

MidLife Smarter than the Average Band

Crysis



Deep within the hallowed halls of the OU School of Music lurk serious musicians whose other lives are dominated by a shared passion for that good old rock ‘n’ roll.

PHOTOS BY CONNIE SMITH

BY MICHAEL WATERS ■ Call it a Jekyll-and-Hyde situation: Two mild-mannered and classically trained University of Oklahoma School of Music professors sneak off every so often with a pair of melodic co-conspirators. The improbable quartet grab electric guitars and drums and big, loud amps, and then proceed to give the anthems of classic rock a darn good shake, rattle and rolling.

Individually, they are known as Carl Rath, Eldon Matlick, James Davis and Steve Balduff. Collectively, they are MidLife Crysis, a most unusual—and at OU, much appreciated—example of the pop-music subspecies known as the “cover band.”

Like their copycat peers, MidLife Crysis take the stage and play other bands’ hits—primarily, in their case, the rock-radio goldmine of songs recorded from 1964 to 1969. Unlike other groups of their kind, the MidLifes have had up to four Ph.D.s in their lineup at one time. They have billed themselves, with justification, as “The World’s Most Educated Rock ‘n’ Roll Band.”

Rath and Matlick, the band's co-founders and mainstays, are not exactly grizzled, tattooed veterans of the bar-band circuit.

Rath, the group's drummer, teaches bassoon as an associate professor in the School of Music. On the side, he plays bassoon with the Oklahoma City Philharmonic. That causes an occasional bit of confusion.

He says, "When people hear that I'm playing in a rock band, they say, 'You're playing bassoon—in a rock band?'"

When not playing bass for the group, Matlick, too, serves as an associate professor, teaching French horn, and like Rath, plays that instrument in the Philharmonic. Also like Rath, the range of Matlick's interests has left people nonplussed from time to time.

"Even when I was in high school," Matlick says, "people at the record stores would look at me funny, because I'd buy a Pink Floyd album and also get the newest Los Angeles Philharmonic recording of Beethoven's Ninth."

What brought the two colleagues together as friends at the School of Music, back in the '80s, was a shared passion for '60s and '70s rock. Rath loved above all the Beatles catalog and the sunny sound of '60s radio pop, while Matlick best admired the Rolling Stones, acid rock, Memphis soul and Chicago blues.

MidLife Crisis was born in the mailroom at Holmberg Hall, circa 1990. Rath and Matlick had made the acquaintance of a newcomer to the School of Music, Ken Stephenson, a long-haired, ex-popular musician who had incorporated rock 'n' roll into his theory classes.

"The School of Music had this convocation that met once a week," Rath recalls. "Well, once we were kidding around, and I said, 'Why don't we become a rock band and play some tunes for our April Fools' convocation?'"

Matlick thought Rath had to be kidding, and Stephenson took the idea only half seriously. But the more the three colleagues talked, the more the idea seemed credible—credible enough that, within a few weeks, they had brought together keyboards (Stephenson), bass (Matlick) and drums (Rath), and worked up tidy performances of a dozen rock 'n' roll standards. All three sang.

The trio, known briefly as Flashback, did not play the convocation after all—at least, not that year. Instead, they serenaded a faculty party with the likes of Wilson Pickett's "Midnight Hour"—repeated three or four times, as fledgling bands are prone to do. At one point, the band even was asked by one L-7 attendee to "play softer," prompting a rebellious comeback from Rath: "This is rock 'n' roll. Go talk somewhere else."

But they grew quickly, as did their tune selection. An addition to the voice faculty, Meryl Mantione, provided them with a

female vocalist capable of re-creating "The Shoop Shoop Song" and Jefferson Airplane's "Somebody to Love." The addition of Steve Paul, from the music education faculty, gave the band a much-desired lead guitarist. At one point Carolyn Bremer, a composition faculty member, joined on second keyboard and saxophone.

