

A family faces the music

The Cowsills had fame, fortune and each other. How did it all come crashing down?

RHODE ISLAND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

'FAMILY BAND: THE COWSILLS STORY'

Wednesday, Aug. 10, 6:30 p.m.

The Vets, 1 Avenue of the Arts, Providence

Tickets \$15

(401) 861-4445

www.film-festival.org

BY JANINE WEISMAN

They did milk ads, for goodness sake. How much more wholesome could The Cowsills get? Their matching outfits, smiles and major chord cheer blasted this musical family to the top of the pop charts in the late 1960s.

But the real story isn't so sunny in a new documentary on the real-life inspiration behind "The Partridge Family," premiering Aug. 10 at the Rhode Island International Film Festival. "Family Band: The Cowsills Story" recaps the rise and fall of these talented Newport-bred siblings

and their search for answers to understand how they could have earned millions performing their bubblegum pop with their reluctant mother throughout the U.S. and Europe only to end up a fractured family deep in debt within five years.

Except the man they need to ask — their abusive, alcoholic father, Bud Cowsill, who mismanaged the band and terrorized his children and petite wife Barbara — died of leukemia in Mexico in 1992 at age 66. Barbara died of emphysema in 1985 at age 56.

And that makes "Family Band" part memoir and part therapy for the surviving Cowsill siblings: Robert, Richard, Paul, John and Susan. Bud Cowsill's mood swings and vicious temper and their mother's inability to stand up for herself and her children have clearly inflicted psychic harm. "It gave closure," said Bob, 61, the film's narrator, in a telephone interview last week. "I think we're stronger now."

Filming started seven years ago after director-producer

Louise Palanker approached Bob at a southern California pub where he performs a regular solo gig. "My first reaction was to say no because we weren't doing anything," he recalled. "She kept coming back, then I decided I better ask my siblings."

A two-year break ensued after the five learned their oldest brother Billy had died in Canada on the same night they were holding a memorial service at the Hotel Viking in Newport for brother Barry, who perished when Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans. The cameras were rolling as the siblings were setting up for the celebration of Barry's life, capturing their stunned reactions, as they got the news. They'd been getting ready to visit and record an interview with the ailing Billy, according to Palanker.

But another group of filmmakers had already done so for a separate project. Palanker negotiated over a year to buy 90 minutes of a gaunt and grainy-voiced Billy talking between off-camera breaks to breathe with the aid of his oxygen tank. Billy, who suffered from emphysema, Cushing syndrome and osteoporosis, died only a couple of months after that interview at age 58 at his Calgary home. No longer the embittered black sheep fired from both the band and the family after an infamous quarrel in Las Vegas (that ended with the cops hauling away Bud), Billy says he feels sorry for his alcoholic father, whom he believed was bipolar.

"Did he rescue us even in his death as a big brother? Absolutely," Bob said. "He took him on and he was hurt the most by the man and forgave him and cut him a lot of slack that I did not have it in me to do."

The siblings and Palanker



The park and other things. Left to right, Susan, Paul, Barry, Richard and Bob are shown on the field at Fenway Park on Oct. 16, 2004, during Game 3 of the American League Championship Series. The Red Sox lost to the Yankees 19-8, and Barry would end up indulging in Richard's meds and ending the night passed out. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

met in Las Vegas, of all places, with the filmmakers who interviewed Billy to see the interview and were amazed by the once headstrong brother they saw on screen. Bob had only seen Billy three times in the previous 30 years.

"They were dumbfounded," Palanker said. "They were seeing a Billy who was contrite and understanding and warm and giving and had made peace in his heart with his life, with the people who mattered to him."

The Cowsills spent much of the years from 1968 through 1972 on the road, averaging 200 performance dates per year. All the while Bud made a series of bad decisions back home. Among his worst: starting a fight after the band's performance on "The Ed Sullivan Show" that resulted on their 10 contracted performances being cut to just two.

The film includes Newport restaurateur Richard "Biggie" Korn, who was The Cowsills' road manager (and legal guardian of the youngest siblings on the road) as well as Artie Kornfeld, the creator and promoter of Woodstock who co-wrote The Cowsills' 1967 hit "The Rain, the Park &

Other Things" (also known as "I Love the Flower Girl.") Singer-songwriter Tommy James, who shared the same manager, and producer Waddy Wachtel also appear. The siblings talk with their aunt Eleanor Worley, Bud's sister, only to be disappointed by her evasiveness. Their mother's sisters, Flo Presley and Jean Russell, however, do give them insight into the young Barbara's wild side.

There's also great footage from numerous television appearances with Johnny Cash, Johnny Carson, Buddy Ebsen and Mike Douglas. "It was hard to see the old shows, to look at them as an adult. You saw what the public saw," Bob said of watching his 15-year-old self perform. "I saw the freshness and the beauty."

Viewers will see the adult siblings reverting to roles they assumed decades earlier when resolving a conflict while practicing for their gig singing the national anthem at a Red Sox game at Fenway Park in the fall of 2004. Palanker's co-director Ian Broyles was smart enough to keep the cameras running as the Cowsills argued after Paul grew frustrated with

Richard's limited musical ability. It's a sensitive subject because their father had long ago rejected Richard from the band, dooming him to enter the military and two tours in Vietnam, where he would develop a heroin addiction. And while their performance of the national anthem ultimately goes OK, we learn from Bob's narration that the night would end badly for the drug-addicted Barry.

"Family Band" tells a story of a family blessed and cursed at the same time. It's a film about a family like no other growing up and ultimately coming to terms with the things they cannot change. But one thing that doesn't change is the role of music in bringing them together — and making both this film and the healing process possible. Bob, Paul and Susan now perform regularly together as The Cowsills with Susan's husband, Russ Broussard, on the drums (brother John tours with The Beach Boys), Bob's son Ryan on keyboards and Paul's son Brendon on guitar and vocals. The Cowsills will perform several songs after the Rhode Island International Film Festival screening.



Mom in the middle. Barbara Cowsill never wanted to be in the band and her oldest children didn't want her in either. But her husband did. Clockwise around her from upper left in this 1967 photo are Billy, Bob, Barry, Susan and John. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO