Haze reunites over funky mystery record

Discarded album revives forgotten chapter of Minneapolis music history

By Emily Kaiser
published: January 27, 2010

all photos courtesy of Haze; multiple credits to Mike Wick

Yesterday...

...and Today

Crystal Haze

It all started with Shelley Pierce hunched over the vinyl bin at Cheapo. She had most of the albums she wanted, but enjoyed the thrill of the hunt.

As she finished flipping through the new arrivals, a short, plump woman in her 50s came in the front door of the store, lugging a crate full of used vinyl records. Once she dropped it off at the front counter, she turned around and went back out to her car. Ten crates and 15 minutes later, the woman was out of breath, leaning over the front counter looking at the employee behind the desk.

"Whatever you're willing to pay, I'll take it," she said.

The employee stood baffled, half-heartedly flipping through the selection with a blank look on his face. He looked up at the woman, uninterested.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but we can't use any of these," the man said.

The woman's face went red. "Well, I don't want these records. You can just have them."

"That's not our policy. I'm sorry," the employee said.

"Well, where's the closest dumpster?" the woman finally blurted. He pointed her to the SuperAmerica out the door.

Pierce stood in the background, watching the conversation unfold. She spotted a couple of good finds in the woman's crates, including the Concert for Bangladesh box set, something she didn't have in her collection of more than 4,000 records at home. When she heard the word "dumpster," she had to intervene. She knew she would be getting some junk, but the thought of the records being thrown away was too much for a collector to take.

First album cover

Details:

SLIDESHOWS:

Haze: A serious Minneapolis funk odyssey

What Haze looks like today

Haze's fabulous funky fashions

Pierce walked over to the distraught woman as she picked up the first crate to lug back outside.

"Ma'am, I don't have a lot of money on me, but do you mind if I look through your records?" Pierce asked.

"You can just have them," the woman said, raising her voice and looking back at the Cheapo employee to be sure he heard her.

Pierce carried the crates back outside to her two-door Chevy Cavalier as the woman walked alongside her. As she stuffed three crates in the back seat, she asked the woman why she was getting rid of so many records.

The woman's friend had just passed away, and she was helping clean out her estate. She was exhausted, sweating in the July heat.

"Your friend's records will be loved and taken care of," Pierce promised. "I host a radio show in Mankato. Your friend's records will be played on my show."

Relieved to be free of the crates, the woman left Pierce to finish filling her car with the records. Pierce never got the woman's name, but she managed to hand her the $10 she had in her wallet.

Satisfied with her car full of unknown vinyl treasures, Pierce drove to her sister's home in White Bear Lake. She was spending the weekend in town with her family, and when she pulled into the driveway, they were busy getting their boat ready for an afternoon on the water.

Her younger sister, Carrie Carroll, expected Pierce to come to her house with a handful of vinyl finds. When she arrived with her car jam-packed, Carroll just rolled her eyes.

Pierce plopped down on a lawn chair in the garage and flipped through her almost-free collection.

"Oh my god! Look, it's Pink Floyd's first album!" Pierce squealed.

In the middle of the crate, Pierce came across a special find: a record without a band name or album title. Pierce loved picking up these mysteries during her hunts. The records were usually polka bands, church choirs, or a woman singing along to the radio, but the slim chance of finding a valuable lost recording made it worth a listen. The record had a simple label and "4-22-74" handwritten on the front.

She put the record aside, reminding herself to listen to it later.

One month later, Pierce remembered to bring the blank record with her to work. Settling into her radio studio at KMSU Mankato before taping her show in 2005, Pierce pulled the record from its paper sleeve, lowered the needle on the vinyl, and played the third song on side one.

The keyboard leads the song into an up-tempo guitar solo backed up by conga drums. The singers come in, harmonizing the first verse.

Every night I close my eyes/Waiting for the sun to rise/Waiting for the moment when I'm walking through the park with you/Waiting for the moment when I'm holding hands with you

This was no polka band or church choir. Pierce knew seconds into the first song that this was a band that took their craft seriously. The soulful harmonies and Latin-style guitars reminded Pierce of early Chicago and Santana. She thought it sounded like a West Coast soul band with black singers.

Pierce's radio co-host, Tim Lind, came in shortly after her first listen.

"Remember that blank record I got at Cheapo?" Pierce asked Lind. "You've got to hear this."

Pierce slipped the needle back onto the spinning vinyl. Lind expected a laughable high school band. When he heard the first harmony, he sat down to actually listen.

"This group wasn't screwing around on the weekends," he would later recall.

Pierce and Lind named it the "Mystery Record," placing it on a shelf in their studio. Thus began their quest to figure out who was behind the music.

Their most obvious clues came from the record itself. Dated "April 22, 1974," the test pressing was put out on Century Records. Pierce found a Century Records discography site that was attempting to collect the information on every record released on the label. The site didn't have her record number listed.

Century Records was a large custom record label in California that specialized in small pressings for churches, high schools, and other organizations. The company, also known as Keysor-Century Corp., filed for bankruptcy in 2003. Company officials pleaded guilty in 2004 to felony charges of violating a number of environmental laws when they released toxic chemicals into the air and wastewater near the Santa Clara River. The company manufactured polyvinyl chloride (PVC) for record albums and other plastic products. Keysorx paid $4.3 million in civil and criminal penalties.

When their internet searches reached a dead end, they took the tunes to the airwaves, hoping listeners might have some clues. The two played a couple of songs on their morning show and asked listeners to contact them with any ideas on where they came from.

Their broadcast brought in a number of suggestions. One listener was convinced the band had played at his dad's pizza joint in Mankato during the '70s. He said the band was called "The Noteables," but Pierce had never heard of them. She later came across one of their albums and crossed that possibility off her list. The band was an all-white Dixieland lounge act and sounded nothing like the Mystery Record.

One by one, Pierce and Lind played the album for all 50 volunteers in their radio studio. **Ric Roushar**, their resident psychedelic expert and host of the Dr. Psycho Acoustics show, couldn't come up with a guess. Carl Nordmeier, the owner of Tune Town Records in Mankato, didn't recognize the music. Gary Campbell, one of the jazz and blues experts on staff, didn't have a clue. When they had exhausted nearly every music geek in town, it was time to take the Mystery Record to a bigger audience.

Pierce, who still owns an 8-track player and had just recently purchased a cell phone, decided to embrace technology in her quest for answers. She recorded a song she titled "Shuck and Jive" and put it on her radio blog in November 2008 so she could expand her search outside the Mankato area.

She made a plea to anyone who wanted to help:

There are nine tracks on the entire album, but I am sharing one of them with you. I have no idea what the song is called, I just refer to it as "shuck and jive," but it is a good example of the other songs heard on this "mystery album." When I listen to it, I dream that it is some long lost demo recording of a great regional band that never hit the big time, but is being rediscovered by record labels like Numero or Light in the Attic. Yes—it is just that good.

By the end of the week, the blog post was getting 500 hits a day, with visitors streaming in from Canada, Germany, France, Japan, and China. The "I'm Learning to Share" blog, which is often featured on popular aggregator BoingBoing, linked to the search.

A number of readers offered suggestions, including Chicago, California funk band WAR, and Steely Dan. One person also suggested they try getting in touch with Numero Group, an archival record label

that specialized in long-lost soul tunes.

But Rob Sevier, one of the Numero Group founders, could only suggest that she track down regional record labels of the '70s for ideas.

Pierce emailed one member of a band from Texas that had a similar sound and put out one record in 1975. The answer was short and sweet: "Nope, not me."

In May 2009, Pierce and Lind planned to commemorate their radio show's nine-year anniversary by playing the entire Mystery Record. The album had taunted them for nearly half of their years on the air, after all.

Pierce and Lind prerecorded the show in the morning for the nighttime airing. As the album played out, Pierce decided to try searching the internet another time for some of the odd lyrics in the songs. She wrote down "shuck and jive," "I do love my lady," and 30-some other phrases.

