

# Jamming With The Centaurs

When Cliff Lenz remembers his early love affair with rock 'n' roll, and his seven-year odyssey of performing, recording, road trips and opening for some of the biggest names in music, he smiles to think it all started with just a casual meeting between two high school kids in a little place called Coronado.

Coronado in the 50s and 60s was a special time and place for music. Numerous local musicians banded together to play songs and emulate what would become known as the cornerstones of rock 'n' roll. All the while they would work to define themselves through original music and modest recording projects.

This musical era in Coronado saw a special sort of music scene developing. "I don't think that time will ever come to pass again," said Lenz, founding member of the early Coronado rock band known as the Centaurs.

Lenz, Doug Johnson and Rick Thomas met at Coronado High School in the fall of 1962. One fortuitous evening they got together at Doug's house with guitars and amps in tow. Their objective was to see if they could play some rock 'n' roll.

They only knew one song, a Ventures song. So they banged out a fairly decent rendition of "The McCoy" on their guitars and began to think about what they could do as a band.

With that, a seven-year band odyssey began to take shape that would find them opening for some of the biggest names in rock 'n' roll, during one of the greatest decades in American music.

But, why "The Centaurs?" Naming the group was an on-the-spot decision made the night of a school football game, when CHS principal Robert Oliver realized the band needed to be introduced.

Many assumed the band was named after the mythical half-man, half-horse creature, but it was actually named for an Atlas missile in the news. "I figured, we call ourselves the Centaurs and every time they fire one of

In this 1963 publicity shot The Centaurs appear, from left, Rick Thomas (guitar) Ken Brown (drums) Drew Gallahar (bass) Cliff Lenz (guitar, keyboards) Bill Lamden (sax).



**The Centaurs**

*Allied Artists Co. Agency*

those babies off, we get free publicity," recalled Lenz.

"I think we had maybe 15 tunes and played everyone of them three times," said Lenz. "But we made it through the gig without a single tomato flying toward the stage. Another thrill, and we were hooked."

A Coronado man is compiling an online archive of Coronado music history with stories about the Centaurs and many other homegrown talents. Dean Atkinson started his Coronado Band History Web site to create a record of Coronado musicians during the 50s, 60s and 70s, a 30-year music scene that he described as fantastic.

"It was a great time to be a musician in Coronado," said Atkinson. "Everybody in town played something."

Lenz provides a chronology for the Centaurs on the site, which tells the full story of the intrepid band - from humble Coronado beginnings in the fall of 1962 to big-name opening gigs at the San Diego Concourse and Balboa Stadium.

"From '62 to '67, the music had morphed from Pop to Surf, to R&B, to Psychedelic," recalled Lenz. "We now had a new chick singer, Linda Morrison - a great talent who became a real driving force with her powerful vocals. Not bad to look at either. She later became Miss San Diego."

The Centaurs played countless school dances after football games and basketball games, when all of the kids would migrate from the game to the gymnasium.

Once, during an early morning sound check at the concourse, Lenz remembered a chance meeting with a special headliner. This was no small gig.

Cliff and company were in the middle of the sound check when a massive, corrugated door towards the rear of the venue opened wide for a tour bus. "It's the Mothers," [Mothers of Invention] they whispered. "It must be!"

The door of the tour bus opened and out plopped a chicken, then another one. Squealing, naked kids followed the chickens, and after that, the band and Frank Zappa himself. With such an intense on-stage presence, Zappa was



Still playing music, still enjoying it, Cliff Lenz is seen here with the legendary Fender Coronado guitar. The guitar belonged to band member Rick Thomas, who died of cancer in 2004. Upon his death, Rick's parents sent Cliff the instrument, which today remains one of his most cherished possessions.



One of the highlights of Cliff Lenz' career was getting The Ventures to sign his vinyl album cover.

nevertheless congenial and a pleasure to talk to, Lenz said.

The Centaurs had the satisfaction of opening for the likes of Jim Morrison and The Doors, The Association, and Steppenwolf. They also opened for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, The Leaves, and Grace Slick and Jefferson Airplane.

Atkinson's Web site has about 30 different bands posted, some with a wealth of information, like concert posters, audio clips and discographies. Other bands have done a disappearing act (is it better to burn out than to fade away?) and missing information is needed.

Atkinson gladly accepts any and

all information about these bands and musicians and incorporates them onto the site (address below).

Lenz left Coronado for graduate school at the University of Washington in 1969. He spent 20 years as host of the "Seattle Today" morning show for an NBC affiliate, and in the process he received an Emmy for composing the theme to "The Phil Donahue Show." An accomplished organist, Lenz played a musical tribute to Johann Sebastian Bach entitled "Happy Birthday Bach." He also produced a children's music show entitled "Music Magic."

Lenz is a big supporter of music education for children and he recalls his

band days in high school as some of his happiest memories. "Getting [children] into music in some way is one of the greatest gifts you can give a child," he said.

Many Coronado musicians contributed to the Centaurs' legacy. Rick Thomas, Pat Coleman, Doug Johnson, Clair Carlson, Randy Chilton, Kenny Brown, Drew Gallahar, Bill Lamden, Janie Seiner, Danny Orlino, Linda Morrison and Steve Kilajanski all called themselves a Centaur at one point.

Though they've moved on, many of the former Centaurs kept music in their lives long after they left the band. Lenz is one of them. "You may go off in a little bit of a different direction, but the passion is still there," he said.

Dean Atkinson is currently compiling info on local band members and their instruments of choice for a list that will fill the gaps in his local music history timeline. Anyone with information photos, or advertising fliers on local bands is encouraged to contact him at coronadobands@sbcglobal.net.

Atkinson's website, Coronado Band History, is located at [www.members.cox.net/coronadobands](http://www.members.cox.net/coronadobands). Lenz's bio on the Centaurs can be found on that site as well.



Clockwise from top:

Former Miss San Diego Linda Morrison added a new element to the Centaurs when she took on the job of lead vocalist. She is seen here with the band at the Atlantis Restaurant in the late 1960s.

The uncommon Fender Coronado II, close-up, which faithfully served The Centaurs from 1962-1969.

The Centaurs landed the gig as the Sunday night house band at what would become the legendary Downwind Club - the junior officer's club on North Island where they played for six years.

At the keyboards in this 1968 shot is a very young Cliff Lenz. The band is performing at the Atlantis Restaurant.



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