

Devil-Ettes Shimmy Into Fame

Edited by James Sullivan

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No more rock-club attitude. The cool kids aren't afraid to make fools of themselves. They're playing dress-up and doing the Limbo.

At least that's the opinion of the Devil-Ettes, the 18-member-and- growing dance troupe that is fast becoming San Francisco's favorite traveling theme party.



``All of us grew up in the punk rock era, when you had to be super- cool," says Baby Doe, the leader of the Devil-Ette pack. ``We're sick of that. We want to go to shows and have fun, smile and be goofy."

The Devil-Ettes began almost by accident, late last year at Radio Valencia's annual Christmas talent show. ``Three or four of us didn't have any talent, and we felt really stupid," says Baby Doe. So they came up with an idea -- synchronized dancing. It was a smash. Twelve women, mostly staff members of Radio Valencia and its sister nightclub, Casanova, ended up signing on.

``We thought it was a one-time thing," Baby Doe says. But friends in bands immediately began asking the troupe to be their opening act. The Devil-Ettes opened for Virginia Dare at the Makeout Room in January. The show was a sellout.

Beth Lisick caught that show and asked the group to open for her next gig at Cafe du Nord. It was a match made in kitsch heaven; another sellout. Suddenly the line-dancing, bunny-hopping Devil-Ettes -- the Dazzler, the Cheerleader, the Barracuda and the rest -- had a career on their hands.

``At first people were really shocked," Baby Doe says. ``Everybody in the bar would stop what they were doing and watch us. `What are these girls up to? Strange!'" "

The Devil-Ettes work out special programs for each gig, developing fearlessly corny routines for long-forgotten novelty songs (``The Topless Dancers of Corfu" by Dick Hyman), vintage R&B (``Lucky Lips" by Ruth Brown) and primitive rock 'n' roll (Elvis, Eddie Cochran). At a recent ``Prom Night" party at Cafe du Nord, the ladies shimmied to Patti Page's ``My First Formal Gown" and Lesley Gore's ``It's Raining on Prom Night."

Bookings are pouring in. The group performs tomorrow night at the Makeout Room with the Inspectors. Next week they start a monthly appearance at the Hi-Ball Lounge, and on July 31 they take part in the SOMAR Gallery's ``DaDa Fest."

In September the Devil-Ettes will entertain at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' exotica film festival. They'll also host a show called ``Bongos by the Bay" featuring Preston Epps, the Oakland native who recorded the 1959 hit ``Bongo Rock."

Baby Doe says the Devil-Ettes knew they'd really arrived when they were asked to perform at this October's Las Vegas Grind, a three-night trash-culture event to be held at the Sin City throwback Gold Coast Hotel. When she and her live-in boyfriend Otto von Stroheim, editor of the exotica zine Tiki News, were hired to decorate the Gold Coast, they told the promoters about the Devil-Ettes.

Bands to appear at the Grind include the Trashmen, Los Straitjackets and the classic garage band the Wailers.

The Devil-Ettes recently held auditions for new members. Their routines -- and their day jobs -- can be hazardous. The dancer called the Saucy One has a bad back. "I think she was shaking her groove thing too hard," laughs Baby Doe. And the one they call the Tumbler, a bike messenger, took a tumble trying to avoid a pedestrian.

Finding new members has not been a problem. Finding audiences hasn't, either.

-- James Sullivan

Ad-libs

Phil Lesh and Friends, Galactica, Government Mule, moe. and the String Cheese Incident headline Summer Session '99, August 20-21 at Berkeley's Greek Theater . . . The rejiggered Rollins Band throttles your skinny neck August 3 at Slim's . . . French electronic act Cassius tweaks the knobs July 31 at the Justice League . . . Saxophonist John Handy, the T.S. Monk Sextet and vibesman Bobby Hutcherson headline the first John Handy Jazz Festival, August 27-29 at San Francisco State University . . . Dilated Peoples perform July 23 at the S.F. Amoeba Records; Dance Hall Crashers are scheduled for August 24 . . . Toots and the Maytals, the Wailing Souls, Boukman Eksperyans and the Rev. Billy C. Wirtz are among those scheduled to appear at the Renegade Music and Camping Festival, July 30- August 1 at the Plumas Sierra County Fairgrounds in Quincy . . . Horn blower Ralph Carney will release his second solo album, "I Like You (A Lot)," in September . . . Jim Campilongo, the Aquavelvets and the Scott Amendola Group have been added to tonight's benefit for Paul Pena ("Genghis Blues") at the Great American Music Hall. Others on the bill include Tuvan throat singer Kongor-Ol Ondar, Merl Saunders, the Ali Khan Band and didgeridoo master Stephen Kent . . . Police have asked the producers not to publicize the free Tower of Power concert July 25 at Stern Grove, lending new relevance to the question: "What Is Hip?"

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