When she typed in "I Do Love My Lady," she finally found a match. There was a compilation record, "Soulful Thangs Vol. 6" with a song titled "I Do Love My Lady" performed by a band named Haze. The site even let her listen to a clip.

Pierce streamed the clip. Sure enough, it was the same song she could hear coming off her studio's record player.

Now the real web searching began. Her first find was a 2005 *City Pages* feature listing "Minnesota's Fifty Greatest Hits."

"Another chapter in the Twin Cities' neglected history of pre-Prince R&B, Haze, formerly Purple Haze, scratched Billboard's soul chart in March of '75 with this groovy ballad in the vein of the Stylistics and Blue Magic," wrote Dylan Hicks. "Seven pieces strong on this, their lone hit, the group wheedles on bended knee with skyscraper harmonies, Paul Johnson's smooth bass rolls, Peter Johnson's organ swells, and lead singer Willy Thomas's falsetto swoops of devotion."

She found the album, released on ASI Records, for sale on a number of Japanese sites for more than $50. With three band members' names and most of the track titles, Pierce and Lind went to the white pages, where they found an abundance of Paul and Peter Johnsons living in Minnesota.

Before long, she felt like a telemarketer reading a script: "Is this Paul Johnson? Hi, my name is Shelley Pierce. Just wondering if you played in a band called Haze?"

A dozen fruitless calls later, she realized she was getting nowhere. She decided to go back to the internet—someone in the band was bound to do a vanity search someday, she thought.

If you remember this band, or know where some of the band members might be today, or MAYBE YOU WERE IN THE BAND HAZE—please get in touch with us. Maybe you caught this band in action back in the day, or know more about the ASI Label—we would love to hear from you too.

Peter and Paul Johnson sprawled out on the living-room floor in front of their family's only television set. It was February 1964, and the junior high school students could hardly wait for *The Ed Sullivan Show* that night. It was the Beatles' first American performance, and the Johnson brothers had heard their No. 1 hit, "I Want to Hold Your Hand," on the radio. This was their first time seeing the band perform on TV.

More than 73 million Americans tuned in that night as Sullivan introduced the British pop sensations to the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Beatles. Let's bring them on," Sullivan said over a crowd erupting into screams. As the Beatles performed four of their tunes, studio cameras zoomed in on girls hyperventilating, screaming uncontrollably, and bouncing out of their seats.

Peter and Paul Johnson were mesmerized. They wanted to be just like the Beatles.

The two begged their mother to buy them guitars for Christmas. They waited patiently for the 10 months, constructing makeshift guitars out of cardboard boxes, sticks, and rubber bands in the meantime.

When the two finally had guitars of their own, they practiced hours a day, and decided to form a band in 1965. Paul removed two strings from his guitar so he could play it as a bass. Their school friend Willy Thomas picked up vocals. They were the Fabulous Fascinators.

The boys spent hours on the second floor of the Johnson home, strumming away as long as their mother, Carrie Johnson, allowed them. They played shows around their Selby-Dale neighborhood in St. Paul, performing covers of their favorite artists including the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Temptations.

Their black peers weren't always their biggest fans. It was the height of the Black Power movement, and some of their neighbors expected them to stick to what they considered "black music."

"Why you playin' that white-boy music?" someone would yell during their show. Classmates would stop them in the halls at Como Park Junior High School, suggesting they play more James Brown, less Beatles.

"We just like the music," Peter Johnson would respond with a shrug.

In 1968, a boy named Steve Powers came to one of the band's gigs at the Loft, a youth recreation center. He didn't own a drum set, but carried drumsticks in his back pockets everywhere he went. He joined the band, along with Solomon Hughes, a Minneapolis teen and guitarist who had been playing around town with other bands. The Johnsons' cousin Janelle Green joined in on the action, too, picking up timbali and percussion. Peter Johnson learned to play keyboard, handing the lead guitar to Hughes.

By the late 1960s, they called themselves Purple Haze and started performing all original songs. Dressed in handmade, color-coordinated, low-cut, button-up shirts; 52-inch bellbottoms; and gaudy jewelry, Haze had a sound and an image to go with it.