And while the story goes that the Beatles were given their name by a "man on a flaming pie," MidLife Crisis was christened by an undergraduate—sans flames, pie or intent.

"Eldon would come up to my office at Carpenter Hall, and we'd excitedly start talking about rock 'n' roll stuff," Rath says. "One day one of my students, Mark Blackbird, overheard us and said, 'Are you guys having a midlife crisis or something?' Then Eldon and I just looked at each other and yelled 'That's it!'" Matlick contributed the idea of adding a Byrds-ish "y" to the name.

Eventually, MidLife Crisis shows would feature any of more than 200 songs the band worked up over the years. Some are rock 'n' roll chestnuts, such as "Blue Suede Shoes," "Roll Over Beethoven" and "Shakin' All Over." There have been oldies-



At first Eldon Matlick thought his friend Carl Rath was joking when he suggested forming a rock band—but it only took a moment for Matlick to trade his French horn for a bass and join in the fun.

radio staples, such as "Glad All Over" and "Happy Together." Most shows would feature what Rath calls a "wacky" number, along the lines of "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'." In time they branched out to include more modern tunes such as Toto's "Rosanna" and Don Henley's "Heart of the Matter."

The trio-quartet-quintet-sextet have played such selections at citywide Fourth of July picnics, University functions of all kinds

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and fundraiser benefits and are booked this spring at the University Club and the Clear Bay Café on Lake Thunderbird. At one point the band played backup to a big-league Elvis impersonator named Dana McKay, who subsequently, and tragically, made news when he was murdered in Las Vegas.

But the group's most enduring professional relationship is with “1964 — The Tribute,” who have impressed OU audiences annually since 1991 with their dead-on impersonations of the Beatles. Rath first brought the Ohio-based band to OU as part of an honors class in popular music. The following year MidLife Crisis opened for 1964 on campus, complementing the Beatles homage with an hour-plus show of '60s and '70s hits. It has become a tradition—every winter, the two bands perform a weekend of shows on the same bill at OU.

“It's probably one of their longest relationships with concert producers,” Matlick says. “They like coming here because, unlike whom they normally deal with, we are musicians and so they know they're going to be treated well.”

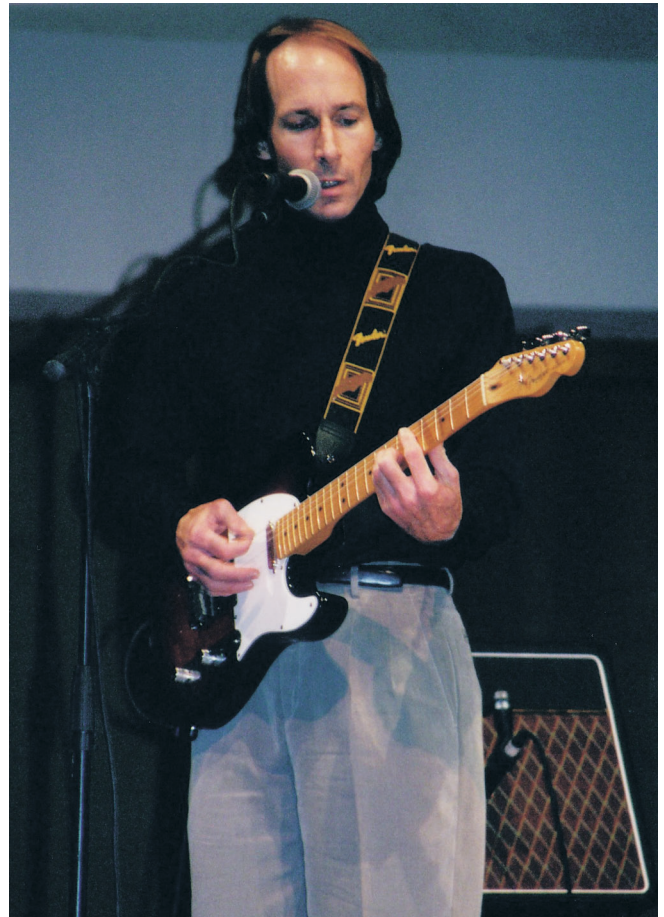
Alert concertgoers would have noticed that the MidLife lineup continued to change through the mid- and late 1990s. Rick Sondag, the husband of a doctoral piano student, replaced Steve Paul on guitar for several years. At one point the band became a trio again, with Rath and Matlick joined on lead guitar by Bob Morris, the son of OU provost emeritus J.R. Morris and a professional performing and recording musician in his own right.

