

shoe. Sticky floor, nasty place...and the women's room wasn't any better!"

**Charlotte Pressler:** "Stress" show almost never varied. Most of the crowd knew his jokes by heart. They had been coming to hear him for years, and would keep on coming to hear him. The small, dim room was always jammed; Monique, the one barmaid, hopelessly over-worked. But Stress, knowing his comfortable reliability might become too predictable, always provided himself with a foil in the band. His guitar players, usually young and untried, drew people who wanted to see who Stress was going to come up with next. Peter Laughner, with his grimaces and raw, almost violent solos, was one of the more interesting."<sup>28</sup>

**Tom Rinda:** "...we would play 'Chicken Shack' in the key of G of course and he would rattle on (with) his lame routine like 'We'll be featuring such tunes as 'Don't Holler Through The Screen Door It Will Strain Your Voice'" and he would go on with all this corny humor but it was funny."

Things were progressing nicely for the MSBB at the Brick Cottage through the summer of 1972. The group did four blistering sets to about 100 people throughout the night, drawing from the classic but diverse blues catalogues of Little Walter, Muddy Waters, Bobby Blue Bland, B.B. King, Otis Rush, Freddie King, Big Bill Broonzy, Charles Brown, Lowell Fulson, and many more. They'd also shake things up a bit and there is recorded evidence that they did Bob Dylan's "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat" and Chuck Berry's "Nadine" with Laughner singing lead and Miller blowing some mean harp behind him.

**Tom Rinda:** "We played normally four sets and we usually packed the place. It was standing room only there. If you were lucky you got a table if you came early. I think the lights came on at 2:10 or 2:15 and they were throwin' people out at 2:30..."

Despite how well things were going,

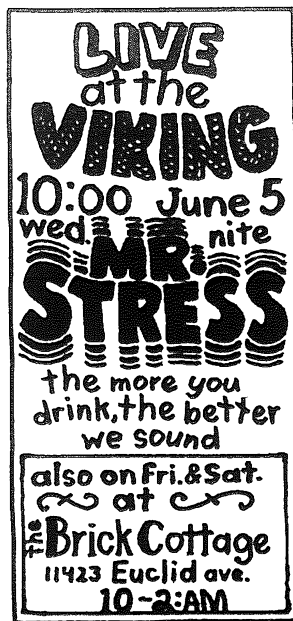
there were some problems brewing with the group's energetic young guitarist. Laughner's growing interest in glam rock and the fact that his heart probably belonged more to Lou Reed and Michael Hurley than Sonny Boy Williamson or Little Milton in both spirit and style were certainly factors. As Miller stated "Peter's style was changing. He was being attracted to a different kind of music. His tastes were changing. Peter had some definite ideas about music."<sup>29</sup> Despite the fact that Laughner was an excellent guitarist, he was not a blues guitarist in the purest sense of the word.

**Mike Sands:** "Well Peter was...a flawed player even though I loved his wide musical interests, (his) knowledge, his energy and spirit and all that. I guess I had some quality concerns, I was a little nervous about that, maybe."

**Pete Sinks (MSBB 1966-67, 1971-72, 1975-76):** "Peter was one of the most creative people I ever knew (and) he was an incredibly talented singer songwriter. And like every musician, you need gigs, and I think that was part of his willingness to play with the blues band...but he would go off... Peter would have the opportunity to do an original tune with the blues band (but) much of it really didn't fit with the MSBB or even the blues venue. Sometimes I think he took material that he liked and he made it fit in with the blues band format because it was a gig and we were a band, we were out there working."

**Tom Rinda:** "Peter was one of those people you either liked him or you didn't but he was a larger than life character. He knew all the Dylan songs and he loved to perform and sing. The one dynamic he brought was he could sing in addition to Stress singing. (Peter) tried to be the front man (of the MSBB) and obviously there was some testosterone issues between him and Bill when we were performing. I'll leave it at that."

