

THE BEAT GOES ON

by David Mills

Dubrovnik. This seacoast community on the Adriatic was not known as a thriving centre of activity. Famous people did not emerge from here, nor did popular trends begin here. It was a place where sons grew up expecting to live much the same lives as their fathers – fishing the streams, working the mines. It was not a place of hope; it was a place of resignation. Dull and boring. Nothing ever happened in Dubrovnik, ...especially in terms of music. That is, until the Grubworms emerged.

The origin of the Grubworms can be traced back to the time Juan first met Philbert. Both played guitar on their own and both followed the current music trend – a Croatian croon known as “piddle”. Piddle is best described as the sound of flowing or dripping water put to a musical beat. This style was best exemplified by Lenny Doorazzan, an artist the Grubworms would later acknowledge as one of their major influences.

Piddle music united Juan and Philbert and soon attracted a third member, Thor, who was eager to form a piddle band. Together, they practised their piddle in basements and garages or wherever people would put up with them. Being full of questions about the music business, they called themselves the Quiryman, but soon changed the name to the Golden Grubworms when a fourth member, a drummer, was recruited.

While still in their teens, they began playing popular cover tunes at the Cave, a dark and dingy underground tavern that attracted the lowest class of people. Lawyers, landlords and insurance salesmen would crowd in to hear the latest bands. At this point, the group was still very young and inexperienced and their piddle looked and sounded just like everyone else’s piddle.

But they did have something. There was a harder edge to the music and the piddle flowed with a little more clarity. It took a trained ear to detect the difference but one evening, about a year after the Grubworms began playing the Cave, such an ear was present, along with the man who owned it.

Brent Upstart introduced himself to the band as a local record dealer interested in new material and invited Juan out for a coffee to discuss their sound. The others were not invited.

Brent was an expert on piddle and other forms of popular music and he knew that, given the right training, the Grubworms could become a major sensation. He worked late with Juan every evening, booked several local gigs, and assured the group that they would soon be going places.

They went to a broken-down, rat-infested stink hole in Salzburg. Brent promised them a long-term engagement - they played for eight months, ten hours a day, six days a week. Brent promised them girls - all of the Grubworms got VD. Brent promised them exposure – they were all arrested for indecency.

Still, it was this lifestyle and the experience of playing continuously day in and day out that ripened the Grubworms' technique. Piddle was petering out in Croatia but the Grubworms had taken the original piddle and added sophisticated chords and arrangements, creating a brilliant blend of pop and piddle.

They returned to Dubrovnik a mature group of competent and inspired musicians. Back at the Cave, people began to listen to them more closely and appreciate the change the band had undergone.

Brent, confident that success was just around the corner, hired a producer named Gord Carmen to help the Grubworms achieve a professional and commercial style. Although his training was in opera and he was a very busy man, he agreed to help them on the condition that the boys replace their drummer, Zeke Pest.

It was a difficult decision for the group to make. Zeke had been a childhood friend of Juan and Philbert and a close companion of theirs for many years. Still, it wasn't like he'd saved their lives or anything.

Zeke was dropped from the group and a competent new drummer named Ronald Skopje took his place. Ronald quickly became known as Rocky Stone because of his curious desire to collect rocks. With the new line-up, the group also shortened the band name from the Golden Grubworms to the Grubworms.

During these changes, Brent continued to promote the group and arrange for special engagements, but the popularity of the foursome was still limited to a local cult following. The band's first original composition, "Love Me Too" could not get off the ground since no label would touch the new sound.

Frustrated, Brent turned to his friends in the music business who reluctantly agreed to print a limited edition of the song on an independent label, providing that Brent pay for the production and buy them a new car.

Within a few months, "Love Me Too" was recorded and circulated to all the local record stores with several copies shipped to Sarajevo and Belgrade. The response was less than enthusiastic; the record only reached number 184 on the Croatian charts. The country was obviously not ready for the Grubworms.

