

Bob Mack, Mad Mike and Pittsburgh Oldies
By Ed Salamon

Bob Mack (McConnell) and "Mad Mike" Metrovich were two record collectors who took their passion for obscure rock and roll and rhythm and blues records to Pittsburgh radio in the sixties. Together, at their peak with Bob as entrepreneur and Mike as front man, they helped to define a body of music known as Pittsburgh Oldies, songs well known to those who grew up in the area, but still relatively unknown elsewhere. I became friends with Mike during that time and later worked with him in the early 70s, when he was a part time engineer for WEEP radio. Although I likewise met Bob Mack in the 60s, and frequently saw him at the teen nightclubs that he ran, he was always a more mysterious "behind the scenes" presence. Bob and I recently reconnected and I had the opportunity to speak to him about his and Mike's role in Pittsburgh Oldies, a body of music that is unique to Pittsburgh radio.

What was the difference between the teen music that became popular in Pittsburgh and the rest of the country?

Teens went wild when rhythm & blues music exploded in the mid to late 1950's. Following the lead of pioneers like Alan Freed in Cleveland, Porky Chedwick in Pittsburgh and Art Laboe in Los Angeles, white deejays on radio stations across the country began playing records by black artists. I discovered the music myself when I found Porky Chedwick by turning the radio dial away from the middle to the far left end. The exciting rhythm and beat of the "jump tunes" and the lyrics and harmony of the "love ballads" were infectious. These r&b records soon became the big national hits, being played on radio and juke boxes everywhere. Black artists like Fats Domino, Lloyd Price, Ruth Brown, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and vocal groups like the Moonglows, Flamingos, Penguins, Platters, Cadillacs and Five Satins became big stars. In cities across America, everyone ran to buy these new hits in record shops. However, in one city, there was an explosion of music that no one knew, and it led to the nation's most exciting radio, the most young adult dance clubs and most live shows by the world's top r&b recording stars. This most spectacular music and entertainment scene happened in only one city in the world, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania.

How did you and Mike Metrovich become involved in this music?

In the mid 50's, Mike Metrovich and I, both young Pittsburgh record collectors, ignored the hits, and went in a different direction. Individually, and initially unbeknown to each other, we began searching out exceptional r&b dance records (and some by white artists) that had been overlooked, received little or no radio play, and never made the charts. I called my discoveries "Mac's monsters" and Mike called his finds "moldie oldies". Many of these rare and obscure "mystery" records were better and more exciting than the national hits. As it turned out, countless talented black artists lacked the resources and connections to get their records onto radio. In addition, in the 1950's, most radio stations refused to play "negro" music. This resulted in countless great dance records being stored away in "junk bins" and on dusty shelves in record shops, record distributors and juke box operator's basements across the country. Mike and I traveled endlessly to major US cities in search of these rare gems. On one of those trips, Mike and I met in a New York City record shop. We introduced ourselves and were friends from then on.

How did the records that you and Mike found become known in Pittsburgh?

As we added to our collections, friends, music lovers and record collectors began coming around to hear these incredible unknown records. The response was typically "wow man, what the bleep is that!?!?". Both of us had a great passion to share our exciting record finds with others. Soon, we obtained sound systems and began playing these obscure records at local dances, held in schools or small neighborhood halls. In 1958 I saw an opportunity when Pittsburgh deejay Barry Kaye left town and I took over Kaye's regular Friday night "record hop", at the Masonic Temple in nearby Washington, Pa.. The crowds went wild for this new "mystery music" and were packed in like

sardines every weekend. In 1959, I began opening young adult dance clubs in the suburbs of greater Pittsburgh and in nearby cities. These facilities were frequently converted adult "supper clubs", theaters and large banquet halls. All of these operations featured our exciting dance records, played on huge theater sound systems, and new special effects lighting (this was 20 years before similar systems in the late 70's discos). A few of the clubs, close to the city of Pittsburgh, featured live shows every week-end by the nation's top r&b recording artists. The most famous of these clubs was the legendary White Elephant in McKeesport, which in its first ten weeks, featured live performances by Chuck Berry, Smokey Robinson & the Miracles, Little Anthony, the Midnighters, the Isley Brothers, the Coasters, the Shirelles, Little Richard, the Drifters and the Five Satins. By the early 1960's the chain of clubs grew to fourteen and also include the Wildwood Lodge, Tarena, Lebanon Lodge, Blue Fox, Sugar Shack, Teenland, Teen Scene, Bethel Park Arena, Infiniti and out of town clubs in Sharon, Washington, Meadville and Erie. As many as 30,000 tri-state areas teens and young adults filled these dance clubs to capacity each week-end. Most of them first heard these records at my clubs, and literally went wild when some of these rare and unique records blasted through huge theater sound systems. All week long, in the halls of the tri-state areas high schools and colleges, the main topic was about what was happening at the clubs, the act that was coming in next week-end, the new gal or guy they met last week, and most of all, the incredible dance records ("man, what is that stuff ???!"). Soon, hundreds of Pittsburgh area record collectors, club and radio deejays followed, and began searching for their own "exclusive" records. It became a Pittsburgh phenomenon

How did the music you found first get onto radio?;

In early 1963, realizing that two thirds of greater Pittsburgh's three million residents were too old or too young to attend dance clubs and hear these rare records, I started a radio show to feature the obscure, unknown and uncharted records I called "Mac's monsters". I began hosting Mac's Wax Museum on a small radio station WZUM, which I discovered by again turning the radio dial from the center, this time to the far right side. It quickly became Pittsburgh's hottest radio show for teens and young adults. In the late afternoon, countless Pittsburgh record collectors turned on their tape recorders, to capture and try to figure out the names of "Mac's monsters". Collectors in cities across the country began hearing about these rare records; since this obscure music was unique to Pittsburgh, they began referring to it as "the Pittsburgh sound". Since the obscure records were first exposed to the masses through my dance clubs and radio show, I became known as the "architect of the Pittsburgh sound". In interviews, Mike and I typically gave equal credit to the other for the popularity of these obscure records.

