

MISSING LINK



THE FIREBALLS' GEORGE TOMSCO
SURFED THE EARLY WAVES OF ROCK 'N' ROLL
BY PAUL JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM KELLER





George Tomsco and bassist Stan Lark of the Fireballs performing at Albuquerque, New Mexico's Centennial Summerfest in 2012. The Fireballs are arguably the most successful rock 'n' roll band to come out of New Mexico. In addition to the vocal hit "Sugar Shack," the Fireballs are responsible for classic instrumental tunes such as "Fireball," "Bulldog," "Vaquero," and "Quite a Party."

Unhappy with the reaction of their old record label to the tune “Curious,” the Fireballs were able to tear up their contract and promptly sign to Top Rank Records. “Curious” was renamed “Torquay” and the rest is surf music history.

COURTESY SUNDAZED MUSIC

During the years just prior to the advent of surf music, rock instrumental music was a widely popular subgenre of rock. Originally, the guitar played a subservient role to the saxophone — the earliest instrumental hits such as Bill Doggett’s “Honky Tonk” reflect the dominant R&B flavor of the time. And the Champs’ sax classic “Tequila” remains the highest-charting rock instrumental hit of all time.

The trend changed abruptly when Duane Eddy accumulated hits built around his bold, “twangy” guitar sound. Eddy’s “Rebel Rouser” from 1958 was the first major instrumental hit to feature the guitar up front, inspiring countless would-be young musicians (myself included) to learn the instrument.

The floodgates were opened, and soon the airwaves were filled with a wide variety of guitar-driven instrumentals exploring the new realm that Eddy had pioneered. Other memorable instrumental guitar hits included Link Wray’s “Rumble,” Jorgen Ingmann’s “Apache,” the Virtues’ “Guitar Boogie Shuffle” and, of course, the Fireballs’ “Torquay” and “Bulldog.” Guitar instrumentals were suddenly the thing all over the world. The TV show *Bonanza* adopted a Duane Eddy-styled theme, and Ennio Morricone developed his own variation of the new guitar sound in his musical scores for Sergio Leone’s “spaghetti western” films. All of this (and surf music, too) can be traced to the influence of Duane Eddy.

The advent of the Ventures in 1960 was like the full blossoming of the seeds that Eddy and the other early bands had sown. “Walk, Don’t Run,” sparked a new nationwide surge in guitar playing, even as it brought a new level of sophistication to the rock-instrumental motif.

The playing of George Tomsco in the Fireballs remains, in my opinion, the essential stylistic link between Eddy and the Ventures. “Torquay” (as well as the instrumentals that followed) featured the same kind of clever creative interplay between instruments — the succulent chordal strums of Dan Trammell’s rhythm guitar providing counterbalance to Tomsco’s plucky lead. “Walk, Don’t Run” used this motif to such powerful effect that the Ventures’ chart success dwarfed that of the Fireballs and stole their thunder.

Despite that, the Fireballs remained one of the favorites within my circle. They served as a role model for the “ensemble” style that my band, the Belairs, favored. And in many ways, the Fireballs were my prime influence. As I was playing mainly rhythm guitar in the Belairs, I found a lot to like in their approach: It encour-

aged me to think that my function need not be so subservient to the lead as to be insignificant.

It was great to sit down with Tomsco and ask him about the earliest days of the Fireballs, recording for Norm Petty and more. Raton, New Mexico, is nowhere near the Pacific Ocean, but Tomsco played a vital role in the making of surf music.

PAUL JOHNSON: Tell us about growing up in Raton, New Mexico. Where is that?

GEORGE TOMSCO: Well, that is on the northeast quadrant of the state, and it’s seven miles south of the Colorado border. If you go from Albuquerque to Denver, or Denver to Albuquerque, Raton was the first town south of the Colorado line in New Mexico.

PJ: You spent your whole life in Raton?

GT: Except for when we moved to Clovis and became a recording band.

PJ: Did you go to college?

GT: Three months.

PJ: And then music called?

GT: Well, here’s what happened. I wanted to be in the music business. I wasn’t a flashy student. I had to study in high school, but I made good grades. I wasn’t one of those genius guys that didn’t have to do anything and made great grades.

So anyhow, because I made some good grades, I got a co-op scholarship for the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology in Socorro. I could go down there, work half a day, and go to school half a day, and that would pay some of my schooling. My folks said, “You better take advantage of that because we don’t have the money to send you to school.” I really didn’t want to do that. I wanted to be in the music business, but I didn’t know how to do that.

PJ: When did you start playing?

GT: I started playing when I was actually 9. I took six months of lessons. My guitar teacher taught me how to do chords, you know, D, G, C, F. I was working on covering the full fretboard with my first finger, like for the major F chord. I was struggling to accomplish that. Finally got to where I could execute that, and then my guitar teacher died! I consequently put my guitar in the closet for two years. Didn’t touch it.

PJ: Didn’t feel like some great destiny there?

GT: No. I just thought, that’s over. And then when I was about 11 years old, for some odd reason [I heard] the Harmonicats... I loved what they called “Western music” — Webb Pierce and Faron Young and Hank Thompson. In those days it was called Western music, it wasn’t called



TOP RANK RECORDS
The FIREBALLS



COURTESY SUNDazed MUSIC

country music.

PJ: Was there a lot of music in your house?

GT: No, not really. My dad was not real musical. But my mother was. She could sit down at the piano and play harmony notes. She could sing a little bit. And I always thought that was really neat that she'd sit down at the piano and play two-fingered harmony notes.

And so after I was about 11 years old, I started hearing the Harmonicats and Chet Atkins. Then I heard Les Paul and I said, "Wow! Listen to that!" I really got hooked on guitar. Les Paul probably created the biggest desire for me to start playing. Then, in school, I was in

the fifth grade, and we had a little assembly, and these two guys came and played for our little school assembly. They played "Guitar Boogie Shuffle," which I didn't know at the time.

PJ: Was there a fair amount of live music going on in Raton? Were there bands?