Despite this setback, the band was undergoing a creative surge composing songs day and night, on the train, in the bath, over breakfast and under the boardwalk. They were scribbling lyrics on napkins, cigarette packages, table-tops and soccer balls. As winter arrived, their local popularity snowballed, and soon the news of their talent spread.

The time was right to release another single, the best of their new compositions. Brent met with Juan and agreed on the Nature loving “Trees Please Me”.

It was an excellent choice. It sold out within days in Dubrovnik and soon became the number one song in Croatia. Suddenly, everyone wanted the Grubworms. Remaining copies of “Love Me Too” quickly sold out and everyone rushed to see the new sensation in music.

Brent celebrated by taking Juan out to the best restaurant in town and showering him with gifts and compliments. He assured Juan that the Grubworms were well on their way to being the best act in music today – possibly bigger than Elvin Parsley.

What followed was a string of No. 1 hits with national exposure for the group. By the end of the year, the foursome had six Top Ten hits with four of those reaching No. 1 in Croatia. Dubrovnik became known as “the place the Grubworms are from”. Maps were revised to show Dubrovnik in boldface.

They played to capacity crowds everywhere. They conquered Zagreb, Montenegro, Sarajevo and Belgrade. The next step was America.

With this in mind, Brent set to work creating a “Grubworm image” to present to the American public. He wanted a wholesome, clean-cut image, which meant haircuts and suits for all. He then chose new instruments for the group, shifted the order of their songs and showed them how to bow. Philbert, with tongue in cheek, wrote a new song that would become their first American single, “I Wanna Mold Your Band”.

Brent had attempted to distribute “Trees Please Me” and other Grubworm hits (“From You and Him”, “Tell me how”, “I’ll cry in bed”) in the U.S. but had continually met with rejection. However, in the intervening year, word of their immense popularity throughout the Eastern Mediterranean had leaked out and imports of their Croatian albums were now selling like hotcakes. Producers realized they could

no longer ignore the impact of the group, so when Brent offered “Mold Your Band”, it was immediately accepted. By the time the Grubworms set foot on American soil, the new release had reached No. 1. Grubworm-mania had begun.

Nothing could have prepared the Grubworms for the reception they were to receive on the other side of the ocean. Brent and the boys landed in New York City to find the airport mobbed with teenagers, police and security guards. This was rather mystifying since the Grubworms arrived by boat.

The group was hustled into a limousine and quickly escorted to their Park Avenue hotel where hundreds of youngsters chanted and screamed, waiting for a just a glimpse of the Grubworms. The boys took turns waving from the balcony and speaking to the masses in Latin.

The band’s first obligation in New York was a promotional appearance in which they met their adoring fans and autographed copies of their first American album, “Greet the Grubworms”. Then it was on to meet the press.

The media were captivated by the group and enamoured by their wit and charm. Newspapers tried to outdo each other by quoting witticisms of Juan, Philbert, Thor and Rocky. When asked “What’s your first impression of America?”, Rocky replied, “It’s a bit crowded.” When Juan was asked, “How would you describe the type of sound you make?”, he replied “That depends on what I’ve eaten.”

The Grubworms could not walk the streets of New York without being mobbed. Even their own security officers mobbed them. Their pictures were everywhere – on TV and billboards, in newspapers, magazines, bubble-gum cards – and everyone recognized them instantly. Excepting their engagements, the foursome had to be confined to their hotel room day and night, having their meals slid under the door.

Still, even the hysteria associated with their arrival and the frenzy around their media appearances could not prepare the Grubworms for the chaotic din surrounding their performance of “Can’t Buy Me Enough” on the Ned Silvan Show.

Although the band played only two numbers (sandwiched between Pink Chops, the dancing pig, and a mute ventriloquist), the concert would go down in history as the beginning of an era. The music was virtually inaudible, but it didn’t seem to matter. It was all security could do to keep the young hysterical girls in the front row from throwing themselves at Juan and Philbert. The boys eventually took matters into their own hands by pushing the security guards out of the way.

