

Rolling Stone



Fab Faux Meet the Beatles

New York combo is the greatest Beatles cover band – without the wigs

Not your average cover band

Photo by: Josh Rothstein

One day in early 1998, Jimmy Vivino, guitarist and arranger for the Max Weinberg 7, the house band on *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*, ran into his neighbor Will Lee, bassist for Paul Shaffer's CBS Orchestra on *Late Show With David Letterman*, in the elevator of their Manhattan apartment building. "We were going to our shows," Vivino says, "and Will goes, 'Hey, I'm starting a Beatles cover band.' The first thing I said was 'Why? There are plenty of Beatles tribute bands out there.'"

"Then I realized he was serious," Vivino recalls. "He said, 'I'm not talking about *that*. I'm talking about the way classical musicians start a chamber orchestra to play Mozart. I'm talking about playing the Beatles' songs and records live, as perfectly as we can.' I said, 'Without the wigs?'" Lee's reply was quick: "Sure."

Seven years later, the Fab Faux -- Lee, Vivino, guitarist Frank Agnello, drummer Rich Pagano and multi-instrumentalist Jack Petruzzelli, all of whom sing lead and harmony vocals -- are the most accomplished band in the Beatles-cover business. Since debuting at New York's China Club in May 1998, the Fab Faux have mastered and played more than 160 of the 211 songs in the official canon -- according to Agnello, the Faux's resident Beatles statistician -- and most are complex hits and post-'65 LP tracks the Beatles never performed in concert. The Fab Faux are surely the only Beatles tribute band that has *never* covered "She Loves You," "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "I Saw Her Standing There" but *has* re-created the complete White Album collage "Revolution 9" *live*. The Faux don't do the obvious, says Lee: "We do the impossible."

They do it to the letter. At a June club date in New York, augmented by small horn and string sections, the Faux went the distance, from the chiming guitars and high brassy vocals of "Please Mr. Postman," on 1963's *With the Beatles*, to Petruzzelli's perfect take on Paul McCartney's soulman howl in *Abbey Road*'s "Oh! Darling." Pagano vocally evoked John Lennon tripping through watery reverb in "I Am the Walrus," while drumming in strict Ringo Starr time. And in "Penny Lane," guest trumpeter Lew Soloff blew the brief, closing cadenza found only on the rare promo version of the single.

"When we play the early stuff, it's fun," Pagano says one day before a Faux rehearsal. "But when we play the later stuff, it becomes an enigma, this dream state -- how it would have been." The Faux are religiously attentive to vintage studio detail. Lee recently bought a cowbell that matches the exact pitch of the one the Beatles used during the recording of "I Call Your Name." But Agnello insists, "We're not that exact. We learn all the parts from the records, but we sing the songs in our own voices." And when all five voices spread out in full harmony in "Nowhere Man" or when Vivino spins out on lead guitar at the end of "Paperback Writer," the Faux invigorate the artistry of even the Beatles' most intricate studio masterpieces with top chops and Beatlemaniac glee. "It's not just a cover band," Pagano claims. "This is the greatest music ever written, and we're such freaks for it."

Ranging in age from forty (Petruzzelli) to fifty-two (Lee), the Fab Faux are all veteran session players, songwriters and touring sidemen who were already pressed for spare time when they met at Lee's home for their initial practice. The first thing they tried: the ornate waterfall vocals of "Because," on *Abbey Road*. "And we nailed it pretty well," Lee remembers. "But this is not a band of weekenders. Other Beatles bands have the same love for the music, but they don't have the edge. They don't do what we do for a living."

Pagano, who oversees the Faux's booking and financial affairs, hopes the band can start doing more than its current two dozen or so gigs a year and meet a growing demand for appearances outside New York. (The Faux's next big local shows are September 11th and 12th at Webster Hall, where they will perform *Ex-Factor*, a thematic salute to the Beatles' solo years.) "We get so many requests to play in other big cities," says Pagano. "But Will and Jimmy never know when their vacations are coming up, and touring is a big part of Jack's and my life." In June, Petruzzelli missed only his second Faux gig in six years because he was in Europe with Rufus Wainwright. (The Faux have understudies for such rare occasions.)

The Fab Faux long ago learned to live with the stigma of being a cover band. "The first thing I tell people is 'We don't dress up,'" says Petruzzelli. "Some people are just not open to it, period." But for the past few years, the Faux have been a top attraction at the annual Beatle Week in the real Fabs' hometown of Liverpool. "These are people who had *seen* the Beatles," Lee says. "They tell us, 'We saw the Beatles many times, and they were never this good.'" He laughs. "That's kind of hard to take."

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