GT: Yeah, there were Western bands. I played with two of them: Perry Turner and the Drifters. That was the first band I ever played with. I was 12 years old. So from 11 to 12, for one year, I got back on the guitar and started really having a desire to know about and to play the guitar. My sister played accordion.

PJ: And you were playing acoustic guitars all this time?

GT: Yeah, it was an acoustic. I think it was a Harmony or an Airline. I think mine was like \$9 out of a catalog.

I remember telling my folks that I wanted a guitar either for Christmas or my birthday. So they did get me one. They'd see me glued to the radio when Les Paul would come on.

And then, of course, I was off to the races when I got my guitar. I had that thing under my pillow! Then I started playing well and I graduated from that to a nicer Gibson cutaway guitar. Then I bought a DeArmond pickup. I did have an amplifier, and I don't even know what it was. And then when I saw the Fender line of guitars, I wanted to go to that.

PJ: How did you meet the guys in the Fireballs?

GT: 1956. I was 16 years old, had a motorcycle — scared my mom and dad to death. They knew that I was just gonna trash myself... I hadn't heard rock 'n' roll yet. Our radio station was very traditional, played big bands.

A friend of mine, Will Royce Wright, knew that I played guitar, and he was interested in the fact that I was a guitar player for some odd reason. He was related to the neighbors and he would come up and visit them, and we would get together.

He was probably a couple years older than me. I was 16 and he was probably about 18 or 19. And so he called me up one day and he said, "Come on down here. I got something that you need to hear. It's some new music." And I said, "New music?" And he said, "Yeah, it's called rock 'n' roll." And I can remember so plainly, it's like if it was a minute ago, saying, "Rock 'n' roll? I have never heard a more stupid explanation of music in my life." A rock and a roll, like a stone and wheels! Rock 'n' roll? Why would anybody want to call music rock 'n' roll?

So anyhow, he said, you gotta come down and hear these records that I've got.

PJ: Up to this point, were you aware of the roots of rock 'n' roll, like the rhythm and blues, Fats Domino and the Platters, and that sort of thing?

GT: Oh, no. I hadn't heard none of that.

After I went down, he got his little record player out and played, I believe, "Rock Around the Clock" on 78. And Elvis Presley's "Mystery Train." And for four hours we listened to those two records, over and over and over. I couldn't believe my ears.

I was just glued to that little record player. And so I went home on my motorcycle, just mesmerized with what I was hearing, and I got back home and I said, "Wow, rock

'n' roll." Then I started hunting for it on the radio...

Then I ran across KOMA in Oklahoma City, playing rock 'n' roll.

It not only would come in, but it would stay in. It wouldn't fade out. And so KOMA was my gateway to learning rock 'n' roll. I always wanted to be in the music business, I just didn't know how to do it. I got together with Chuck Tharp, a singer in school. He was aggressively pursuing singing. I said, "Hey, let's work out some things."

And then after Chuck and I started getting some things worked out I got ahold of Dan Trammell 'cause he was a rhythm guitar player. I said, "Let's get a rhythm guitar player 'cause then maybe I can start learning some lead."

I didn't even know then anything about where I was going. As it worked out, after we got Danny, the next thing we did was get a drummer, which was Eric [Budd].

We were all part of little Western groups. Stan [Lark] would be playing with that one and this one, and I'd be playing with that one and this one. Finally we said, "Well, let's get together and learn one rock 'n' roll song. Let's do Jerry Lee Lewis' "Great Balls of Fire."

We had a talent show coming up. So we learned "Great Balls of Fire," and that was the only rock 'n' roll song we learned as a group. We won the contest; everybody's clappin' and shouting, "Let's have another song!" We played "Great Balls of Fire" again, 'cause that's the only one we knew! We didn't have the name for the group, and then somebody said something to my dad about why don't they call themselves the Fireballs. When Dad repeated that, I said, "Wow, that's a great name."

So that's where the name of the Fireballs came from. Then we started really concentrating. We start trying to find and buy rock 'n' roll records and we started rehearsing rock 'n' roll songs. Chuck started singing Elvis and Carl Perkins and everything.

PJ: So were you doing mostly [songs with] vocals?

GT: Yeah, we were doing mainly vocals at that time.

Then, when I graduated and went to college and I was down in Socorro, I still hadn't written anything yet. But while I was down there, I had a dream and in my dream I heard this melody, and it was *dan, dan, dan, do, do, do...* I had heard that in my dream and I woke up, and I thought, "Wow, what a neat thing I'm hearing." So I went from a dream to kind of waking up, to becoming awake and concentrating on keeping that same melody going through my mind as I was waking up. I reached under-

neath my bunk and I pulled out my guitar, and I said, “I gotta find out where to play that. Where is the melody on this guitar?” And so I started hunting and hunting, and then I’d have to quit because I was making lots of mistakes and I’d almost lose the thought, so I’d quit playing. I’d keep concentrating on *dab, dab, dab, do, do, do* — keep concentrating. And then when I knew that I’d gotten it back and I wasn’t going to lose it for a minute, then I’d try to find it on the guitar again. Finally, I found out how to play on the guitar what I was hearing and what I had dreamed about, and it was just so simple as that song is, you know.

PJ: Are you talkin’ about the song “Fireball?”

GT: “Fireball.” That’s the first song I ever wrote, yeah. And it came from a dream. It was like manifest from a dream into being awake, to grabbing the guitar and to writing that song. And then once I did that, then I kept playing it ‘cause I didn’t want to forget how I was doing it. It was like two in the morning when this happened. So I stayed up all night playing that, over and over and over again, and then went to class. As soon as class was over I went back to the dorm and grabbed the guitar.

While we were still in Raton, the music director for the school band bought an acetate cutting machine. He used to come up to the Fireballs’ jam sessions and record some stuff. I had this little record player and I was playing one of the disks that he had cut on the Fireballs, it was just some Western music that we were doing when he was experimenting. And this guy stopped in my room and was listening. I didn’t know who he was, and he said, “What’s that?” I said, “Oh, that’s our little band up in Raton.” And he said, “Well, sounds pretty good.” Get this, he said, “You oughta go down to Clovis, New Mexico, and record it at Norm Petty Studio where Buddy and the Crickets record.” And I said, “What?” I wanted to be in the music business, but I didn’t know how to get there.