During their short stay, the boys witnessed first-hand the profound influence of their music. There was a sudden interest in Croatia and Dubrovnik in particular, youngsters began sporting Grubworm haircuts, new bands sprang up with names like the Centipedes and the Inchworms, and Grubworm memorabilia was everywhere.

The group eagerly returned to Dubrovnik for a little peace and quiet before recording their next album, ...but it was not to be. They were met by hordes of admirers, some of whom were living in tents having given up their worldly possessions to follow and worship the Grubworms. It was all too much for these small-town boys.

In a desperate attempt to get away from it all, they secretly arranged to leave in the middle of the night for a remote commune near Gyantse in the Himalayas. When they arrived however, gurus and yogis came from miles around to praise the coming of the Grubworms and offer their services to the band members. Realizing they could not escape the attention, even in Tibet, the musicians accepted the idolatry and asked the sages to do all their cooking and cleaning.

While the Grubworms were away, Brent was very busy indeed. He edited and released another two albums for the American public (filled with their early Croatian material), booked several concert dates and a future American tour, authorized countless merchandising contracts, did three jigsaw puzzles and carried on four relationships. He even had time for a nervous breakdown.

With the Grubworms firmly established, he also turned his attention to other local talents. It was becoming apparent that there was a new sound across the country and Brent set out to discover the best of the new "Balkan beat".

One of the first bands to capture his attention was Jerzy and the Bogradites, a group that was gathering quite a local following in the capital. Brent had an uncanny ability to pick out a No. 1 hit and he soon proved that this talent was not limited to the Grubworms. Jerzy and the Bogradites were given a recording contract and within two months, their first single "Ferry Cross the Adriatic" hit the top of the charts in Croatia and the U.S.. It seemed whatever Brent touched turned to gold, or at least platinum.

Countless other groups emerged from Croatia that year and the quality of the material was astounding. The number of Croatian hits that dominated the Billboard charts at the time led the American media to refer to the phenomenon as the "Croatian Invasion". It was led by the Grubworms, of course, then Jerzy and the Bogradites, but literally dozens followed: Pieter and Gorizia with "A World Without Mountains", the Dave Kosovska Five with "Land All Over", Rijeka Recluses with "Mr. Brown, you've got a lovely cornfield", the Mammals singing "House of the Rising Bread" and "Please don't let me be Miss Kraljevo", the Zombozos offered "She's not fair" and the Kukes gave us "Tired of waiting for the train". In addition, the Bosniacs, Maribor Mann and the Zagrebites all had a string of Top Ten hits. It seemed that anything coming out of Croatia would be a best-seller.

Despite his other successes, Brent's favourite group remained the Grubworms. They also remained the favourite of the American public. The group broke dozens of records including most songs

in the Top Ten at one time, most songs on the charts at one time and most songs at No. 1 at one time. They won awards for the most gold records, most platinum records and most vinyl records. Other achievements included best debut album by a No. 1 artist and most vowels in a song title by a No. 1 artist. That first year, they spent fifty-one weeks at No. 1, finally bumped out of the top spot by Dewey Legstrum's Christmas entry "Hello Holly".

It's important to note that all of these awards came *before* the release of the brilliant album "Rubber Plant". From the catchy arrangements of "You Won't Leave Me" to the haunting strains of "Hungarian Wood (This Bird is Dead)", it was destined to be a classic.

With their position in the music business secure, the group turned to movies. They wanted to return to their roots in Dubrovnik and write about growing up with the fishing industry there. The result was "Kelp!". It was loosely based on their hit song about the seaweed and featured the playful antics of the Grubworms being themselves. As fishing movies go, it was quite a success. The soundtrack yielded another dozen hits including the touching ballad "If I Tripped".

