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Wednesday, September 29, 2004

A Conversation With Doug Fieger Of The Knack

THE KNACK

**A CONVERSATION
WITH DOUG FIEGER**

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In the late 1970's, four young men were taking the Sunset Strip by storm. Together, Doug Fieger, (vocals/guitar); Berton Averre, (guitar); Prescott Nilas, (bass) and Bruce Gary, (drums) called themselves The Knack and their music described by some as pure pop was making a major impact on Rock & Roll history. They released their debut record; "Get the Knack", in 1979 and with the leadoff single "My Sharona" The Knack climbed both the album and singles charts, eventually selling millions of copies around the world. Now back in the spotlight thanks in part to "My Sharona" being included on the movie soundtrack for "Reality Bites", The Knack with new drummer Pat Torpey (of Mr. Big fame) is once again putting out great music. Epiphone's Don Mitchell talked with Doug Fieger from his home in California.

EPI: Hey Doug, thanks very much for taking the time to chat. Your music has impacted so many people, both players and non players. Tell me about your early musical background and how you got started in music. Was anyone else in your family musical, other than yourself?



DOUG: Not really, although my mother loved to listen to music. She loved opera and folk music and I actually learned how to speak



listening to her records. She had all the 45's of the day like Peggy Lee and Dean Martin and she told me I was singing along with those records before I could even talk. She'd just kind of sit me in a high chair and put on a stack of records and that's really I guess where I fell in love with music. I've been playing music since I was about five years old. I started out on piano, and then moved to trumpet but when I was eleven years old the British invasion started and that's when I really knew that I wanted to do this. That's when I started playing guitar as well. A friend of my brothers had this old Jazz Master and it wasn't cool at all but I thought you know, maybe I'd like to try playing guitar.

EPI: Did you take guitar lessons at that point or just kind of plunk around?

DOUG: I did take some lessons but they wanted to teach me stuff like "Lady of Spain" and I really wasn't interested in learning that single-note kind of square music. Not long after that I met a guy who lived across the street from me that was in a band. By this time I had gotten a [Country Gentleman](#) which was a really beautiful and expensive guitar. Well, he offered me a gig in his band if I would switch over to bass and let this other guy named John Corey play my Country Gentleman! (Laughs) I had to go out and rent a bass while this other guy was playing my guitar! Anyway, after that I became a bass player for the next fifteen years. I really never played guitar in a band until The Knack. John Corey and I went on to form a band called Sky that got signed right out of high school. We made a couple of records with Jimmy Miller who produced the Rolling Stones and Traffic.

EPI: That's pretty impressive that you were signed right out of high school! How did you manage to accomplish that so young?

DOUG: Actually I was still in high school when we started having some success with Sky. I was only fourteen when we were opening for some major acts. We opened for Traffic, The Who, Joe Cocker, Jethro Tull, The Jeff Beck Group plus we played with all the local Detroit stars like Bob Seger and Iggy. Around that same time I wrote a letter to Jimmy Miller saying "If you're ever in Detroit, come and hear my band". Well, he not only answered the letter, he came to my house and later signed us. Five days after I graduated from high school he flew us to London where we recorded our first album at Olympic Studios, right next door to where The Stones were recording "Sticky Fingers". We recorded our second album at Mick Jagger's house using the Rolling Stones mobile studio. In the midst of all this we moved from Detroit to California.

EPI: And what label did those Sky projects come out on?

DOUG: RCA, which explains why you probably never heard the records.
(Laughs)

EPI: I guess really the band Sky was where you gained your initial stage experience?

DOUG: Yes, opening for all those major acts at fourteen was quite an experience.

EPI: Were your parents OK with you doing all this at such a young age?

DOUG: They were cool with it as long as I didn't bother them. (Laughs) No, they were fine with it. We used to rehearse in my basement during the day while my parents were at work so it worked out pretty good.

EPI: So what happened after Sky?