PJ: Now, had you heard Buddy Holly at this point?

GT: Yeah, I’d heard Buddy Holly.

And so I said, “What did you say?” And he said, “You ought to go down there. There’s a recording studio in Clovis, New Mexico, Norm Petty Studios. He records Buddy Holly and the Crickets, Roy Orbison, blah, blah, blah.” And I said, “I didn’t even know there was a studio in New Mexico, let alone that these guys recorded there!”

PJ: How far is Clovis?

GT: Two hundred and thirty four miles from Raton. So I went home that weekend and I told the guys, “There’s a

recording studio in Clovis, New Mexico. Norm Petty’s got it down there.” I said, “I’m gonna call him.” This is on a Saturday and I found “information please” — you know, you’d have to get ahold of the operator, and she would have to get information, please.

So she got information please for me for Norm Petty’s Recording Studio. I called. Norma Jean answered and I said, “We wanted to find out how to cut a record.” And she said, “Well here, why don’t you talk to Mr. Petty?” So Mr. Petty got on the phone. He said, “Why don’t you send me a tape of your band?” We didn’t have a tape recorder. I said, “Well, we’re gonna be down there in a couple of weeks playing around the area.”

PJ: Was that just made up?

GT: Yeah. I made it off the top of my head. I said, “I would rather come by and audition for you live.” He was real hesitant about that because he’s getting calls; everybody’s wanting to make a record. So finally I convinced him, after talking with him for a quite a while and lying.

PJ: Were you approaching him with the idea of having him produce you?

GT: This was the only thing I had in my mind. *I want to make a record.* I didn’t know anything else.

PJ: Had you written “Torquay” at this point?

GT: “Fireball” was the only one. It was “Fireball” and then Chuck and I wrote a vocal called “I Don’t Know.” So we only had two songs when we went down to Petty’s.

We didn’t know exactly what to expect. I mean, we just wanted to make a record! So when I convinced him that we were playing there, I said to him, “Could we come down and could we rehearse or audition on a Sunday?” I said, “We’re playing Friday or Saturday night, and we could be there on Sunday.” He said, “Well, yeah, I guess so,” but he also said, “It’d have to be about two in the afternoon because I go to church in the morning.”

Saturday night, we played in Roy, New Mexico, at Rigoni’s Bar. Then we drove on down to Clovis. It was like three in the morning; we got us a motel. I was so excited to be in Clovis because we were going to be auditioning for Norm Petty! I made everybody in the band go to church that morning.

So come 10 or whatever mass was that Sunday morning, we were all in church and just haven’t really had any sleep yet, or anything. And I can remember asking God’s help for the audition. And so then it’s two o’clock. We went in there, got set up and everything and started rehearsing. There were two guys in the control room —





two young-looking guys — and we didn't know what they were doing. So we started to practicing and getting ready for Norm Petty.

PJ: What was your impression when you walked into that studio?

GT: Oh, the studio, wow! It was just like *whoa*. This is where Buddy Holly and the Crickets record? And Roy Orbison's been here, you know. Buddy Knox's "Party Doll" and Jimmy Bowen's "I'm Stickin' with You."

And we're getting ready for Norm Petty. I'm expecting a guy with a fat belly and a white shirt with his buttons pulled, smoking a cigar. So come three, there's

no Norm Petty. We keep playing and practicing, and everything. Come four, I get ahold of Norma Jean and ask, "Where's Norm Petty?" And she said, "Oh, he's in the control room there." I said, "One of those guys?" They're young guys, you know!

PJ: You didn't even know there was anybody in there?

GT: Well, we knew that there was two guys in the control room, but we just saw them doing stuff in there, working with the tapes.

PJ: So you figured they were like...

GT: ... just employees of some kind. I was waiting for

the fat guy to come in! Then she walked in there and said to Norman that the guys want y'all to come and talk to them. So he walked in and, of course, we got the jitters.

PJ: He had already heard you at this point, right? Did he give you any feedback?

GT: Well, he just said, "Do you have any original material?" I said, "Original material, what do you mean? What's that?" He said, "Have you written any songs?" I said, "Yeah, we got two; one of them is a song I wrote, 'Fireball,' and the other one is a song that Chuck and I wrote, 'I Don't Know.'" So he said, "Did you play those?" And we said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, play 'em again!" And so we did, and of course we messed up on them and he laughed about that, 'cause we had the jitters.

Anyhow, he said, "If you were going to record, who publishes your material?" I said, "What do you mean? I don't understand what you're asking." "Well, if you're gonna record, you've got to have a publisher."

PJ: So he's probably got you sized up pretty quickly as a malleable...

GT: Yeah. So I said, "Well, I don't understand what you're talking about." He said, "Well, if you record, can I publish your material?" And my brain just flew open. I thought, this guy who's recording Buddy Holly is asking me if he could publish my song? You know, I just couldn't believe that he was volunteering for that. I said, "Well, yeah."

I asked, "Can we record now?" And he said, "No, I'm not recording today." Today's Sunday. We said, "Can we record tomorrow?" "No, I've got Buddy Holly and the Crickets coming over Monday." "Can we record Tuesday?" "No, they're gonna be here Tuesday, too."

He said, "Why don't you guys go back to Raton, and call me on the phone and we'll figure out a time to record in the future."

He said, "I'll record ya, but it's going to cost you \$150." Seventy-five dollars a song. He said, "The thing that's different about me and other recording studios is the fact that I don't charge by the hour. Once we get the song done properly, we call that good." It's \$150 to record two songs, not looking at the clock, so to speak.

PJ: Any mention of an agreement or contract, recording release?

GT: No, not at that point. And then I said, "Well, could we record Wednesday?"

PJ: So you're pushing it.

GT: I told the guys, "This guy likes us; let's don't let him cool off. I don't want to leave town." He said, "If you want to, I guess you can, 'cause we could record Wednesday."