**Charlotte Pressler:** "He didn't seem to really fit in with the rest of the band. It wasn't that he played too much or covered up the other musicians, but he stood out from them... Peter was impatient with Stress; he was tired of doing the same sets over and over. He wanted to introduce more rock 'n' roll material and he wanted to sing some of it. He was trying to get Stress to record, and to play-some out-of-town gigs; things Stress was not willing to do. Stress came to suspect Peter was trying to steal the band away from him;



Newspaper ad, 1974 (SMOG VEIL ARCHIVES)

in any case he was finding him difficult enough to work with."

Pressler called Laughner's firing<sup>30</sup> at the end of the summer of 1972 "relatively amicable", and Laughner seemed to take it in stride,<sup>31</sup> immediately forming a new folk-based trio called The Original Wolverines for which he borrowed Sands<sup>32</sup> and Sinks. By late 1972, with the formation of the glittery Space Age Thrills (which quickly changed its name to Cinderella Backstreet), Laughner was already on his

way to becoming a Cleveland proto-punk legend. Laughner would maintain a friendly if causal relationship with Stress and would occasionally drop by The Brick to sit in before his untimely death at age 24 in 1977.

**No one** can quite remember how Chuck Drazdik came back into the MSBB, but memories are that he re-joined soon after Robert Jr. Lockwood, Bill Miller, and Jimmy Ley played a one-shot concert together as The Cleveland Blues All Stars at the Cleveland Agora on August 28, 1972<sup>33</sup> (Sinks played drums, Rick Matisak from Ley's band played bass, and Orville Normal, featuring future MSBB guitarist Alan Greene, opened).

Drazdik had been playing with Jimmy Ley following the break-up of Frigate, and his incredible fluidity and power on the six-string had only increased. With "Pontiac Slim" ("They called me that because I was thin and lived on Pontiac Drive") back on the axe, the MSBB went from being strong to unbeatable.

**Charlie Drazdik:** "I really don't recall what was happening back then. I don't remember how I got back in. I don't remember the circumstances. I remember playing a lot of gigs at the Brick and at the Cellar Door once in a while. There's not really many details that I can remember about that. I remember for a long time at the Brick I wasn't drinking any alcohol. I was dry, you know, I was playing guitar a lot. As far as philosophy, I really can't put my finger on it. I just had a lot of interest in playing guitar and if we weren't doing a gig I was at home playing, practicing..."

**Tom Rinda:** "Chuck was a scholarly kid from the East Side that happened to have a knack for the guitar and got really good at it. He was phenomenal. You know we would go over to his house after playing and he'd cook something and of course we'd stay up all night talking and eating and we would just bullshit around. He could have sat on stage and held his own with a Jeff Beck or Jimmy Page no problem, chops wise. He could play. When Chuck started throwing all those wacky jazz chords at us it blew Bill's mind but he went with it and he loved it 'cause he got to play his chromatic harp..."

**Mike Sands:** "Chuck was amazing player and I think I was literally amazed at his facility right from the start, you know,

'How can he play that fast' and he was not a flamboyant guy off stage or personally. Pleasant, quiet guy with a little of a sarcastic sense of humor; not cruel, but I remember him coming up with little jokes with a smile, but as soon as he's playing (it was) just these amazing flights of improvisation. (I had) just nothing but admiration for his ability."

**Pete Sinks:** "Chuck was an unbelievable guitarist. I always felt the scope of his talent was wasted on the MSBB because Chuck could really nail it in venues far beyond the blues band. And Chuck had command of that high E string and he would start to wail on some of these solos and it far exceeded the scope of the blues band. I mean he was like out there. You know we would back him up but let me tell ya I was playing the drums but I felt like I was in the audience of some venue. I know Mike (Sands) felt the same way. The jaw would drop and we'd be staring at him and he would be wailing, working through these incredibly proficient solos. He'd do the basics, he could do the blues, he could do solos like he was in Cream. (and) he would just go on and on with those solos and it was remarkable."

