

Black & White: It takes two to tango, plus a frontman

BY RICK MASSIMO
Providence Journal Pop Music Writer

Black & White's latest CD, *So Much for the Classics Vol. 1*, is the group's fifth recording, but the first of what drummer Don DiMuccio calls the band's "Steely Dan" phase. And it's a phase he hopes doesn't end soon.

DiMuccio and bassist Kevin Martin are the permanent core members of the blues/rock/R&B band, and they use a rotating cast of frontmen/guitarists for various gigs. It's an unusual dynamic -- usually the singers and guitarists run the show. But DiMuccio is happy with the current setup.

Black & White started in 1990 with pianist/singer Erik Narwhal in front. They rose quickly through the scene, partially because they were so young to be playing such classic music in a time when hair metal was still going strong.

"I graduated high school and started a band," DiMuccio says. "We didn't know anything about anything; we thought we knew everything about everything."

After Narwhal left -- "it was like a divorce; we were kids" -- DiMuccio and Martin hooked up with singer/guitarist Mark Wagner for 11 years, ending amicably in 2004 when Wagner decided to get "a real life," DiMuccio says, starting a family and getting a full-time job. Black & White play four to five nights a week, including virtually every weekend.

"It's great if you're single" is how DiMuccio describes the life.

The drum and bass parts of what was to become *So Much for the Classics* were recorded last year, during the tenure of a singer and guitarist who didn't work out, DiMuccio says. But the tracks

remained, and the band eventually got Jason James to play and sing over them.

James' hot rockabilly-influenced guitar and vocal howl make an excellent complement to the rhythm section of DiMuccio and Martin, on classic covers such as "Something Else" and lesser-known songs such as Conway Twitty's "Lonely Blue Boy" (which James brought to the band, and they recorded fresh).

"We've got the experience and he's got the energy," DiMuccio says. "He woke us up."

James started in the band about two years ago as a fill-in "understudy," DiMuccio says, and has quickly become the frontman of choice on about 80 percent of the band's gigs. James remains with his own band, Jason James and the Bay State House Rockers, for shows in the Worcester area.

On other shows, the band plays with such local blues stalwarts as Dave Howard and Tom Ferraro, of the High Rollers, and Thom Enright. And they've patched things up with Narwhal and are playing with him again. Having frontmen to choose from makes it easy to tailor the band to each particular gig, and to the club's clientele.

DiMuccio says this is the way of the future for Black & White -- "I don't want to get locked into one guy again."

It's a second wind for the band, which started when "being in a band was admirable," DiMuccio says. He bemoans the heyday of alternative rock -- "it ruined so much. . . . [Now] it just seems like everyone's in a band."

He eschews the college circuit, even though it can pay well, describing the attitude of the audience with a haughty "Oh, jukebox boy!" He would rather play at events such as outdoor town concerts, even with audiences that can have a large concentration of "bluehairs with lawn chairs." Baby-boomer audiences "get what we're doing," he says.

So that's the plan for the foreseeable future. "Just keep doing what we're doing, have a backbreaking schedule, and have some fun."

Black & White celebrate the release of *So Much for the Classics Vol. 1* on Sunday, July 16, at the Newport Blues Café.