PJ: Ah, the magic words. Did you have \$150?

GT: Well, we did at the time because we just played in Roy, New Mexico, and we'd made about \$200 for the gig that night. We stayed in a motel. Of course, motels were just like \$4 or \$5 a night, and we bunched up in one room. So we had the \$150, but by the time Wednesday rolled around, we'd been having hamburgers and then putting gas in the car, chasing the Clovis cuties and all that...

We stayed Monday, Tuesday and then Wednesday. Late Wednesday morning, the Crickets and Buddy Holly went back to Lubbock and we got there about four on Wednesday afternoon. We set up and started to get a sound check and he said, "Since this is going to be your first session, why don't you go get some burgers and come back because it's not going to be as easy as you think. It's going to take a little time, and we don't want to be in a real big hurry," which we really appreciated.

So we went and got burgers. When we came back, there was a pink Cadillac in front of the studio with Texas license plates. I said, "Who's that?" We walked in and here's this skinny guy with funny-looking glasses playing my guitar better than I could play my guitar, with his foot up on my brand new amp, which ticked me off. And so I stormed into the control room. "Who's that guy playing my guitar?" And Norman looks at me through the double windows and said, "Buddy Holly." Well, of course.

He punched the talk back button and said, "Buddy, come in here. I want you to meet these guys." So Buddy set my guitar down and walked in the control room. Norman said, "Buddy, this is the Fireballs from Raton." So we all shook hands. We were awe-struck.

When we got back, I said to Norman, "We don't have \$150. It's been motels and gas, and it's been burgers. So we ain't got the money to record now. He laughed and said, "Well, how much money will it take for you to get gas to get home?" We had two cars, figured \$20.

And he asks, "Okay, if you have \$20, how much does that leave you?" We said, "Well, we got \$75 if we take the \$20 off for gas." He said, "That's enough for one side. We'll go ahead and record both sides, and you pay me the \$75."

In 1963, Jimmy Gilmer and the Fireballs reached the top of the Billboard chart with their vocal hit, "Sugar Shack." By November 29, 1963, the single was certified by the RIAA for selling over a million copies. The catchy tune was not penned by a member of the Fireballs, but by songwriters Keith McCormack and Jimmy Torres. The single would later be covered by the Muppets in the early 1990s for their album, *Muppet Beach Party*.
COURTESY SUNDAZED MUSIC

We were floating. Our minds were just spinning 100 miles an hour. And he said, "But I'm not gonna take your master until I get paid for the second side." He had told us that he makes regular trips to New York to try and place masters with record companies.

PJ: Now, he was a pretty shrewd businessman...

GT: Yes, he was. That's how he got Buddy. Everybody that was anything resulted from one of his trips to New York.

But at that point we went ahead and did our session — the two songs — and then we left and came home. I convinced the guys to stay till Wednesday. Two of them had regular jobs, supposed to be at work Monday, and Stan was supposed to be checked into college on Monday. The guys called back and said they weren't going to be coming to work because we passed an audition and we're going to cut a record. The bosses thought that was pretty snazzy. But Stan didn't call his folks and say anything, because his dad would have just blown his stack...

PJ: Can you describe the recording session?

GT: When we got in there, set up and actually started recording... it was weird because none of us had ever heard any fidelity, you know? We heard it played back on one Altec speaker. I actually, literally, didn't think it was us! It was the same song we just did, but I thought, "That can't be us." And I even said so. I said, "Is that us?" And Norm looked at me and said, "Well, who else would it be?" It was just amazing because he didn't let us come in and listen until he thought we had a cut.

PJ: So he just had you all miked separately in the same room?

GT: Mm-hm. The drummer was in an isolation booth; it was kind of a little hut that was over him, but it was still open to the room. And our amplifiers were faced away from the drum mic, but still in the same room.

PJ: So how long did the session take?

GT: "I Don't Know" took the biggest part of the night. We probably finished at two [in the morning].

PJ: How long did it take him to get your sound to where he was ready to do a master cut?

GT: It took about an hour. Yeah, he would come in and change stuff. Sometimes sessions would go quickly, and sometimes they wouldn't. Just like with the Crickets. I could see that he knew that it could go quickly or it could take a long time. But the important thing he wanted to

do was to get that feeling in the cut. He would get the technical perfection done, but then he would wait until the feel was there.

PJ: Was there ever a moment in that session where he said, "Yeah, wow, that's great!"

GT: Not really. He'd say, "Come in and listen." Whenever he said, "Come in and listen," we understood we might have a good take. He never did jump up and say, "Oh, man, that's great," or anything. He was pretty mellow. Sometimes when he said, "Come on in and listen," he wanted us to hear what we were doing wrong. He wanted us to identify it.

PJ: What happened after that initial session?

GT: Well, we went home Thursday and we slept Thursday night. We had a job either Friday or Saturday in Springer and we made \$80 that night. So we took \$75 and sent it to Norman, and we all split \$5 five ways. We each made \$1 that night.

PJ: But now you could look forward to him pitching your record.

GT: Right. We sent him a check immediately on Monday. And he took our first cut to New York and sold it to Kapp Records. It was our first release.

PJ: Wow! How soon after the session was that?

GT: September the 3rd was when we had the session, 1958. Norman went at the end of September to New York, and so "Fireball," our first record, was released in January of '59 on Kapp Records.

PJ: So what sort of negotiations did you do with Norman at this point?

GT: "At this point since I did sell it, maybe you would like to consider signing with the agency?" he asked. "What that means is that I won't charge you to record, but I'll take 50 percent of your royalties. But I'm also going to try to sell it for more than the average contract."

PJ: So the way he's representing it is that you're going to split with him for whatever comes in on the record?

GT: Right, as artist royalties. And then he's also going to publish my stuff, which he gets 50 percent of. People say, "Well, wait a minute. It sounds like to me like you really got screwed!" Not really, because we were putting up a song and a performance, and he was putting up his studio, his time and his expertise. So he's taking 50 percent...