Since they were an all-black band from inner-city St. Paul, most clubs wouldn't touch them. They refused to hire black bands for fear of attracting a black audience. So Purple Haze took their show on the road, driving hundreds of miles throughout the rural Midwest to perform at high school and college dances.

In the early 1970s, the band traveled down to Iowa to play a show at a college in the dead of winter. To save money, Purple Haze would pack up their equipment and head back to the Twin Cities instead of finding a hotel. When they hit southern Minnesota, the weather turned hazardous. The temperature sunk below zero and the snow made visibility almost zero.

They had just entered the outskirts of Albert Lea when their car sputtered to a stop. There were lights in the distance, but no sign of human life anywhere close. Fearing they might freeze to death, each member one by one took off down the road for the closest set of lights. Every man for himself.

Thomas took the lead, sprinting down the deserted highway. He spotted a hotel and was the first to make it to the locked doors, pounding away until a sleepy man answered.

"Our car broke down, we need a place to stay," Thomas explained. He was so far ahead of the group that the man offered to drive him back along the road to pick up the stragglers.

By 1974, the musicians were calling themselves Haze, and had their first self-titled album on vinyl. The band opened for the Jackson Five at the Civic Center that same year. Roger Egge, Haze's sound engineer, watched the band from the sound console, taken aback by the crowd of people and the band's biggest show to date. As Haze took the stage, longtime fans of the band came up behind Egge, grabbing his arm.

"We came to see you guys, not Jackson 5!" a woman yelled.

The next year, their single "I Do Love My Lady" made it to No. 38 on the Billboard charts. Each member of the band received a $9 check for the album.

"They had it made," says Jeff Cryer, a local music veteran and former singer in numerous bands during the '70s. "They were one of the best bands. They should have been the first band to make it out of Minneapolis."

Their album made it to No. 1 in some local markets, including much of Iowa. Haze made a day trip to Des Moines to advertise their hit single and meet some local fans.

Just as they drove into the city, the car radio was tuned to the main music station in town.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have just found out Haze has entered the city and will be at the record shop this afternoon."

When they were in Des Moines, they were famous. Fans spilled out of the record store and lined the sidewalks.

Back home, Haze had a growing loyal following as they booked more shows on their hit-single fame. Joan Adkins had moved to Minneapolis from Bloomington in hopes of seeing more live music. In 1975, she attended a Haze performance at the Flame, a dive club on Nicollet Avenue. She took to the dance floor and didn't stop moving until their set was done.

"We kept coming back to Haze because they were good and the band members were very friendly and respectful," Adkins says. "Watching other bands play, you can see that synergy, but when the music stops and the lights come on, it all goes away. The synergy that existed in Haze carried off the stage."

But their Billboard debut disappeared almost as fast as it arrived. Their label, ASI Records, didn't expect the band to gain national interest so quickly, and the company was unable to distribute the record fast enough to catch the Billboard wave. Without records in stores for fans to buy, Haze couldn't capitalize.

Egge kept the band realistic. He knew their show at the Civic Center was the best they could do in

Minneapolis. They needed to move to a bigger market.

After a Haze set at the Jockey Lounge in St. Paul in 1975, two women who claimed to be songwriters for the Jackson 5 approached the band.

"We'll set you up if you come out to California," one of the women promised. "You'll make it big and we can help you out."

With nothing to lose and high hopes for stardom, the band packed their equipment and belongings into a 1959 school bus and drove out to California.

When they arrived in Los Angeles, they parked their bus in front of the home of the two supposed songwriters. Instead of the Beverly Hills mansion they imagined, they found a dingy housing project and two pissed-off women who never expected the whole band to arrive at their doorstep.

The band slept in the school bus in the apartment parking lot, contemplating their next move. They had come all this way for a broken promise, and had $1,800 to their names.

