

A Long, Strange Journey: Pearly Baker Reflects on the Eve of Its 28th Birthday



by Sloan Piva

On an early spring afternoon in 1985, UMass Dartmouth graphic designer Mike Mahoney's life changed forever. While strolling through the campus halls, he was approached by two students, Terry Sullivan and Tim Richmond. Sullivan and Richmond were desperate to replace two lead members of their band, who no-showed their gig at a nuclear disarmament protest rally in the quad.

"They said, 'Come on, play with us,'" Mahoney recalls. They were fans of his former band, Maxwell's Demon, who he fronted with guitarist/artist Kenny Richards until 1983. "I said, 'What? We've never played together before.' But they said, 'We need you.' So we grabbed our guitars and came back."

With their instruments in tow, Mahoney and Richards raced to campus and convened for a quick rehearsal with Sullivan, a drummer, and Richmond, a bassist. Huddled behind the administration building to decide on a set list, the one thing they knew was that they all shared a mutual love of the Grateful Dead.

"At the end of it, we thought 'wow, that was fun—maybe we should do this again,'" says Richards, the lead guitarist. "And so we did."



Twenty-eight years later, Pearly Baker has played weekly shows almost the entire time they've been together, mixing in occasional acoustic sets on weekends. They will play their annual benefit for the United Way Hunger Commission

on April 6 at the Zeiterion, donating 100 percent of proceeds.

During Pearly's long, strange trip, founding members Mahoney, Richards, Sullivan, and Richmond picked up drummer Jim Novick and keyboardist Eric "Toad" Costa. Most recently, the band added drummer Geoff Fortin to replace Sullivan, who hurt his shoulder.

At the start, Pearly Baker played Tuesday nights at Mickey McQuaid's in the north end of New Bedford, mostly because Richards was playing every other night of the week.

"We were playing in front of 15 to 20 people," Richards says. "Hell, we didn't make any money, really. It was more just that we found a place to jam."

After stints at the Sail Loft in Dartmouth's Padanaram village and Gilligan's on Pope's Island in Fairhaven, Pearly found a permanent home at the Bullpen in New Bedford. An instant connection and mutual level of respect was formed. The band played there on Tuesday nights for 20 years straight, until the club was sold. They currently play Tuesdays at the Sixth Bristol on Ashley Boulevard, where the cover charge never exceeds a minimal two dollars a person, per the band's wishes.

"It's never been about the money," Richards says. "This is our church."



Mike and Ken playing a local show.

Mahoney, Richards, and their comrades don't consider Pearly Baker a cover band, but rather one that takes music and treats it the way the Grateful Dead would. They primarily play Dead songs, sometimes putting their own spin on classic sets, while other times mixing in Bob Dylan, the Allman Brothers and the Beatles. But they always play "in the same spirit as the Dead," says Richards.

"It's improvisational music, which is very American," he continues, tucking his long, greyish hair beneath a bandanna. "Like the Dead, we use American folk-based, blues-based, rock-based music as a vehicle to play improvisational music. We never play a song the same way twice, and we like to take chances."

Mahoney, the lead singer with a poof of white hair and a trimmed but still Jerry Garcia-like beard, echoes such sentiments. He says Pearly lives for the unpredictability of the moment, as opposed to the mechanical nature of most modern records. They freely explore the groove, constantly playing off of each other to create a moment in a succinct but not structured jam. Just recently, they kicked off the second set of a Tuesday gig with a rousing rendition of Dire Straights' "Sultans of Swing."

As the lyrics ended, their fun seemed to just begin. They jammed out with the loud, high-pitched twangs of Richards' guitar dancing around Mahoney's rhythms, as the very-concentrated Costa adapted and improvised on the keys. Richmond's funky bass lines bounced and reverberated, and Fortin and Novick banged out the beat in perfect harmony, occasionally juxtaposing drum solos. They live for this kind of synergy.



Ken Richards

"It's that freedom to recreate the song from the bottom up," Mahoney says. "The songs are like do-it-yourself kits. There's certain instructions—some people might call them the lyrics, or the chord patterns. But once you get the framework up, you're free to do what you want. The audience allows you to fail—to take massive chances—on the hope that we're gonna catch that ephemeral feeling where we're not just band and audience, but one animal—breathing as one and moving as one."

It's the epitome of electric rock and roll jam music, and it's happening in front of a small crowd of southern New Englanders, including a short hippie sporting a cane, wandering around aimlessly and spinning in circles. People tend to lose themselves in this kind of music.

Meredith Smith, a longtime Pearly Baker fan, says she no longer lives in the area, but makes Pearly Tuesdays a top priority when she visits her hometown of Fairhaven.

“The music they play is a big draw for me, since I am a big Grateful Dead fan,” says Smith. “But the band members themselves are extraordinarily talented musicians. They take great music and make it their own.”

At times, the band will admit, they fall flat on their face. But most often, Pearly and its audience reach a connection that transforms the feeling in the air and takes the band to a higher place.

“Something happens,” Richards says. “It’s the interplay between the musicians and the audience, dancing in front of us and listening, and it’s like they’re the seventh member of the band. There’s a certain symbiotic relationship there.”

Costa, who sneaked in to see the band before he turned 21, started playing keyboards with Pearly after building the courage to ask Mahoney for an audition 20 years ago. He’s been hooked ever since.

“The Grateful Dead’s music seemed to be made with the common man in mind,” Costa says. “So it seems to be a natural fit as a type of music for common men to cover. It’s just some damn fine and damn fun music to play. If there’s no fun, there’s no payoff.”