I was 18. I think Eric was 20. Nobody was over 20. Our parents said, "I don't know, this music business can



SURF MUSIC 101

A quick history lesson: Before 1961, there was no California surf culture as we know it today. But a new trend was on the rise that year: With the advent (in the late '50s) of lightweight foam boards, surfing caught on big with beach-area kids. By the summer of '61 this had grown into a major cultural explosion — a mass movement complete with its own styles, mannerisms and slang. At that time, I was 15 and a fledgling guitarist with a fledgling band, the Belairs (in L.A.'s South Bay area). The Belairs emulated the sounds of the rock-instrumental heroes of the preceding years (Duane Eddy, the Fireballs, the Ventures, etc.). We had never given the slightest thought of calling ourselves a surf band.

And when we saw that a lot of the kids from the South Bay beaches were driving 30 miles south to Balboa on the weekends to hear a guy named Dick Dale playing music similar to ours, we decided to get in on the action by throwing our own dances locally. The result was like jumping onto a speeding train! Our first dance that summer drew about 200 kids; a prominent local surfer came up to me that night and said, "Wow, man, your music sounds just like it feels out on a wave! You oughta call it 'surf music!'" By summer's end we were filling halls with 1,200 fully stoked surfers. Over the summer, they had embraced our music (along with Dale's) as their own. Now they were calling it surf music!

Early the next year, guitarmaker Leo Fender began to market his reverb unit — a device that gave the guitar a wet, slippery tone. Once Dick Dale began using the Fender reverb, this sound was quickly adopted by growing numbers of new Southern California surf bands seeking to be a part of what Dale and the Belairs had begun. By the summer of '62, thousands of kids were stomping to the sound of reverb-ridden instrumentals all over the area. Surf music was in full flower.

Also in early '62, just as the Belairs' record "Mr. Moto" hit the local charts (along with Dale's "Let's Go Trippin'"), another record started getting airplay: "Surfin'." This vocal tune by a group called the Beach Boys (from Hawthorne, just east of the South Bay) had a twist: a song with actual words touting the sport and the new phenomenon surrounding it.

Ironically, the local beach crowd (who insisted that real surf music must be instrumental) initially scorned that record. I overheard comments dismissing the Beach Boys as "gremmies" (pseudo-surfers) who were trying to cash in on the surf craze with their "candy-coated" paean to the surfing life. (I even remember some guys at Torrance Beach talking about going up to Hawthorne to beat up the Beach Boys!) It wasn't until the Beach Boys sang about cars, "honeys" and cruisin' the boulevards (subjects they could sing about with more personal authority) that they finally won everyone over and earned the local respect that their talent deserved. When Jan & Dean began cranking out similar hits, it became clear that this was a whole other phase. While instrumental bands like the Chantays ("Pipeline"), the Surfaris ("Wipeout") and others continued to champion the authentic, original surf sound, the new vocal groups captured the imagination of the whole world with what I prefer to call "the California sound" — songs with colorful lyrics interpreting the SoCal experience for mass consumption.

I will be the first to confess that I had no part in contriving to invent a music to go with the feeling of the ocean or of surfing or any such thing. Although I'm sure that growing up around the beach must have affected the attitude of my playing in some characteristic way, the surf music I played was not inspired by the surf, but rather by the guitar work of guys like Duane Eddy and George Tomsco. — PJ



be not very good.” And oh, man, we were just bound and determined that we wanted them to sign something. They did, I think, because they thought that there’d be no peace in the house if they wouldn’t!

It was a five-year contract, and I’m glad we signed it. I thought that was a great deal.

PJ: So did anything exciting happen between the time that the agreement came and the record came out?

GT: I actually went to work at a steel mill for a little while.

PJ: Did you hear “Fireball” get played on the radio?

GT: Yeah. Luckily our local radio station broke ranks and decided they would play our record. It was amazing to hear our stuff played on that station because traditionally they didn’t play rock ‘n’ roll. That was a big deal. And then I went to Pueblo and KDZA. Steve Scott started

playing “Fireball” up there in Pueblo.

PJ: What did you record next?

GT: I think we did “Torquay” and “Cry Baby.”

PJ: “Cry Baby” is the vocal?

GT: The vocal. And we really thought that that was going to be the hit, you know? And we recorded “Panic Button” and something else.

PJ: You mentioned that it wasn’t named “Torquay” yet?

GT: It was named “Curious.” And so he presented that to Kapp. Mickey [Kapp] was in charge of the office while his daddy was gone. Norm walks in and Mickey’s got his feet up on the desk... Of course Norman’s got his suit on. He was always very proper when he did business. He didn’t want to mess around. They had words. Mickey didn’t like “Curious.”

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TWO SIDES TO SURF MUSIC

Historians generally point to two principle schools of surf music: the Orange County sound had Dick Dale as its champion, and the South Bay sound was defined by the Belairs. Dale was more in the Duane Eddy mold: not in his playing style so much as in the way he took his place at the front of the stage as the dominant force, with his band playing a subservient role behind him. Band members could be interchangeable, as the only truly distinctive voice on the stage was that of Dale's loud and powerful guitar. The Belairs' influence, on the other hand, put forth the ensemble motif we had learned from the Fireballs and the Ventures. We were more about creative ideas and arrangements than we were about the overwhelming power of the lead guitar. As a result, the South Bay-styled bands kept the volume levels of the two guitars closer to equal, and the lead guitarist tended to use less reverb than his OC counterpart; these elements were intended to highlight the intimacy between the guitars, rather than the space between them (as the OC style tended to do).

I make no case for either one of these motifs being better than the other; I merely want to point out this distinction, and to show the South Bay school as being the closer example of the Fireballs' influence. In any case, followings for each band (the Belairs and Dick Dale) spread out from each of their home areas, and the styles of the various surf bands that came later can be defined in terms of these two influences. — PJ

Norman said they had words back and forth and they agreed to tear up our contract. Norman tore up his copy, and Mickey went and got the contract out of the files and tore it up because they were at odds. Norman knew we had a good thing, but Mickey was saying, "Well, I don't know about these Fireballs." Anyhow, once the contracts were torn up, Norman walked down the stairs, across the street and up the stairs to Top Rank Records.