Such prosperity in the film and recording industries is often overwhelming for those involved and many turn to artificial stimulants. The first casualty in this instance was the boys' personal manager, Brent. With more and more commitments – tours to manage, films to produce, merchandising rights, records to release and promote – there were simply not enough hours in a day for him to cope. The Grubworms knew he drank a lot of coffee to keep awake, but no one knew the extent of his drinking. He would be constantly on edge and often stayed up for days. Juan once discovered a percolator under Brent's bed but did not think to tell anyone at the time. Others reported seeing him running laps at 4:00AM and sneaking a thermos of coffee into the bathroom. Brent eventually had a very nervous breakdown and had to be admitted to Dubrovnik General. He was also put into restraints when he was found hopping over the beds.

Unfortunately, the Grubworms were obliged to leave Brent and begin their American tour. The manager died before their return. He had broken his restraints and was found unconscious in the kitchen, clutching a jar of Coffeemate.

Across the Atlantic, the Grubworms' reception was as phenomenal as ever. They covered dozens of cities and played to frenzied crowds everywhere. They were so successful, it prompted Juan to say "We're bigger than the Beatles!"

The popularity of the Grubworms could not have fallen any quicker. Millions of Grubworm fans turned against the group accusing them of blasphemy. Albums and merchandise were burned and a boycott of their material went into effect. Juan was forced to go on nationwide television and apologize.

"I didn't mean to insult or offend anyone," he said. "I wasn't saying that we're better than the Beatles, or that we're going to replace the Beatles. All I meant was that, at the time, we seemed to be more popular."

The apology was grudgingly accepted by the public, but it would be several months before record sales picked up again. This was aided in part by their new album "Yesterday, the day before ...and the day before that". This release was note-worthy due to its controversial cover depicting babies wearing T-shirts with the Stars and Stripes, suggesting that the American fans had acted "like babies". A revised cover featuring decapitated dolls was reissued and sold much better. Two songs from the album, "Day Stripper" and "Drive My Tractor" helped to put the band back on the top of the charts.

With the death of their personal manager, Juan, Philbert, Thor and Rocky worked closer with their producer, Gord Carmen. Gord often helped the boys with their arrangements and volunteered ideas of his own. Their music was becoming more and more complex and, as a result, many of their new

songs could not be reproduced on stage. This, along with poor airline food, led the Grubworms to abandon touring altogether.

If the pressures of travelling, composing, recording and singing were taking their toll on the band, it did not show. Their next album "Colonel Salt's Travelling Salvation Army Band" would become known as their masterpiece. The collection had everything from the psychedelic "Lucy in the Bars with Cheap Jewellery" to the quirky "When I'm 6 foot 4", to the epic closing number "A Day with the Wife". The album was praised by fans and critics alike. Even Simon Cowell liked it. Now people who had not considered any form of popular music to be art were taking a second look at the Grubworms.

Their string of No. 1 hits continued with "Hello hello hello" and "Sugar Beet Fields Forever". They were still the best rock group in the world, but serious personal differences began to split them apart. Thor was dissatisfied that only a handful of his compositions were included on Grubworm albums. Juan and Philbert, who composed the vast majority of tunes, resented Rocky's success, feeling he contributed very little. They also hated the way he squeezed the toothpaste in the middle. Rocky resented being left out and feeling like he didn't belong. He also envied the others for being able to cut a deck of cards with one hand. On top of all this, each of the boys were getting more interested in girls and wanted more time to build a good relationship. It was becoming a strain to work together.

Around this time, they were also encountering production difficulties and discussed with Gord the idea of forming their own label. He agreed and before long the Grubworms founded their own production company and began recording under the new "Adhesive" label.

Although the company was plagued with management difficulties from the very beginning, "Adhesive" still became a lucrative label in terms of Grubworm songs. "Hey Dude", the first single released on the new label, became their biggest hit of their career. At 42 minutes and 58 seconds, it was also the longest, once again testing how far they could take their audience.