**Charlie Drazdik:** "My influences were Eric Clapton, (Jimi) Hendrix. After I started listening to rock I started listening to a lot of blues, like Freddie King, Otis Rush and Little Milton and then later on I started listening to people like Buddy Guy, Magic Sam, B.B. King, just a lot of blues. I took maybe three guitar lessons from this jazz guitarist Ralph Russo and he introduced me to practicing scales. So I would practice scales and I'd come home from school and go down to the basement and listen to records and play along. I learned by that and I jammed with some people when I could. I didn't have much of a social life."

Drazdik also remembers being turned on to electric blues by longtime Miller friend, fan, and archivist Geoff Swisher who also happened to be Drazdik's next door neighbor:

**Charlie Drazdik:** "I was over at Geoff Swisher's house one day and at that time I was listening to mostly The Ventures, Paul Revere & The Raiders, stuff like that, not into any blues. Geoff played me 'Fine Jung Thing' by The Electric Flag (from the soundtrack to *The Trip*)—Mike Bloomfield had that distorted sustained sound—and I had never heard a guitar like that before—I said 'what is that, a sax?'"

That was a big influence on me."

As 1972 faded into 1973, Kenny Ruscitto came back into the line-up upon the departure of Pete Sinks to pursue a master's degree at the Ithaca School of Music. Ruscitto had a much heavier approach to the drums than Sinks, who played with a bit more finesse. Comparing Ruscitto to Sinks is like comparing John Bonham to Fred Below: both are superb drummers but of completely different styles and tastes. That both Sinks and Ruscitto worked so well in the MSBB is a testament to just how much the band could adapt itself to changing styles.

**Kenny Ruscitto (MSBB 1967/68-69, 1973, 1987-90, 1993-96):** "Pete (Sinks)



Handbill, 1967 (SMOG VEIL ARCHIVES)

was like the consummate, really authentic and old-fashioned blues drummer that did not syncopate anything with his foot but his hands were just phenomenal. But I came from a little bit more modern school because I was younger and that version of the band sometimes got criticized for being too modern and being too danceable or having more rhythm and blues influences than traditional blues... but that's what helped that early the first version of the MSBB that I played in back in '67 to '69. There were people that would stand and watch and listen but there are also a lot of girls that would dance. Part of that was because of the rhythm and blues influence."

**Tom Rinda:** "Kenny Ruscitto was good; 'the funky monkey', we called him. He was a good dude, we used to go over to his house and hang out. He lived on the West Side of Cleveland, we were all East Siders as it were... but he was a hell of a drummer, he had energy. Kenny was a machine, a Caterpillar DA bulldozer of funk just comin' at you. Pete Sinks played esoterically. Kenny...could make it cook."

**Wende Miller:** "The thing that I remember, and this is a personal observation, that the better the drummer was, the better Bill was. I know that he relied on his guitar players and that he really got off on doing riffs with them and they played against each other on solos. I still think that it was the drummer—and maybe it's not even conscious or Bill even realized it—but the band was so dependent on having a really good drummer."

As 1973 progressed, the band continued to play the Brick while picking up extra gigs now again, including several regular nights at the Oar House in Cleveland Heights that summer through the winter. However, further personnel shake-ups continued to occur: by the end of the year, Ruscitto had been replaced by Tom Schuster. Sands had been replaced by Tom Skove, and Rinda had departed to be replaced by Mark Balogh and then Vito San Filippo. The arrival of Schuster, Skove, and San Filippo also brought a funkier, groovier sound to the MSBB that while still rooted firmly in the blues was a little more "out there." This allowed Drazdik to stretch out even more in his solos and bring in some of the influence of fusion players such as John McLaughlin.