Norman told him about what happened over at Kapp and said, "Here's the Fireballs' new cut called 'Curious.'" He played it for him, and [Top Rank's] Norm Wienstroer said, "I really like that." He said, "I just came off on the coast, it's called Torquay."

He said, "This cut reminds me of that place so much. We'd like to have the group, but I'd like to name this song 'Torquay.'" So Norm gets on the phone and calls me. He said, "You know, we're no longer with Kapp. I'm in Top Rank's office and..." And this is what's neat — for the phone to be ringing and Norman Petty calling me

from New York! I mean, wow! This is 1959! I'm 19 years old! He said, "They like this cut, but they want to change the name to T-O-R-Q-U-A-Y — 'Torquay.'"

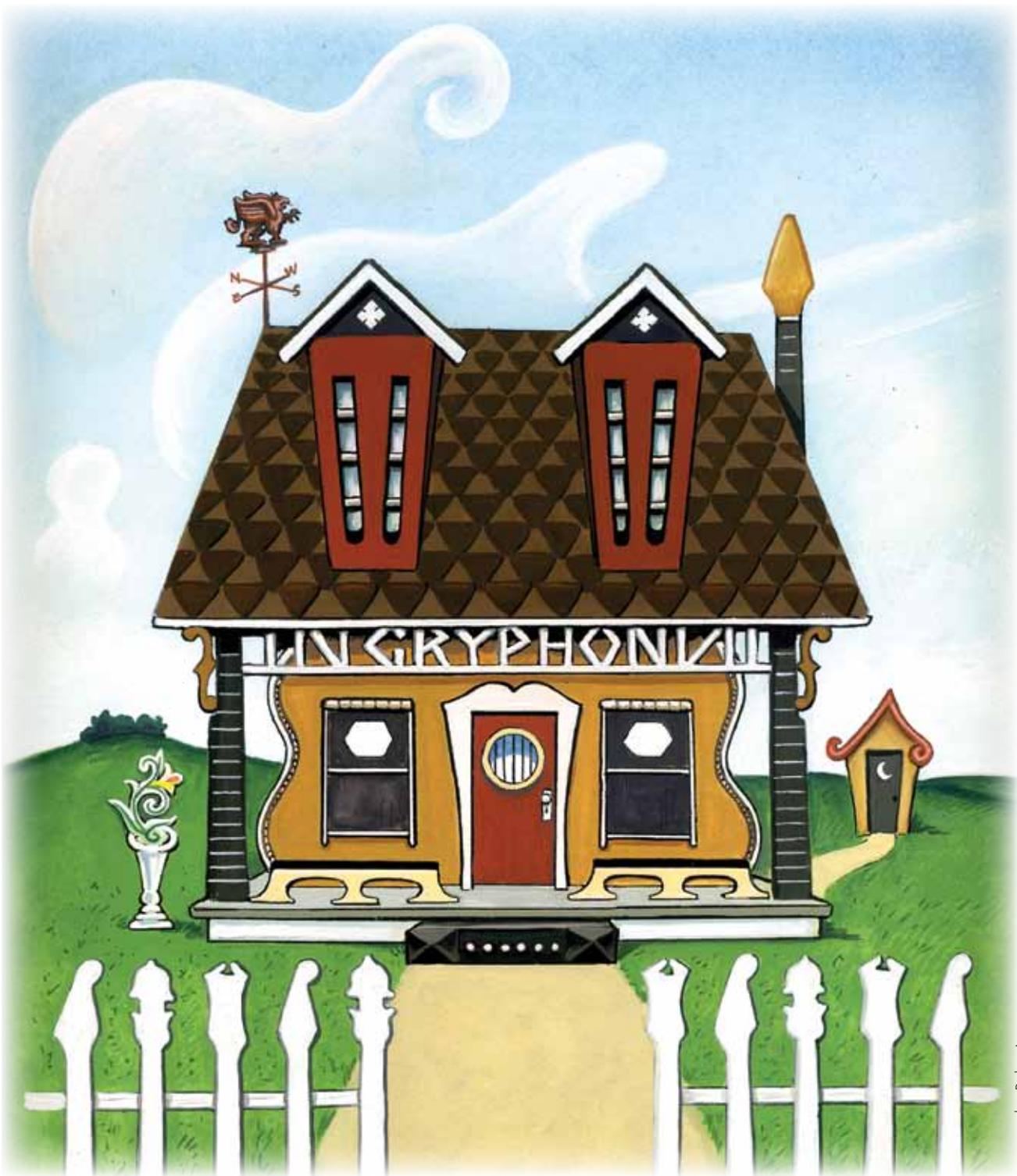
And I said, "What?" And he told me the story about it being a resort and all that. So I said, "Well, I don't know, what do you think?" And he said, "I think that we ought to let 'em go with it and change the name if they want to." So I said, "Well, okay," and that's the way it was. Norm signed us with Top Rank. They released "Torquay."

Our whole first album come out with Top Rank: "Cry Baby," "Bulldog," "Torquay," "Foot Patter," "Panic Button," "I Wonder Why."

PJ: How long did it take from that time for "Torquay" to start catching on?

GT: "Torquay" was quick. It wasn't very long and Top Rank got right on the promotion of it. That was in the summer of '59.

PJ: Did you record "Torquay" with the Jazzmaster?



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GT: With the Jazzmaster. The only thing cut with a Strat was “Fireball” and “I Don’t Know.”

PJ: We noted in listening to the recording of “Torquay” that it is in G. And it’s obvious that the guitar’s going down to a low D. Did you detune the guitar?

GT: Yeah.