DOUG: Well unfortunately that band broke up but I wasn't going to go back to Detroit. I didn't want to spend another winter in Michigan so I stayed in California. The reality of it was that suddenly I was just another musician among the thousands of musicians already out here. Even though I'd made a couple albums and hung out with a bunch of heavy people it didn't really mean much. I just had to start looking for musicians and the first guy I met was Bruce Gary who was to become the original drummer in The Knack. We started jamming together and then a couple years later I met Berton Averre who would become the guitar player in The Knack. We started writing songs together but it actually took seven years to put The Knack together. We'd record demo tapes of the songs we wrote, many of which were later recorded by The Knack, and shop them around but we got turned down by everybody....more than once. An interesting story is that "Good Girls Don't" was written in 1972 and Capital Records which finally put it out on 1979, selling millions of records with it, turned it down four times before they took it! Anyway, finally by 1978 The Knack was officially formed and by then I was playing guitar in the band. On the demo's I would play bass and guitar but when we started playing live I had to pick one so I chose the six-string and that's when Prescott Niles joined the band on bass.

EPI: And Burton and Prescott are still with you today...Right?

DOUG: Yes they are.

EPI: It sounds like you shopped those original demos to everybody on earth! What do you think it was that finally got the attention of somebody after all those rejections?

DOUG: Yes, we shopped them to everybody in Los Angeles, New York and London! Despite the rejections we decided to start playing gigs in Los Angeles and by our fifth gig we were packing the clubs, literally. There would be lines around the block and it had become like a local phenomenon. Still the record companies were not real interested.....they wouldn't know a good song if it came up and bit them. Anyway, at one point all these stars started coming to our shows. We didn't even know these people but they heard about us and came to see us. Raymond Manzarek of The Doors was the first one and he asked us if he could sit in with us. We did a couple of shows with him and then Eddie Money and Tom Petty came down and we did some shows with them. Then Steven Stills came down and then Bruce Springsteen came down. Bruce got up with us on a Friday night at the Troubadour and on Monday we suddenly had fourteen offers! I'm not sure but I think it was the fact that Bruce Springsteen got up with us that suddenly made all these record companies think we were cool.

EPI: So Los Angeles was a great place for you to be at the time. What about up and coming bands today? Do you think a move to L.A. would be a wise thing for a band to do?

DOUG: I don't think so anymore. I think Los Angeles is the last place that record companies want to go because they can't use their expense accounts if they just have to drive down the street! (Laughs) You can probably tell I'm not a big fan of record companies!

EPI: It seems like a lot of artists I talk to these days share your sentiments.

DOUG: Well, you know nowadays the record business is pretty well over....but that doesn't mean the music is over. As a matter of fact I think it's actually much better for music.

EPI: Which of the fourteen offers did you take?

DOUG: We signed with Capitol.

EPI: And then was it right into the studio?

DOUG: No actually we played some more gigs. We did about 150 that first year and had all the songs for the first and second albums by the time we started to record. We actually wanted to release a double album but the record company didn't think we would sell that well and were concerned that a double album

would be too expensive for people to buy. So we got a producer, Mike Chapman, and went in and recorded our first album "Get the Knack" live in the studio in eleven days. We still had this whole other album that went with the first album but we didn't record it until later. It turned out to be our second album "But the Little Girls Understand". They came out very quickly, one on the heels of the other because they were meant to be a double album.



EPI: So all the material was ready to record, you just didn't get the green light from the label to do the initial double album?

DOUG: Right. And we had a lot of other songs too, in fact some of the songs on the third album and even some of the songs we recorded later than that were written during the time when Berton and I were just trying to get something happening.

EPI: At what point did you become aware of Epiphone guitars?

DOUG: When we were recording "But the Little Girls Understand" I got a 1963 Casino with a Bigsby tremolo. It was just like Paul McCartney's and I fell in love with it. He's been quoted as saying that if he had to pick one guitar it would be that one and I can see why. I totally fell in love with it and it's still one of my favorite guitars today. A couple years back I got one of the [John Lennon 1965 Casinos](#) that I use live.



EPI: And you like it?