**Bill Miller:** "We established ourselves as the house band at the Brick. There was no cover. We were packing the place but the owner was complaining that he wasn't selling enough booze. It (then) became a cover charge of one dollar<sup>34</sup> at the door."<sup>35</sup>

1974 brought still more changes to the band's line-up: Schuster was replaced by Tom Almassy and Skove was replaced by Jim Herman who was briefly replaced (and later subbed for) by Jim Rieger. The group also played two very high profile gigs that year. The MSBB opened for Bonnie Raitt at CWRU's Strosacker Auditorium on February 3rd and then opened for Boston harmonica player James Montgomery (who, according to Miller, demanded to know how Mr. Stress got "that sound" out of his

harp) at the Agora on September 23rd.

In July, the band left the steady gigs at the Brick Cottage behind and switched their weekends for what they had already found to be the greener pastures of a Cleveland Heights club called the Cellar Door. The MSBB had also been holding down regular Wednesday nights at the somewhat sleazy Viking Saloon—located downtown near Cleveland State University—and switched to playing that night at the familiar Brick.

**Bill Miller:** "We had a dispute over money with the Brick. I was offered (what had been) the (band) Flatbush's spot at the Cellar Door. I wasn't sorry we went from the Brick to the Cellar Door. It had a whole different class of people, a different crowd that we turned on to our music."<sup>36</sup>

**Jim Rieger (MSBB 1974, 1975):** "With Mr. Stress the things that really stood out to me musically were some of the greatest moments of trading solos that I have ever experienced. I really got a kick out of trading 8's between all of us, you know, around the horn. And the stuff that Bill would do was just amazing. He would just answer the call that we would put out there on our instruments. (I) never quite relived that sense of spontaneity. From a personal standpoint it was a blast playing with all those guys, you know, Bill with his corny humor that he's so famous for. We definitely had a pretty good following at the Cellar Door. I know he built up a following when he was at the Brick Cottage, and the Cellar Door had a little bit more of a rock and roll crowd..."

The band was getting even further and further out there musically. While Sands had played a Wurlitzer electric piano, Skove had played a Fender Rhodes while Herman and Rieger both played Hammond organs. Vito San Filippo's playing was rooted so deeply in soul, jazz, and funk that he would soon join The O'Jays and later Tower of Power. He was replaced by Dave Snyder, while the departure of Almassy brought in Nick Tranchito, whom Miller soon dubbed "The Mediterranean Metronome."

<sup>28</sup>Pressler, Charlotte. "Those Were Different Times: A Memoir of Cleveland Life: 1967—73 (Part One)" Scat Records via CLE (1978) Retrieved from <http://www.scatreords.com/eels/twdt.htm>

<sup>29</sup>Halasa, Joyce. (1991, November 14). "Mr. Stress Blues Band Part II: More Musicians Pass Through The Band." *Scene*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup>According to Bill Miller, Laughner's habit of drinking Robitussin cough syrup before they went on stage was also a factor. "That's the real reason I fired him because from my experience if you're fucking around with that shit it can only lead to no good."

<sup>31</sup>In an entrance essay for CWRU dated June 24, 1973.

Laughner stated on page 3: "Bored with the repetitiveness and static aspects of the blues band, I returned to my day job."

<sup>32</sup>Laughner and Sands would also collaborate in Blue Drivers (which included Tiny Alice's David Krauss, ex-Orville Normal bassist Andrew "Saint" Baird, and future Mary Martin & The 9th Street Tunas drummer Leo Ryan) who took over Fridays and Saturdays at the Brick in October 1973 before disbanding as quickly as they formed. Sands actually left the MSBB to join Blue Drivers. Krauss currently leads a band of the same name.

<sup>33</sup>Lockwood, Ley, and Miller would, however, continue to perform on the same bills as well as sit in with each other for next 30 years.

<sup>34</sup>To give a monetary perspective: according to the 1977 Derek VanPelt article in the *Plain Dealer Sunday Magazine*, a glass of beer at the Brick Cottage was around 80 cents at this time.

<sup>35</sup>Halasa, Joyce. (1991, November 14). "Mr. Stress Blues Band Part II: More Musicians Pass Through The Band." *Scene*, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.