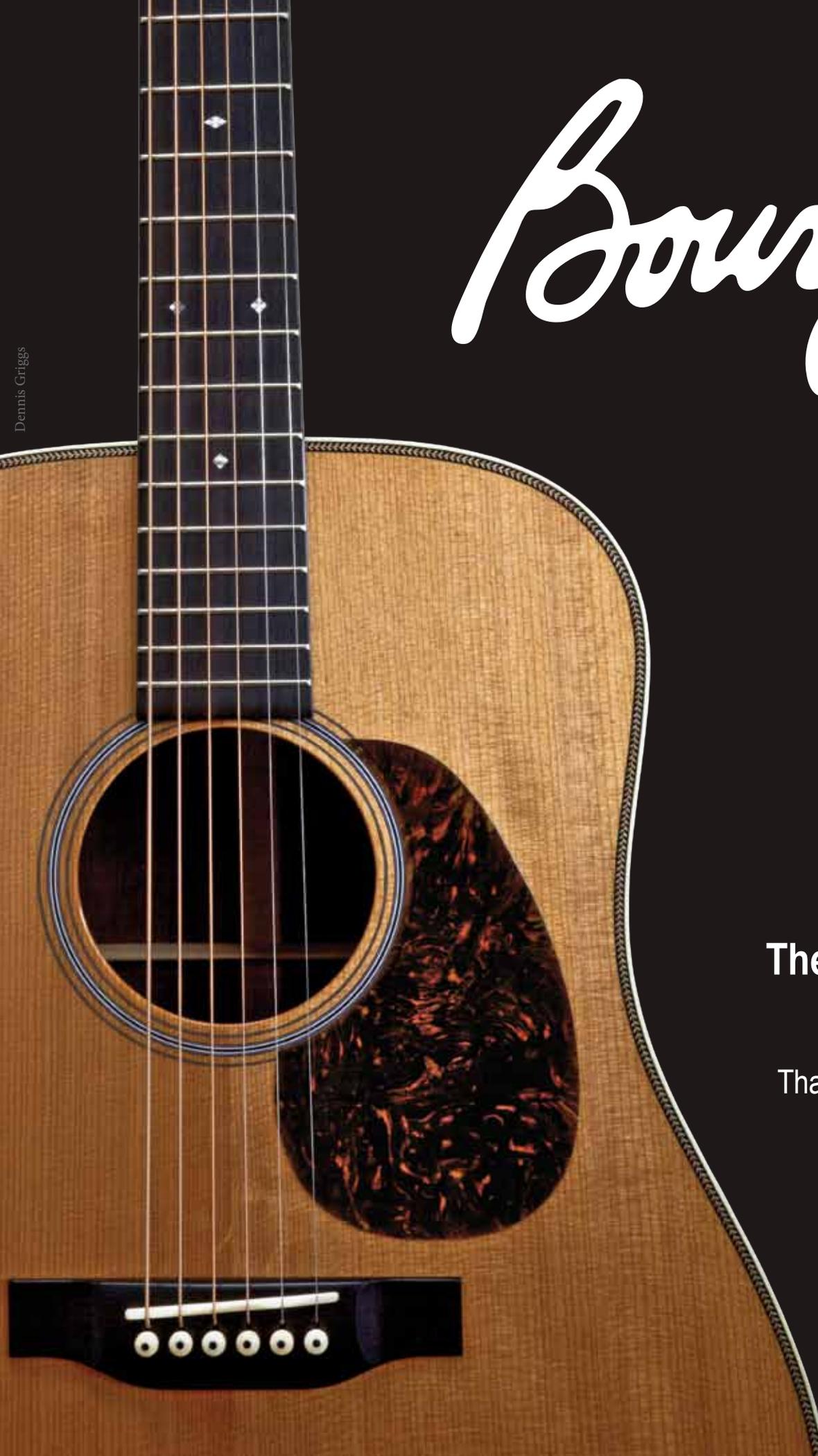
PJ: It almost sounds like one of those Danelectro bass guitars, or something.

GT: Yeah, Norm, for some odd reason, wanted us to detune. I don’t remember exactly why.

PJ: So did you step up to a better amplifier and all that? Were you making money as a new musician enough to afford the Jazzmaster by this time?

GT: Not really. I bought the Jazzmaster and I traded in the Tremolux amp to get a ’57 Fender Twin. I’ve still got it.

PJ: Wow! Really? And that’s what you recorded “Tor-



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Lark and Tomsco in 2012. The members of the original 1958 lineup of the Fireballs continue to play together to this day. They formed the group when they entered the Raton High School PTA talent show in 1958. Their band name came from the tune they were covering, "Great Balls of Fire".

quay" with?

GT: Right. "Torquay," "Bulldog," "Foot Patter," "Vaquero." From then on, that's the amp I used. Through an Electro-Voice 630 — just a small bullet mic. That was what he used on my guitar amp.

PJ: Do you remember how close he miked it?

GT: It would be within an inch of the grill cloth, right into the speaker.

PJ: Okay, so the way I see it: you have the original "Fireball" session, then you have the "Torquay" session with a couple of other tunes. Was it after "Torquay" hit that you went and recorded "Bulldog"?

GT: Yeah.

PJ: So, 1959 was the year that you guys really got your taste of success. Was it with "Torquay" that you were on *The Dick Clark Show*?

GT: Yeah.

PJ: I remember back then the dream was to do *The Ed Sullivan Show*. You'd really made it if you did *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

GT: Oh, absolutely. And of course, [Buddy] Holly was on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. But we didn't ever do it.

PJ: I know "Bulldog" was a bigger hit than "Torquay." Did you start seeing some money come in about this time?

GT: Things were a little bit more lucrative for us, and we just kept being on the road in the Midwest, coming back, playing some local gigs, recording, then going back.

PJ: You must have been kind of blown away by all this? Country boys, never hardly ever been out of Raton?

GT: Right, and then all of a sudden we were at the Edison Hotel in New York City.

PJ: I don't think you had another hit as big as "Bulldog," in the instrumental period. I want to ask you about the Mexican music that you recorded for the *Vaquero* album in 1960, a bunch of old classic Mexican standards. What was the thinking behind recording those? I can't imagine he thought it would be hit-single potential.

GT: [Norm] was just trying to expand our horizons from guitar instrumental rock 'n' roll into a world market by doing other music, not just rock 'n' roll instrumentals.

PJ: How did that album do? Do you recall?

GT: It sold, but it didn't bring us to a new level, because people liked "Panic Button," they liked "Torquay," they liked "Bulldog."