Instead of heading home, Haze decided to try to make it in California. They spent $1,000 of their collected cash to record six songs at the RCA Studio. As they left the studio, a man approached them in the lobby, claiming to be a big-time band manager with interest in their music. He took them out to lunch on Sunset Boulevard and talked big possibilities, record deals, and all the fame they could imagine.

"You know, I'm going to run to the bathroom, be right back," the man said, slinking away from the table. Ten minutes later, the band realized he hadn't returned. And their master tapes were gone. He had snuck out the back door through the kitchen, taking the recording along with him.

Unwilling to give up, the band found a cheap place to rent in San Dimas. They tried to find venues to play and make some extra cash, but countless bands had the same idea. Their reserves of cash quickly dwindled.

Every evening, the band members and their entourage huddled around the house's fireplace to cook potatoes. Hughes and Thomas took turns stealing lemons from the field across the road to make lemonade. Sometimes Hughes would come back after a walk with a couple of oranges from another nearby grove. If they were lucky, a girlfriend back in Minnesota would mail them a care package with food and a little cash.

Their California adventure lasted just six months before they decided to head back home. They saved up enough money to record again, this time at Sound 80 Studios with producer David Rivkin. As Haze recorded their second album, Rivkin was working with Prince to create the demo that got him the deal with Warner Bros and his debut record.

"Haze did have potential, and we were just hoping their timing was right," Rivkin says. "Either way, they were setting the stage for what was to come in Minneapolis music."

Haze pressed 3,000 copies of the record, but a company in Delaware contacted them before they could officially release it. They had heard the recording, loved the band, and wanted to sign them on a multimillion-dollar contract.

There was one stipulation: They had to leave their just-recorded album behind.

The company's top executive, Harry Geisler, wasn't a negotiator. Nicknamed "The Bear," Geisler resembled Jackie Gleason in a thousand-dollar suit.

"I don't want yous to do anything with those recordings," he yelled at the band during their first meeting in Delaware. "They gonna come back and bite yous."

Hoping this was their big break, the band left their album to rot in a Minneapolis basement in exchange for a lavish musician lifestyle.

They had it made. Geisler's company, Factors, Etc., had acquired the rights to Elvis Presley and *Star Wars* merchandise and now had more money that it could spend. Haze moved into a secured mansion in Bear, Delaware, with more than seven bedrooms and land that included a volleyball net, basketball court, and three-car garage. They had a weekly allowance and a limousine to take them to their practice space and studio.

Every morning Hughes and Peter Johnson would get up to practice their martial arts moves while other band members took on the punching bags and weights. Maids would carefully place their clean clothes on the edges of their beds and ask what they wanted for breakfast.

Factors, Etc., transformed Haze into Crystal Haze. Cosmetologists cleaned up their faces, hair stylists groomed their afros. Each member was outfitted in custom-made knee-high boots and long, flowing white jackets. It was like they had stepped off a disco spaceship, awaiting superstardom.

In 1979**,** the band had just finished a performance when the Factors execs called them into a large conference room for a meeting. Seated on one side of a long glass table, the company leaders had a change of plans for Crystal Haze. Fifties teen idol Ricky Nelson was trying to make a comeback, and Geisler said they were going to be his backup band.

Peter Johnson didn't hesitate to speak up against the plan.

"Well, I wish him luck," he said. "That's not us."

The next day, Geisler and his entourage marched into the practice space and interrupted the band's rehearsal. He gave them an ultimatum: "Yous going to do it our way, or yous guys aren't going to do it at all."

Peter Johnson turned off his keyboard and walked out of the room in silence. One by one, the other members followed.

Haze packed up their belongings and flew back to Minneapolis. They never officially said it, but Haze was done. The members went their separate ways, forced to make a living and become adults instead of rock stars.

Susan Green had a free Saturday afternoon ahead of her and couldn't resist vanity searching her husband's band. It had been 35 years since Haze played together, but Egge had mentioned that he found their first record selling online around the world. Copies of their second album that snuck out of their manager's basement were selling for hundreds of dollars.

Susan Green had been married to Janelle for more than 30 years and was fascinated by this part of her

husband's past.