In the mid to late 50's we frequently ran across each other while traveling the country in search of uncharted r&b records. Although we were the pioneers in chasing the progressive and obscure records, hundreds of collectors and club deejays quickly followed. Deejays on competitive radio stations tried frantically to obtain these unknown records, but when they found one, I introduced ten more; they kept coming. The competition was intense and demand for the records we played went through the roof. Soon bootleggers found a few of "Mac's monsters" and began pressing and selling them locally. I decided to open Tri-State, a record shop in downtown Pittsburgh which would offer some of the hottest and hardest to find records to the public. There was a line outside the store for the entire day when we opened.

How did you and "Mad Mike" Metrovich begin working together?

About this time, Mike approached me with a proposal to join forces. Mike had seen the crowds at several of my dance clubs, and was eager to land a spot playing at one of the clubs. Although we were competitors in the early days, chasing the obscure records, I agreed to make Mike part of the team. Knowing that he had "the ear" for the hot records, had built a strong collection of obscure records and shared my passion for playing the music, I hired Mike as the house deejay at the new Wildwood Lodge club in the North Hills. This was one of the hottest dance clubs in Pittsburgh and

was packed to capacity every week-end. This was Mike's first exposure to a large audience, and he made the most of this new opportunity. He broke out his best "moldie oldies", and the crowd responded. Regulars soon learned that if you did not arrive by 9 pm, you may not get in. Grateful for the success at Wildwood, I surprised Mike with an offer to manage the Tri-State collector record shop. This turned out to be an incredible boost to Mike's budding career. At Tri-State, he bought and swapped 45 rpm records with an endless stream of collectors, from Pittsburgh and other cities, and built a huge personal collection. In appreciation, Mike decided to return the favor. He knew that in the year before we started working together, I had been playing as many as 100 records a day on the Mac's Wax Museum radio show. He also knew that I no longer had time to travel and find more obscure records, and at some point, the radio presentation would suffer. To keep the radio show fresh and exciting, Mike began presenting me with a box of his latest obscure discoveries on the first of each month. Without question, this new partnership was most beneficial to both parties, and crucial to accelerating our careers.

How did Mike become the front man?

Through the early 1960's my music and entertainment operations continued to grow. I started Romac Records, which produced records with the two lead singers of the Flamingos (as the Starglows), the Skyliners, Tommy James & the Shondells, Jimmy Mack & the Music Factory, Leroy and the Enchantments and other artists. I later founded Atlantis Productions, which produced rock concerts in multiple venues, and subsequently opened several night clubs for adults in Pittsburgh, including the highly successful Zodiac and Frontier clubs. With the time demands from these business ventures, I was no longer able to do the seven day a week Mac's Wax Museum radio show or continue running the Tri-State record shop. I knew there was only one person capable and prepared to take over those entities: Mad Mike. A deal was struck, in which Mike became the sole owner of Tri-State records, and shortly after he took over my radio show on WZUM. The National Record Mart chain, in an attempt to regain the Pittsburgh area collector record sales impacted by Tri-State, made a deal with Mike. They agreed to sponsor Mike's radio show, give him a job at their record chain and release a series of albums featuring Mad Mike's "moldie oldies". As part of the deal, Mike agreed to close Tri State, and give up the deejay job at the Wildwood Lodge. Mike continued to play his "moldie oldies" on Pittsburgh am radio for the rest of his life. He was heard for 35 years on stations including WZUM, WEDO, WPIT, WYEP and WARO/WCNG. During that time, Mike made deejay appearances, at West View Park Danceland, and later at various other locations. Years later, Norton Records, a New York based record label, which specializes in "under the radar" records, found some of those National Record Mart albums and, following Mike's passing in 2000, released a three volume set of his rare records, both on cd and vinyl. This resulted in a new found popularity and extensive name recognition for Mad Mike among collectors worldwide.

Today, some of those rare old twenty five cent 45 rpm records Mike and I played at the dance clubs and on radio, sell at record collector conventions all around the world for hundreds and even thousands of dollars. Thanks to taking "the road less traveled by" and chasing the "unknown", we became key players in making the Pittsburgh the world's most exciting place to be in the 1960's. The young adults there partied at the nation's best and most "under 21" night clubs, where they danced, saw the world's top recording stars perform live, met new friends from countless area colleges and high schools and heard the world's most rare, unique and exciting dance records. They could also buy and collect these records and hear them on radio. Today many of those who were there still get together to reminisce and hear the music. You will hear them say "those were the best days of our lives". Some of the kids that once attended our dances still play this music on radio stations in the Pittsburgh area.

Ironically, the two collectors who first competed to find these obscure records in the late 50's, became a team in the early 60's. That partnership took the Pittsburgh radio and club scene to the ultimate level and both parties benefited greatly from the association. As Mack became the business man, Mike became the celebrity. It is safe to say that neither would have been as successful, without the other. It is also safe to say, that the world's most unique and exciting 1960's Pittsburgh music and entertainment scene would not have been the same without the "Mac's monsters" and "moldie oldies". In the beginning, there was an idea, unique in all the world. In the end, the obscure records themselves were the catalyst that made it all happen - the music known today as Pittsburgh Oldies.

Ed Salamon is author of "Pittsburgh's Golden Age of Radio" (Arcadia Publishing) and a fan of the Pittsburgh Oldies.

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