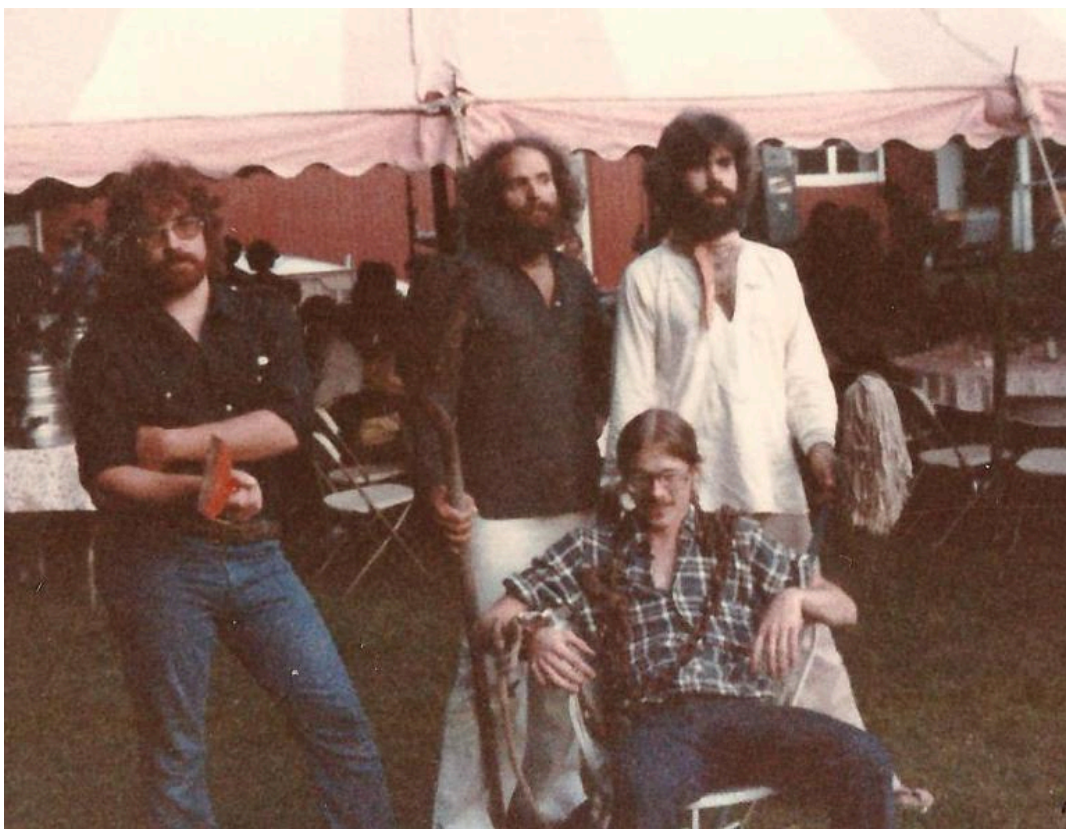
Costa says he feels an “otherworldly bodily force” when he’s “on” during performances, and that the whole band reaches invincibility when they all reach that level.

“Then we can all forget about life for a while,” he says. “We are the near perfect vessel for Grateful Dead music. [Their] music represents one of the last bastions of true American adventure, which involves taking a gamble in life and not resting on one’s laurels. Life is dull without taking risks.

Pearly Baker takes a ton of risks every time we take a stage."

Richards, a fine artist by day, loves the poetic words of the Grateful Dead. He sits in his art studio with a guitar nearby, keeping his two passions at arm's reach. He loves the openness and uniqueness of the lyrics, and the fact that no song ever reveals everything to the audience.

"You bring something of yourself to the lyrics," he says, "and use it to speak to you. Different songs have meant different things to me at different times of my life."



Maxwell's Demon – drummer Peter Blunsden, singer/guitarists Ken Richards, singer Mike Mahoney and bass player Peter Gaucher.

Mahoney and Richards, who have jammed together since their late teens and played in Pearly since their early 30s, have experienced quite a bit in their four decades together. Mahoney says he learned from The Police's Stewart Copeland what keeps bands together.

"Stu said, 'either they're really, really good friends,

they're really, really making a lot of money, or they really, really love the music. Any of those things in great enough quantity will keep a band together. The best is when all three of them are mixed in there.' And that's what we've really got—except the money part!"

Costa says the collective friendship and love of the music has kept the band together, even in tough times.

"It ain't always smooth sailing," he says. "But we are determined to get through with smiles, laughter and some good old-fashioned love."

Richards wants the band to stay together until he dies. He's 61 now, and expects to live until at least the age of 100. He says playing together has become almost like a drug for him and his bandmates.

"It's addictive, and it's a lot of fun. It's really not anything heavier than that. Or maybe it's the heaviest thing there is! We all love each other, we love the music, and we try to bring something new to it every week."

Every April for its birthday, the band teams up with Bill Shell and Michelle Hantman of the United Way Hunger Commission to play a benefit show at the Zeiterion Theatre in downtown New Bedford. State Senator Mark Montigny serves as chairman and host of the event.

"It was serendipitous," Mahoney says of the band joining forces with the United Way. "We were having our 24th birthday at the Bullpen, and I drove by the Zeiterion on the way home and said, 'We should play there!'"

So Mahoney called Richards, as he had on that fateful day 24 years before, and they made it happen. They only wanted to commit if all benefits went to charity, so they called Mahoney's friend, Senator Montigny, who linked them up with the Hunger Commission.

The *Pearly Baker* Bash will be held April 6 this year. Until then, the guys will be rocking every Tuesday at the Sixth Bristol, starting at 9:30 and jamming until the early morning hours. They wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm one of the luckiest people who ever lived," says Richards. "I don't make a great living, but it's a great life. When I die, I want to come back as me."