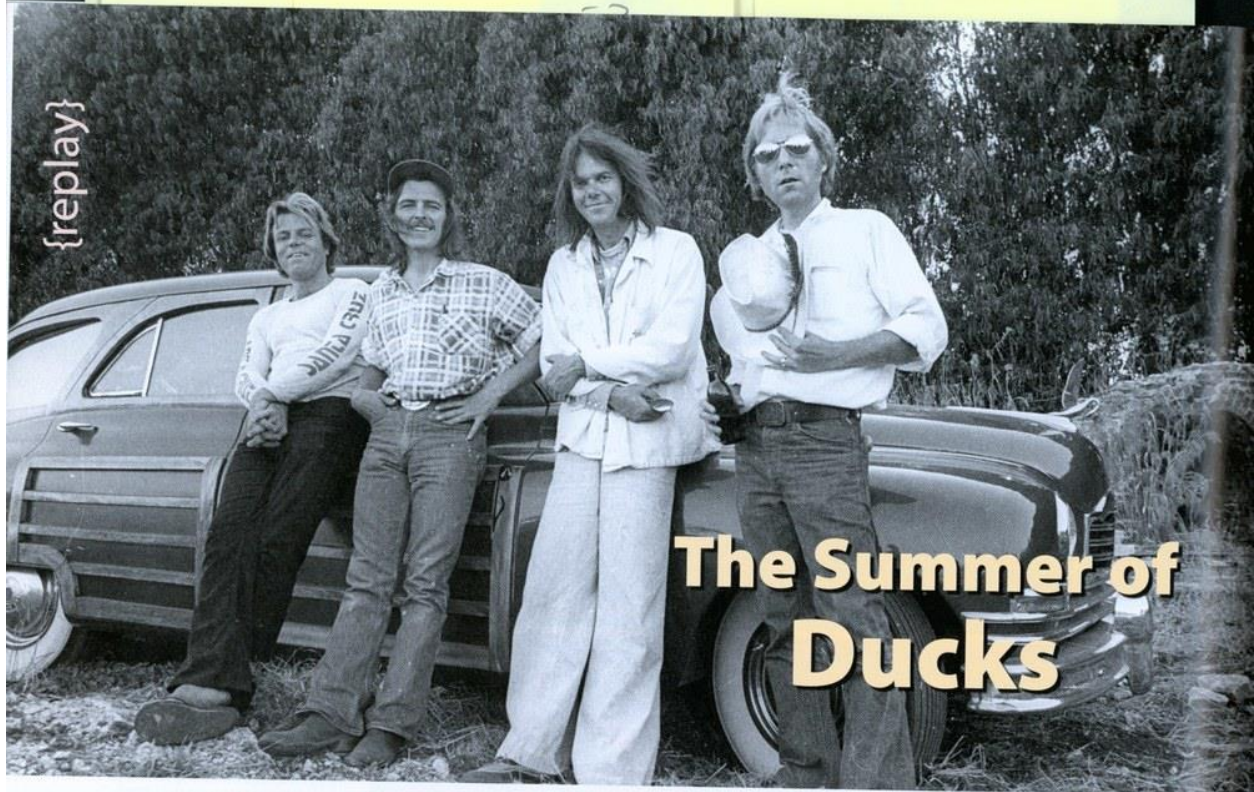


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The Summer of Ducks

During a glorious summer 35 years ago, the legendary Neil Young joined a trio of Santa Cruz rockers to create an unforgettable — and magical — moment in local music lore

By Geoffrey Dunn

In 1967, San Francisco staged the so-called Summer of Love, a transformative season in the history of the Counter Culture and rock music; it would help to define a generation. Precisely a decade later, here in Santa Cruz, we celebrated the Summer of the Ducks—perhaps, in the end, not quite as apocryphal as the cultural shifts ten years earlier in the City of St. Francis—but, for those of us who experienced it, the summer of 1977 was equally memorable and maybe even more fun.

In early July of that year, word hit the street that something momentous was about to happen: rock star Neil Young had joined a band of talented local musicians — guitarist Jeff Blackburn; bassist Bob Mosley; and drummer Johnny Craviotto—and the rumor was they were going to be playing at small clubs around town. They called themselves the



During the Duck's summer adventure in Santa Cruz they called upon the talents of local artist Jim Phillips for their graphics. These prehistoric ducks in space were created as their logo.

Ducks, reportedly after spotting a flock of the migrating birds at Schwan Lagoon.

Recollections vary—and the record is not quite definitive—but by my best calculation and memory, the Ducks played in Santa Cruz at least twenty times that summer. Because of contractual obligations that Young had with his longtime back-up band Crazy Horse, the Ducks were allegedly restricted to playing gigs solely within the city limits of Santa Cruz. Jim Mazzeo, Young's good friend and road manager in the 1970s, handled the band's bookings and arrangements.

Beginning on July 9 at the New Riverside's "Back Room" bar (site of today's

The Ducks (L-R) Johnny Craviotto, Jeff Blackburn, Neil Young and Bob Mosley relax against Neil's 1948 Packard woody.

Illustration: © Jim Phillips 2011



Photos: © Dan Coyro 2011

Riverside Inn), then to the Crossroads (located at today's Sash Mill), then to various haunts, including the Catalyst, Veterans Hall, the Pacific Coast Steamship Company (in Harvey West Park), and even the Civic Auditorium (twice), the Ducks played to mostly packed and enthusiastic houses until the Labor Day weekend.

It was a wild time. There was no advertising for any of the club concerts as I recall; word travelled simply by word of mouth. This was before the advent of Facebook and Twitter. Locals took to carrying duck calls around their necks and blowing on them when word of a new gig was confirmed—although the rumors weren't always reliable. I recall hearing once that they were going to play at the New Riverside, only to arrive and find a large crowd but no show.