DOUG: Oh God Yes! The thing that's wonderful is that it feels exactly like an old guitar. Not that I don't like new guitars, I do because I think that Gibson and Epiphone are now making guitars as good as they were back in the day. There was a time that they weren't, a period in the late 70s and early 80s when the quality of the instruments wasn't so good but fortunately for us guitar players the Gibson companies are now making guitars as well as they ever did.

EPI: We've worked very hard in the past several years to put out the best quality instruments possible. The John Lennon Casinos are a real treat for guitar perfectionists out there. We actually went to "The Dakota" in Manhattan and met with Yoko to examine John's Casino. During the examination,

measurements were carefully performed, body tracings were done, drawings were created, and photographs were taken. As a result, the guitar is a "true" reproduction of the guitar as John originally purchased it.

DOUG: It shows! It just feels like an original mid 60's Epiphone. It plays and feels very similar to my '63. The neck feels very, very similar and the sound is very similar as well. I recently got one of the [Revolution Casinos](#) too and I love it. You know, for a while I actually had a mid 60's Casino that somebody had stripped like the Revolution. I recorded with it on a couple songs on the album Zoom we did in 1998. You can also hear the '63 on that project. I used my '63 on our last album also which we did in 2001 called "Normal as the Next Guy". You can see me playing the '63 on the song "That's What the Little Girls Do" on our DVD, "Live from the Rock and Roll Fun House".



EPI: How can our readers can get these projects?

DOUG: Online is the best place to get them. You can go to www.Knack.com or www.amazon.com and pick them up.

EPI: The live DVD sounds like a fun project.

DOUG: Originally the company that we signed with wanted us to go to a club and record a live show but we had already done that back in 1979 when we played at Carnegie Hall. We didn't want to do that, I mean how can you beat Carnegie Hall, so I came up with this idea of doing like an old-time 60's TV show complete with host and audience. It was a lot of fun even though "The Rock & Roll Fun House" never really existed.

EPI: I heard you have some other projects you're working on besides The Knack?

DOUG: The newest thing I'm doing is a project with Elliott Easton and Clem Burke called Zen Cruisers.

EPI: That sounds very interesting. Any idea when we might see a project released?

DOUG: It's hard to say. We've been working on it for a couple years now but because we're busy with our day jobs so to speak, Clem with Blondie, Elliott with Creedence and me with The Knack we kind of have to grab the time when we can. Coincidentally, Elliott is actually coming over today to put a lead on one

of the songs.

EPI: So you have your own studio?

DOUG: Yes, it's in my house and is "full on" analog. I have a 16 track Studer 800 tape machine.

EPI: So you mean...."full on" analog.... on purpose!

DOUG: Yes, on purpose and then we dump to Pro Tools but basically I just use Pro Tools for storage.

EPI: I'm sure you know that every interview with you must eventually come to "My Sharona"! Do you ever get tired of talking about it?

DOUG: Well, I'm more sick of talking about it than I am of playing it!

EPI: It's a great song! How could you ever get tired of playing it?

DOUG: You can't and honestly we still love playing it.

EPI: This is one of those early songs that you wrote with Berton?

DOUG: Yes, we wrote it in 1978. Berton had the lick for a while, he seems to think it was only about eight months but I think it was more like a couple of years. He'd pull it out every once in a while and say, "You want to write this song yet?" and I'd say, "Naaagh". But then I met Sharona. She was this girl who my then girlfriend actually introduced me to and I instantly fell in love with her. I wanted to impress her and what better way to impress her than to write a song about her? So we wrote it and I'm pretty sure it impressed her! Really, a lot of our early songs were about her. She was my muse!

EPI: Obviously she will always be a big part of your life in a musical sense but is she still a part of your personal life?

DOUG: Oh yeah, she's a friend of mine. She is a great person and also happens to be a very successful real estate agent in the Los Angeles area.

EPI: Thanks Doug for talking with me. We are proud to be associated with you and The Knack.

DOUG: No problem, it was my pleasure.



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