She typed "Haze LP 1970s" into Google, and search results started popping up. There were a number of sites, written in Japanese, selling the first record. Ebay turned up a number of records selling for between $13.99 and $100. She kept digging, scribbling down notes to pass along to her husband.

Then she came across one link that grabbed her attention: "Pop Music as Pornography: CASE CLOSED." It was a blog post with the Haze album cover centered on top.

"Honey, come here!" she yelled, trying to get her husband's attention. "This lady in Mankato is looking for you guys!"

"What?" Janelle Green seemed baffled. Mankato? Looking for us? What do they want from us? "Email her!" he said.

So she did:

Ran across your article about looking for info on the Haze album from 1974 Minnesota-based group. I am married to one of the band members for over 30 years, and the band just had a reunion-type get together Aug. 2009. Not all of the band was present, but it was a great time, and a lot of pictures were taken, and old photos from the band. If you are still interested in contact, please email me.

In Mankato, Pierce checked her email and found the message she had been waiting for. Finally, someone knew Haze.

Hello—You just made our day!!

I would love to get in touch with the band, and possibly even do an interview for us to air on our radio show. If you saw the blog, then you probably have heard the long search that we've undertaken trying to figure out who the band was on our test pressing album. We never thought it was a Minnesota band—primarily because it is so amazing!!

I can't wait to speak with you and the band about our experience with their record. If the band members would like to do an interview, I will speak with my co-host Tim about when we are available and we can see what will work.

This is so exciting—I tried to track down the band, but haven't had any success.

Thanks for getting in touch with us and I look forward to hearing from you soon. —Shelley

Two weeks later, she had a voicemail from Thomas, the lead singer of Haze:

"I guess you folks have been trying to get a hold of our band," Thomas said on the recording. "What makes it so interesting is we thought everyone forgot about us. Have a good day."

One by one, Pierce and Lind spoke to each member of the band, gathering more information. All but one of the original members still lives in the Twin Cities. All of the members except the Johnson brothers had met up in August for a small reunion, but rarely see each other around town. They'd all gone their separate ways, started careers, and had kids. Some even stayed involved in music. Peter Johnson went on to work with Lipps Inc., and Paul Johnson and Solomon Hughes performed with Sounds of Blackness.

After countless hours talking with Haze on the phone, Pierce and Lind came up to the Twin Cities this month to officially meet their mystery band.

Pierce brought her sister, Carrie Carroll, along to the meet-up at a St. Paul condo complex. Carroll couldn't resist the chance to meet the band her sister had spent five years looking for. Pierce calls herself shy and awkward, and figured her outgoing younger sister could help if things got quiet. They were going to meet a roomful of strangers, after all.

The two opened the door and peeked into the meeting room. The moment their heads came into view, the entire room erupted in cheers. Pierce blushed, overwhelmed by the enthusiastic welcome.

"The sleuth is here!" someone in the back yelled.

It was like a family reunion. Band members still call each other by their old nicknames, so Pierce and Lind were immediately inducted into the club with nicknames of their own. They were now Shelley "The Sleuth" Pierce and Tim "Shy Boy" Lind.

Hughes, also known as "Soli" or "Wolf," pulled Pierce over to the computer he had set up. He collected every band member's photos together in a slideshow with some of their tunes. By March, the band members plan to have all of the photos online at originalhazeband.com, along with copies of their first album and second, never-released title for sale. They are calling the second recording *Haze II Resurrection*.

"I really wish I could see them sing live," Pierce said.

Susan Green laughed. The band had toned down their antics for this meeting. The room was usually deafening with different harmonies, most often started by Thomas and any friend he could convince to sing along with him.

Lind couldn't believe their search led to this meeting.

"The circumstances are incredible," Lind says. "Their album was seconds away from ending up in the trash bin."

Before everyone left, Peter Johnson asked for the room's attention. He wanted to present Pierce and Lind with signed copies of their second unreleased album.

"We are just incredibly appreciative beyond what you can imagine," Peter Johnson said. "You took this time to find us. In their search for us, we re-found ourselves."