But the group's current incarnation as a guitar-based quartet began, strangely enough, at a campus fundraiser auction in 1997.

“One item in the auction was a chance to get up on stage and play a tune with MidLife Crisis,” Rath remembers. That possibility grabbed the attention of Connie Smith, an Oklahoma Geological Survey employee who wanted to win the opportunity for her guitar-collecting husband, James Davis, who sits on the Board of Visitors for the College of Geosciences.

“Connie knew I was interested in this kind of music because we had seen (MidLife) open for 1964 the previous January,” Davis says. “She won the bid, and later I brought my guitar over to one of the group's practices to rehearse.”

Not only did Davis look like former member Steve Paul, but he also demonstrated an expertise steeped in the rockabilly roots of early Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins tunes. He could sing as well. So, Davis says, “they asked me to play the entire set.”



A self-proclaimed rock 'n' roll burnout, Steve Balduff, MidLife Crisis' lead guitarist, had not played in 15 years when colleague James Davis brought him to the band's rehearsal, and his fate was sealed.

Davis became a permanent member. He proved useful to MidLife Crisis in yet another way, by locating a replacement when the band found another vacancy to fill in 2000.

A senior manager at Tinker Air Force Base, Davis knew a co-worker named Steve Balduff, who had played professionally with a Los Angeles band. Yet he was also a rock 'n' roll burnout who had not touched a guitar in some 15 years. Davis invited him to a MidLife rehearsal, and no one knew what to expect. “At one point he closed his eyes and played, and the most incredible music came out,” Rath says.

For his part, Balduff says, “I had forgotten how much fun it was.”

The band discovered Balduff to be a hand-in-glove fit to the group's principal goal—which is, according to Rath and Matlick, simply to be an absolutely top-of-the-line cover band.

“The problem with being a cover band is that people have an expectation when they hear a song,” Rath notes. “So, you don't want to sound like a wedding band. You have to sound as close to the original as possible.”

Helping the band toward that end, Matlick adds, is that “Steve Balduff has a great set of ears. He'll say when we're rehearsing, ‘That bass line isn't quite like that—it's more like *this*.’” It's no wonder, considering Balduff was the kind of kid who would play his vinyl Kinks and Ventures albums at half-speed as he sought to

memorize each note and reproduce it on his own guitar.