PJ: So, Chuck Tharp left the band. Can you tell us

what happened regarding filling the vocalist spot?

GT: We were contracted to be on tour — it was either Canada or the Midwest. We had 30 days and Chuck quit. We had to get somebody quick, so we called Norman and he said, "Let's see if Jimmy would be interested." So Norman called Jimmy and Jimmy came over, and...

PJ: Jimmy Gilmer? Was he just someone that Norman knew?

GT: Yeah, he had been over to Norman's to record. He had a single that was released on Decca Records, I think. We really liked the fact that he sang as well as he did, because the only way we knew Jimmy Gilmer was from his record of "Look Alive," which was cut in the studio.

So once we got together and jammed, we could see that it worked. So we said, "Hey, I think we got something to work with here. Are you interested?" And he said, "Sure." This was on a Sunday, and the night before, on Saturday, he had played a job in Amarillo and his band fired him!

So he came over Sunday to audition with Norman for the Fireballs and went home Sunday afternoon saying, "You know, I got a deal with the Fireballs." His former band had their minds blown.

PJ: So how did "Sugar Shack" come about?

GT: Well, we recorded it with several other vocals. Norman and Jimmy were reviewing things [songwriter] Keith McCormack and his brother would bring over. "Sugar Shack" happened to be one of them. We just picked that as one of the good ones.

This was in December of '62. We had no idea that "Sugar Shack" was going to do what it did, because we had recorded several other good songs.

PJ: Was that the first single release out of all those recording?

GT: What was sort of funny was, once we started playing it live at our jobs, just as soon as we finished playing the song, people would come up and say, "What was the name of that song?"

PJ: Right! It's so catchy.

GT: Yeah. "What was the name of that song?" "Well, it was 'Sugar Shack.'" "Wow, man, that was really good." And we'd go back and play maybe a few months later, the same teen club, or armory, or VFW, or whatever, and they'd come up and say, "Hey, the last time you was here you played that 'Sugar' song, or that 'Shack' song. Would you play that song again?" "Oh, you mean 'Sugar Shack?'" "Yeah, yeah, yeah, play that one." That kept happening.



PJ: Did it happen fast?

GT: No, it took six months, because the record company thought it was too strange and didn't want to promote it.

PJ: So, now, when that record hit, though, that must have changed your life, because, let's get this for the record, that was the No. 1 record for all of 1963.

GT: Oh, yeah, this was like big stuff, you know? I mean, it hit the charts and it was solid. We were signed with Dot Records; contractually they released that record, but the president of Dot Records didn't like it. He thought that it would be wasting vinyl to release it, because it was so different. And Norman had another argument going with him.

Norman was insistent and said, "Okay, we're supposed to agree on the releases for the Fireballs, but if you'll go along with me on this one, and it doesn't hit, then you can pick the next one and I'll just stay out of the decision." Let me make this decision, you make the next decision.

PJ: So Norman believed in it?

GT: Yeah, he really did. Yeah, because he had that little *dab, dab, dab* — that was his thing.

PJ: That's a hook, man!

GT: That's a hook, and that was "his" hook. That was his contribution. That made that song his pet.

PJ: How did that change your life?

GT: When that hit, we already had some tours booked for a little money. At that time there was a whole bunch of rock radio stations, and we would go up and down the dial on the radio and we said, "Let's see how long we have to listen to a radio station before we hear 'Sugar Shack.'" "

PJ: I bet it was never more than a few minutes.

GT: It was like every 15 or 20 minutes! And that's just the way it was for quite some time.

PJ: You never had another instrumental hit?

GT: No.

PJ: You had become a vocal band...

GT: At "Sugar Shack," yeah. It changed our lives.

PJ: And then what was the next hit after that?

GT: "Daisy Petal Pickin'" was just a clone of "Sugar Shack." It started up the charts, then it got its knees sliced off by the Beatles.

PJ: I remember what happened to surf music at that time. Were there any other significant charting records prior to "Bottle of Wine" in 1968?

GT: Not really. We reissued "Torquay II" — it was

a recut. And it got a few plays but nothing happened really big.

PJ: "Bottle of Wine" was a Tom Paxton song, right?

GT: Yeah, Stan and Jimmy heard it down in New York, in Greenwich Village, where the folk singers hung out. Tom Paxton was doing it one night and Jimmy remembered it. I remember Carolyn Hester telling me and Norman that the Fireballs ought to do "Bottle of Wine."

PJ: Now, what are you doin' hangin' out with all these folkies?

GT: Well, Carolyn Hester recorded in our studio...

PJ: So that was your connection.

GT: Yeah, she had moved from Austin to New York, but she was recording at Norman's.

PJ: Did you have any other significant hits after that?

GT: Yeah, "Come on, React" was a chart record. And "Long Green" even hit the charts for a week or two, but we didn't have anything really solid like "Bottle of Wine."

PJ: One final thing I wanted to just touch on. As I said earlier, I was listening to "Torquay" and "Bulldog" when I was learning to play guitar and we developed our own versions of those songs out in California, along with stuff we were hearing from the Ventures, Johnny and the Hurricanes and all the others. We started playing around the beach, and the surfers would come up and they started calling it surf music. They identified with the music and they called it surf music. They said it reminded them of being out on a wave. This was in the summer of '61, so it was well after "Bulldog" was recorded. But "Bulldog" was generally embraced by a lot of the bands that started up at that time, as being kind of the model of what they were after. It was a prime example of the kind of tune about which the surfers would say, "Hey, that reminds me of being out on a wave."

GT: Isn't that something. We had no idea. From New Mexico, we had no idea that that was the interpretation of our music...our song, you know.

PJ: Now people listen to the Fireballs and the Ventures and they think it sounds similar enough that they call it all surf music.

GT: Well, that's why Dick Clark introduced us on his TV show as "the new surf band from New Mexico."

PJ: Anything else you'd like to add?

GT: I'm just amazed that it's been 50 years. I'm so thankful that it's at least still alive and still recognized, and still appreciated. What more can you ask for? 