With five years of historical music behind them, the Grubworms were now a household name. They could not walk down any street in the civilized world without being recognized. They wanted a vacation and needed to get away from the madness, the groupies, the tax collectors. They wanted a place where they could walk about in peace and be treated anonymously, even if people *did* recognize them. They chose Toronto.

During this quiet respite from their hectic pace, the Grubworms left their image behind and went their own ways, each composing independently during the interval. It was such a stimulating environment for the boys that Juan and Philbert decided to make the next venture a double album since they had so much material. Thor had also come up with several great tunes, including possibly his finest composition “While my Earl Grey gently steeps”. Even Rocky wrote a few songs for the new album however his favourite, a tune called “Batteries” was not included.

The as-yet unnamed album was a typical Grubworms product – artistic and controversial. The debate this time centred on an obscure composition by Juan that featured dictators and tyrants complaining, over a soundtrack of various odd sound effects and war cries. “Revolution Whine” was not music per se and Gord Carmen fought to keep it off the new album, or at least include an aria. The Grubworms eventually won out however, and it was featured on the double-album they simply called “The Grubworms”. To the general public, due to the cover’s colour, it became known as the “Turquoise” album.

The opening song, “Back in the Y.M.C.A.” illustrated the development of their music. It was actually a parody of a song done by the Town Folk, although few detected the subtle Grubworm wit.

The Grubworms continued to make movies and each one was different from the one before. This time the boys chose animation as their vehicle. The idea came from one of their songs “Yellow Subway Train”, which became the title of the innovative movie. The storyline took place during rush

hour and featured the antics of the “red meanies” who closed the subway doors just before passengers reached them.

Despite their continued success in music and movies, the Grubworms could sense that the end was near. When Juan began bringing his new girlfriend into the studio, the others rebelled against her standards of dress and hygiene. Every rehearsal was full of bickering and back-biting. One particular recording session, marked with tension, sarcasm and put-downs, inspired Thor to write the whimsical “Here Comes the Fun”.

As the atmosphere worsened Thor, upset with the antagonism surrounding the making of the new album (“Convent Street”), decided not to submit any of his compositions but Philbert insisted he contribute “something”. Philbert spent most of the rehearsal time trying to keep the group from splitting apart. When Thor and Rocky insisted that they could no longer sing with each other, Philbert countered by writing the song “Hum Together”.

Despite all the acrimony, “Convent Street” was completed and hailed as another masterpiece. The stunning second half – a medley of song fragments – concluded with the four Grubworms crying out “We quit!”, prompting rumours that the group was disbanding.

Ironically, when the break-up came, it was Philbert who first left the group to record a solo album. This may have happened because the others circulated a rumour that Philbert was dead and, as a result, he could no longer book time at the Grubworms’ studio.

Gord Carmen managed to compile enough existing material for one last album. It featured the last Grubworm song to appear on the charts – “The Long and Winding Snake”. It marked the end of an era.

As with all aspects of their career, the Grubworms went out in style. Coinciding with the release of their final album, they performed an impromptu concert on the top of a van. The event prematurely came to a close when the roof caved in. The Grubworms were charged with vandalism and public mischief.

The solo careers of the members were as unique and varied as the men themselves. Philbert formed a new band which featured his wife playing the spoons but his records did not sell as well as those of the Grubworms. Disappointed many of his followers were abandoning him, Philbert penned "Fans on the Run", which became the centrepiece for his most successful solo effort. He released another twenty-five albums, got married and raised a family.

Juan released some experimental music, culminating in "Double Indulgence", a record in which he and his yodelling wife alternated composing and singing. Luckily it came out on CD, allowing listeners to program in every other song.

Thor wrote and recorded a massive five-album collection he called "My Sweet Horde", then got married and raised a family.

Rocky became a movie star and had two number one hits back to back, stunning everyone. He then toured with four gifted musicians to form a talented quartet.

Philbert's children eventually became missionaries and moved to Botswana where, it was rumoured, another musical invasion was under way.

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