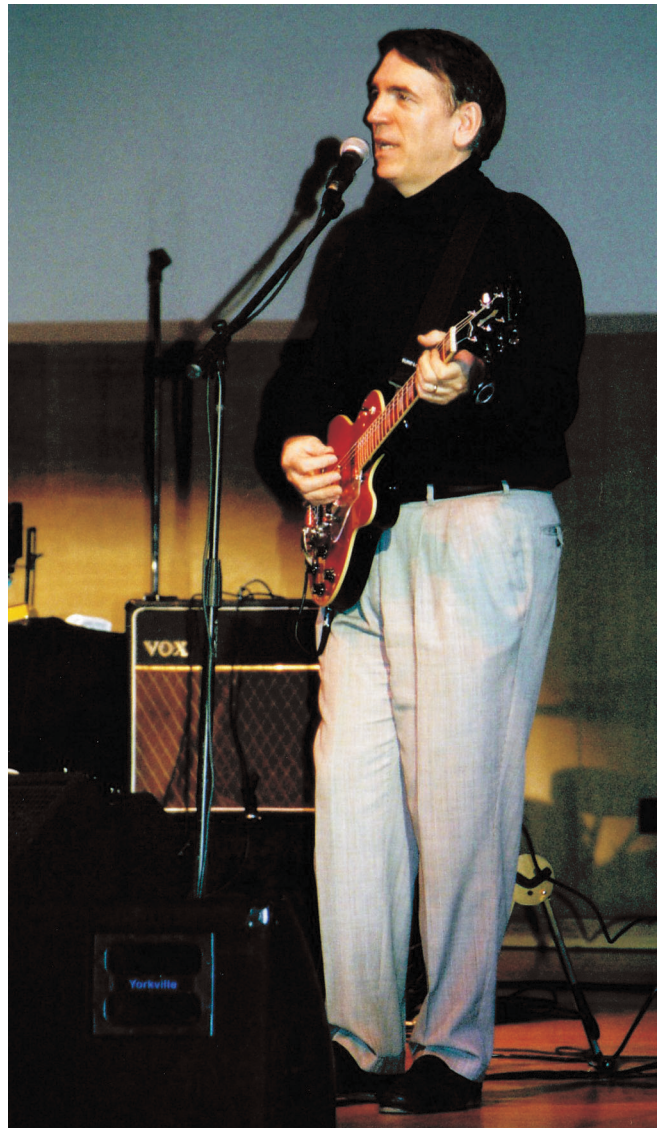
Balduff is still listening, and the other band members are still having fun trying new things. “Eldon and I drive together to gigs a lot, and we’ll hear something on the radio and say, ‘Aw, that’d be great to do,’” Rath says. He has wanted to try some Chicago and Blood, Sweat and Tears songs, although he adds the band cannot do much to reproduce the keyboards and the horns in that type of band.

As for Matlick, “I’d like to get into some more ’70s stuff if we could. I’d like to include some Steve Miller.” Balduff, meanwhile, has enjoyed expanding the band’s horizons to include tunes by the Yardbirds and the Fabulous Thunderbirds, and Davis says he is happy with the chance to sing and play, not just rockabilly, but also more sophisticated material by the Rolling Stones and Creedence Clearwater Revival.

The MidLifes’ rock ‘n’ roll goal-setting is limited, though, by the fact that each of them is approaching mid-century. And, being older, their day jobs, ancillary responsibilities and domestic routines take priority over rock music. Rehearsal time sometimes seems as rare as a mint-condition, first-pressing copy of *Meet the Beatles!*

But when they do rehearse, a democratic spirit prevails. Matlick mentions that all four bandmates sing, “for better or worse,” and one of the biggest decisions when working up a new tune is choosing a vocalist. “We’ll try it several ways. If somebody says, ‘I’d like to sing this,’ we’ll give him a chance. And then we’ll say, ‘Well, maybe we should try someone else,’ or else the guy who’s tried it will say, ‘Maybe this isn’t for me.’”

Eventually, they figure it out. They have been doing so now for 12 years and counting. In addition to the fun and the



ABOVE: At a charity auction, James Davis’ wife, OU staffer Connie Smith, won him the chance to play a tune with the band—just one tune—and soon he was the group’s regular rhythm guitarist.



cathartic sense of release the band members still find in their after-hours work, there might be a point to it all.

“I think it’s good for students to see the possibilities,” Rath observes. “Here are Eldon and I, playing in the Philharmonic, teaching classical music and playing recitals—and then we get down and rock and roll.”

MidLife Crysis seems to have proven over the last decade that even university professors can rock out with authority. That might not be a discovery worthy of a dissertation or a monograph. But it is good enough for a song—the kind that used to blast gloriously from transistor radios by millions of teenagers’ bedsides all those years ago. 🍷

LEFT: In his more serious moments, MidLife Crysis drummer and co-founder, Carl Rath, teaches bassoon and plays that instrument in the Oklahoma City Philharmonic.