

"Serious Fun" with The KNACK



By Phyllis Cruze

The recession. Taxes. Social upheaval. Death. These things aren't fun. We have to deal with life's hassles every day. Wouldn't it be great to be able to just kick back, relax, and groove to some fun, stress free tunes? The Knack thought so, and that's just what they did on their current Charisma release, "Serious Fun". No political message, no psychobabble, just a dozen tunes to pop in the CD or tape player and enjoy.

Billy Ward, Cincinnati native and drummer for the L.A. based quartet, is the newest addition to The Knack. He joined vocalist Doug Fieger, guitarist/keyboardist Berton Avarre, and bassist prescott Niles just about a year and a half ago. The Knack, for those of you who may not be familiar with the name, had their original blaze of glory back in 1979 with their hit, "My Sharona" from the album "Get The Knack". As disco and punk were breathing their last major breaths, The Knack came onto the scene with a pure pop sound that was totally different. Although critics slammed their sound as contrived and scoffed at the band's quick rise to the top, the original members of the band maintain that they were doing what they like to do—create and perform fun, straight ahead music. The Knack's follow up albums weren't quite as successful as the debut release, and the band broke up in 1981.

Gone but not forgotten was the team of Fieger and Avarre, who had been friends since their pre-teen years in Detroit. They kept in contact with Niles and were reunited for his wedding and a subsequent benefit gig. Things still clicked with the trio, and when original drummer Bruce Gary left under friendly terms,

Billy was eventually hired to fill his position.

Billy, an Oak Hills high School alumnus, left Cincinnati 15 or so years ago, but those familiar with vintage Queen City music will remember him from the band Blue tater. After arriving in new York, Billy played with a wide variety of musicians—jazz sax player Bill Evens, Yoko Ono at the famous Amnesty International concert, Ace Frehley and Frehley's Comet, just to name a few. Eventually, Billy moved to L.A. and played with a number of acts there including Rick Springfield, jazz artist Marc Jordan, and Robby Robertson. Says Billy, "Some friends of mine recommended me to The Knack, and I got together with them, and things just clicked. The Knack is the first group I've joined. I'm no longer a drummer for hire, I'm part of a band."

When asked about joining a band with a well publicized past, Billy commented, "although in one sense I'm somewhat tied to the past of The Knack, there's nowhere else I could go to find music like this. Only The Knack has this kind of music—that's so song oriented, yet the performance is fierce live; it's just nothing but the moment. It's really a great experience every time we play. While it took me a few months, honestly, to fit into the band, to realize what my role would be musically in the band, it seems like something that's just perfect for me, and we all feel this way about it. I believe that I can live with these guys for quite some time. I've worked with a lot of artists that are really hard to get along with, and these are regular people. They're enjoying themselves, and basically we want people to listen to our record, and if they like it, come see us

play. We just hope they like it, because we love it. It's basically that simple; it's just the music."

What about the people who try to over analyze or over critique the lyrics and the music? Billy insists, "The fact of the matter is, speaking for the other members, I'm a drummer and I'm going to drum. They're songwriters and musicians, and they're going to do that. One thing we are doing, is we're going to wait to go out on tour because we don't want people to think it's just another reunion tour or something. We really love "Serious Fun". We're proud of it, we think that people will like it, and if so they'll see us play and realize that we're just here, now, for them. We're just the same as any other band. We've made a record, and we're going to start touring in late May, that's the current plan."

About playing locally, Billy said, "I'm so thrilled to hear that Cincinnati has been enjoying the record a lot, WEBN has been playing it, and I'm very happy to hear that it means we'll get to play Cincinnati, and I'll get to see my family and friends. Cincinnati is a hip little city, and music fans there are cool. I'm sure we'll be playing, I would imagine, everywhere because the first single to be released on radio, "Rocket O' Love" is, I believe still in the Top 10 across the country on the playlists, and so that's a very nice, solid beginning. The material is one of the reasons I joined the band—it's just really great playing these songs."

When discussing the band breaking back into the market after being absent a number of years, Billy mused, "The Knack do have loyal fans. It's amazing the number of people that come up to me and they know more about

the band than I do in that sense. They saw the earlier band, and they know all the songs, but they come up and just go, 'You guys were amazing. It was the best I've ever heard you' and this and that. The Knack did have a reputation, I'm told for being a great live band, and that's certainly the bottom line now. We're happy with the record, we're proud of the record, but live we think it's really going to be fun, so that's what we're about."

The Knack just completed a video for "Rocket O' Love", and MTV has picked it up. Billy feels that making videos is, "Kind of fun. The experience of making one is fun, and I really enjoy seeing some from time to time. Growing up in Cincinnati (before MTV), I used to wonder what the great musicians looked like, how they played, or whatever. If they didn't come to town or to Dayton or someplace in the Tri-State area, it was up to my imagination. I think it (MTV) is a great format. I like videos, and I think it adds to the whole picture."

Billy's overall view can be summarized quite easily. "To me, this is really just the beginning of a long career for the band The Knack. To me it's the beginning, it's really different. When you change a band member it changes the picture a lot. I think it's going really wonderfully for us so far. I'm proud of my work, we all are, and I think that the enthusiasm and good vibes that went into this thing has carried through, and I think that people are feeling that when they listen to the record. I think The Knack is a very original, unique band; an interesting band, so it's going to be fun to get out and play. We're just looking forward to doing this all the time."

Musically, "Serious Fun" captures the feel of the original Knack—thundering drums and guitar power chords. Lyrically, the content is about nothing too serious, and that's the whole point. Produced by Don Was, "Serious Fun" is a great way to start the spring and summer. Crank down the windows and crank up The Knack! Stay tuned for further information about the band's upcoming tour.