Fans of Young flocked in from throughout the Bay Area, and, really, from around the world. With cover charges of only a couple of bucks—sometimes there was a code word for getting in free—the shows were quite the deal. Duck puns and expressions were the meme-du-jour all over town. Quack, quack.

For me, the mid-'70s marked an iconic period that is often overlooked. Dylan had just put together a brilliant two-album run with *Blood on the Tracks* and *Desire* and had embarked on his fabled Rolling Thunder Tour. There was a fusion of country and rock that marked the rise of the Eagles, Marshall Ticker, Emmylou Harris, the Allman Brothers and Leonard Skinner. Reggae vibes from Jamaica were also first landing stateside: Jimmy Cliff's

The Harder They Come had just been released, while Bob Marley had his first hit outside the Caribbean—"No Women No Cry." Springsteen's breakthrough album *Born to Run* was released in the summer of 1975.

Young—the Canadian-born singer-songwriter who had first come to California in the mid-1960s to form Buffalo Springfield and, following its breakup, momentarily joined Crosby, Stills and Nash—also played a seminal role in this era.

In 1972, both his album *Harvest* and its hit single "Heart of Gold" soared to No. 1 on the Billboard charts. Three years later, he navigated less popular waters with *Zuma*, a path-breaking album that included the searing political ballad, "Cortez the Killer." He had also become something of film star with his haunting rendition of "Helpless" in Martin Scorsese's landmark musical documentary, *The Last Waltz*.

At the same time, Young had also suffered through the breakup of his marriage to the actress Carrie Snodgrass and, reportedly, the death of at least two close friends to drug abuse. Perhaps a summer in Santa Cruz offered him a perfect respite from his personal challenges and the burdens of fame imposed by his professional career. He called his sojourn here "his re-emergence back into civilization."

While Young was clearly the main draw for The Ducks, he did not hog the spotlight. There was an egalitarian nature to the bands' set list. "Johnny C." Craviotto, a well-known local surfer who had played in

Neil Young and The Ducks perform at Crossroads nightclub located in Santa Cruz's Sash Mill.

the seminal Santa Cruz band Corny and the Corvettes (with Cornelius Bumpus) and had developed a solid reputation backing up national acts such as Buffy Saint-Marie, Ry Cooder, and Arlo Guthrie, throttled the house each night with rock'n'roll standards from the Chuck Berry era. Mosley, who had been a mainstay in the Bay Area rock band Moby Grape, fronted Grape classics like "Gypsy Wedding."

While I was (and remain) a die-hard Young fan (songs like "Helpless" and "Pocahontas" and "Thrasher" form the soundtrack to my life), I was especially taken by the performances of Blackburn that summer. One half of the '60s San Francisco duo of Blackburn and Snow, Blackburn had first moved to Santa Cruz in the 1960s and formed his own band, and it was Blackburn who provided the link to Young—they had written "My My Hey Hey (Out of the Blue)" together. My favorite of his songs was "Silver Wings" and I delighted in his rhythm guitar riffs on "Windward Passage," which the Ducks turned into a psychedelic surf rocker.

Young, for his part, performed some of his personal anthems—"Mr. Soul," "Are You Ready for the Country," "Comes a Time"—and also showcased a new song that summer, "Sail Away," which would later appear on his album "Live Rust."

*See the losers in the best bars
Meet the winners in the dives
Where the people are the real stars
All the rest of their lives.*

Santa Cruz had plenty of dive bars during that era to provide Young with inspiration.

Shortly after the Ducks formed, Santa Cruz photographer and writer Dan Coyro caught up with Young & Co. for a lengthy interview in *Good Times*. "I'm starting to get back that certain feeling for playing my music," Young told Coyro. "We're in a place right now where we're pure...it's like being born again. We're young and we need the safety of a small town to grow in. We're self-contained right now, but maybe when we get bigger, we may move on...the possibilities are there. But right now, the Ducks are just developing, and I'm just one of the Ducks."

Maybe never happened. At one point late in the summer, it was reported that Young's bungalow in Seabright was broken into and several items were stolen, including one of his guitars. The good vibes had ended. The Ducks played two final gigs on back-to-back nights at the Civic Auditorium in early September, one a benefit for the United Farmworkers, and then that was it. They—along with their music—flew away. ♣

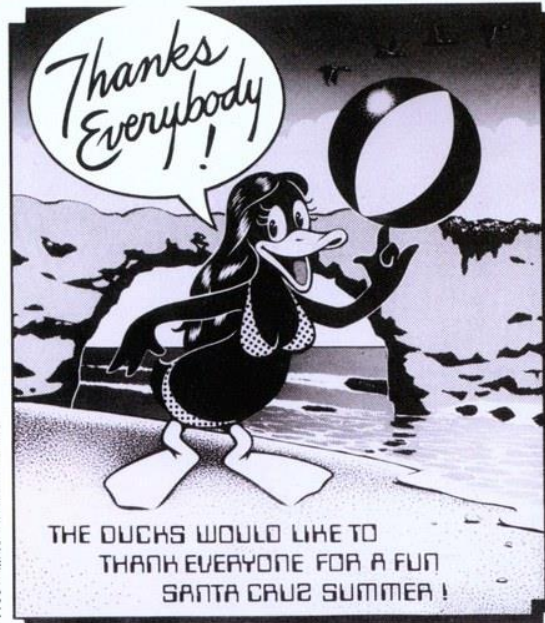


Illustration: © Jim Phillips 2011

This cleverly designed ad ran in the local papers to bid farewell to the end of an era in Santa Cruz.

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