair Oaks"? The local setting of the performances makes sense, since the Beau Brummels, while from San Francisco, were well-known in Sacramento and had a unique relationship with the capital city. "We did our first big concert gig here, at the Memorial Auditorium, with Gary Lewis and the Playboys," says Sal Valentino, the lead singer of the group. "Sacramento has always been good to us." In fact, after he left Los Angeles, where he worked for record labels after the Brummels' demise, Valentino relocated to Sacramento, where he has lived since.



Sal Valentino, foreground, the lead singer for the Beau Brummels, is fully behind the efforts of Dig Music's founders, from left, Martin DeAnda, Jeff Hughson and Dennis Newhall, who have compiled a CD from tapes of the band's gig at the old Shire Pup in Fair Oaks in 1974.
Bee/Michael A. Jones

Now 58, Valentino has seen a lot of unauthorized releases of his band's material. "I've fought these things for years," he says of the unofficial releases. "It's wrong to release stuff that wasn't meant to be released. Song demos that were done on the way to an album have been released as records, which really seemed unfair. "I'd love to go back and redo them as real records," he says, "but that isn't going to happen. "So I was suspicious when Jeff and Dennis came to me. But they turned it into a real deal; it's more than just another bootleg."

Because the record was put out more for love than money -- Hughson says they'll be happy with sales of about 5,000 copies on their \$10,000 investment -- Dig Music came up with an unusual proposal for paying the band: a 50/50 split. In an industry notorious for leaving most musicians with virtually no money for their efforts, this is remarkable. "It gives us credibility with the band," Hughson says. "They stand a chance to make more money than they'd normally make. It's the ultimate fair deal." Valentino agrees. "I'm happy with it," he says. But oddly enough, he says he still hasn't actually listened to the finished CD. "My wife thinks it's real nice," he says softly. "I haven't heard the final disc yet. I like to sit and be able to listen by myself, and I haven't had that moment yet. I've tried a few times, but I haven't gotten through more than a quarter of it."

This may be surprising, but it is not so unusual to anyone who knows musicians, who are often more interested in the next show than in the last album -- particularly when it was recorded 26 years before. "Mostly, I've been getting ready for the show," Valentino says of his gig Oct. 7 at Constable Jack's in Newcastle. "I have to play a second set, and I'm not a player, I'm a singer, so I've got some rehearsing to do. But I'll get to it." At that upcoming show, Valentino will do two sets, the first one featuring Beau Brummels material, backed by area retro-rockers the Surf Dukes. The original members of the Beau Brummels themselves -- in addition to Valentino and Elliot, there were John Petersen, Ron Meagher and Declan Mulligan -- are unlikely to perform together again, because of some members' health problems or lack of interest.

But in the second set of the October show, Valentino will focus on material from his second group, the early '70s nine-piece ensemble Stoneground, which released a few albums that are now out of print. Stoneground recordings will be available again if Newhall and Hughson have their way. They say Dig Music probably will release sometime next year a live Stoneground album recorded at the Memorial Auditorium in 1973. And they have other tapes they're looking into, and hope to release more CDs in the future. "We're not going to be able to touch early Santana or Jefferson Airplane," Newhall says. "But there were so many bands that got FM radio play who recorded in this area that there's plenty of quality to release. "At this point, it's a hobby. But if we can put out half a dozen titles, it could become something more substantial. It was a lot of work, and a lot of fun, and now we're a record company."

For his part, Valentino is still a bit surprised at the enduring interest in the band that started his career. "If you'd told me in 1965 that I'd still be singing 'Laugh, Laugh' nearly 40 years later," he says. "I'd have said you were crazy."

Sal Valentino

Will perform at 9 p.m. Oct. 7 at Constable Jack's, 515 Main St., Newcastle; \$12.50 advance, \$15 at the door; (916) 663-9385.