



D.C. & Co.

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Photo: Fly Magazine photo by Christopher Embardino

Many of the acts I review are forced to forego their immediate dreams of rock and roll stardom in order to “make a living in the real world,” uncomfortably balancing the tedium of daytime work with the excitement of their nighttime musical personas. The idea that the guy who pours my coffee in the morning or the girl at the DMV who wiles the day away typing data into a computer may, at five o’clock, rip off their “real-world” business suits and restaurant uniforms for guitars and stage lights is one that has always intrigued me. It has a certain comic book superhero appeal to it.

There’s really not much difference between the way Peter Parker or Clark Kent transform into their heroic alter egos and the way some musical hopefuls transform themselves from mundane employees into screaming, howling, soulful on-stage presences. And not many can pull off this chrysalis as well as Dave Costarella and his soaring band, D.C. & Co.

In case you haven’t heard D.C.’s story, which has reached the level of local lore, Dave is a construction worker by day, and by night, puts down the hard-hat for a hat that fits much better: songwriter, performer and bandleader of one of Lancaster’s most popular and enduring acts. As Costarella puts it, he “only does the other thing [i.e. his day-job] in order to keep the music going.” Costarella is not content with the monotony of everyday life – he assumes the almost spiritual purpose of proselytizing the blues, preaching from the pulpit of real soul music.

D.C. & Co. channels a wide variety of music from a wide variety of musicians, sometimes unabashedly borrowing from the greats, and other times blazing a stunningly new path through tried and true musical styles. Most of the time I analyze bands in terms of influence, but with D.C. & Co. only the word “channel” could possibly describe how the construction worker is able, in a flash, to transform into a gritty bluesman howling a meaty refrain, or a smooth Cajun huckster cajoling audiences with bouncy New Orleans funk. And juggling these personas seems like second nature to Dave and the band.

Channeling groups as diverse, and yet strangely connected, as the Allman Brothers, Van Morrison and Ray Charles is no easy task, nor is attempting to cover their music from time to time. But when a well-placed cover is added to their set, D.C. and his band’s idiosyncratic stamp could be felt pulsing through every note. Most singer-songwriters find it easier to express their deepest feelings by paring their sound down to the barest necessities, but D.C. does the exact opposite. He flourishes precisely while brandishing his Phil Spector-sized wall of sound.

Costarella is admittedly a musical late bloomer, but as one audience member puts it, “what a flower he’s become.”

“I had songs bouncing around in my head,” Costarella acknowledges, “all sorts of songs in all sorts of styles but I couldn’t get them out there.” He spent a great deal of time and effort trying to communicate these ideas to his musician friends so that they could capture what Dave refers to as “the craziness” – his series of mental noises and ideas that eventually become songs. And while they did a brilliant job translating various hums, tones and rhythms into passable songs, it wasn’t until 1992 when friend and guitarist Marshall Jones taught Costarella the basics of keyboard that his musical career began to really take shape. After this, it was inevitable that his self-described “gift for music” would manifest itself. And the songs seemed simply “to write

themselves,” Costarella says.

“Sometimes I will literally wake up in the middle of the night,” he observes of his overly active muse, “and just have a whole song completely written and ready to perform.” When asked how he so artfully blends elements of soul, rock, blues, funk and jazz, he regards the question with cautious skepticism. It’s clear that this isn’t something for which he has to “try.” There is “none of the bullshit,” he says. “It just comes.” And as unfamiliar or strange as this bit of Zen wisdom is, it’s true. His music works because it seems so effortless; Costarella and the band make the juggling act of influences mere child’s play.

Another aspect of his success stems from the ability to outrun all the stereotypes of bands formed by “people his age.” Many musicians his age (which seems in itself an insult to D.C. & Co.’s tact) are content to wallow in the entirely safe realm of classic rock statuary. Seldom do we hear original music, let alone original music that doesn’t sound like a dull musical hangover in some bizarre Margaritaville-universe.

With Costarella, there is not a desperate attempt at clinging to fleeting remnants of youth, but a distinct sentiment that his youthful lust for life has been and will be there always – and that is what guided him down the strange road that finally led to the thing he loves most: music.

As he says about the perfect swell of a horn riff, or the thumping synchronicity of his rhythm section, “Music like that – you just want to live there.” And the “there” does not refer to the audience, but rather the internal joy of music. Combining the wisdom of musical maturity with the freshness of a songwriter just out of the gate, Costarella gives his music an inspiring breadth and appeal that are conspicuously missing from many groups, old and young alike.

As Costarella points out on the band’s website (www.dcandco.net), his musical gifts are not only in the songwriting department. He also prides himself on “surrounding himself with great musicians,” who not only play well, but also are “good people, people you want to be with on or off the stage.”

The distinct personalities of his band members often ring out louder than the loudest wailing trumpet or searing guitar line throughout the set. Guitarist “Big Tone” Torres, the self-proclaimed “best (and probably only) Greaser guitar player in Lancaster,” adds an indescribable swagger to the band. At the same time, bassist Bobby Fry adds flawless rhythmic funk. Playing with Costarella is a group of straight shooters, music teachers and other assorted good guys who sound like hip-shooting funksters. Fresher than players half their age, they blend virtuosity with a broad perspective on music in a way that young pups could only dream of.

Even cooler than this is the very make-up of the band. I had originally planned on listing the entire band, member by member, but the list soon became too unruly to even consider actually including it here in the article. But it is this amorphous inclusiveness that makes the band function like it does, as an organic whole that is, as Dave describes, “Much, much more than the sum of the parts.”

Because of its core of tight, professional musicians, the band makes even the most difficult arrangements seem easy and carefree. At the same time, because the band is constantly changing (adding a member here, taking one out there), there is a liveliness and constant self-replenishing aspect that helps avoid becoming musically stale.

Lancaster can sometimes surprise you. Far from being burnt out by the world of day-jobs, Costarella even finds inspiration, true soulful inspiration, in this unlikely provincial, little county. And when he’s on-stage in a local club, you almost question whether you haven’t been whisked away to Memphis or Chicago, all while feeling quietly at home.