

Steve 'Marns' Fataar – See the Light -

In the sixties, discotheques and disc jockeys were unheard of, while live bands and the music they made were major sources of entertainment for those of us growing up in a youthful new era of popular culture and optimism.

The Beatles and the Rolling Stones, amongst others, were revolutionising music and influencing the minds of teenagers the world over, instigating a “mania” with their distinctive sounds and lifestyles.

Durban youngsters were no different. The period saw the emergence of bands like the Naked Truth, Ginger Crush, the Insects, the Jets, Johnny Soon and the Magnets, the Vampires, Electric Lighthouse, the Puppets and many more.

But the best, and tightest, of these pop-rock groups were the Flames, so called because their leader, Abdur Rahman “Steve” Fataar, used to like doodling and drawing flames all over his school books. Steve and his brothers, Edris (better known as Brother) and Ricky were also bitten by the music bug and the lifestyle of that period and started entering and winning local talent shows.

My family had a long standing connection with the Fataars, from the early days in Kent Mansions in Greyville to the family home in Mayflower Road in Sydenham. Our Mums were besties - I have a beautiful monochrome studio picture of his Mum Aunty Biba and my mother as elegant young ladies, and other photos where Aunty Biba is the maid-of-honour at my parents' wedding.

So there were the reciprocal visits and interaction with family members, but the first encounter that I really remember was at a fundraiser/ house party for Rosslyn's Cricket Club, held at my aunt's home in Fourth Avenue, Greyville. Along came the three Fataar boys, set up their equipment and entertained us for hours. Like most kids (I was all of seven years old), I was fascinated by the drummer. Ricky Fataar was only nine years old but there he was keeping time and delivering those metronomic beats that would later take him around the world.

The eldest brother Steve, (a monicker given to him by a schoolteacher at Epsom Road School who couldn't pronounce Abdur Rahman), was the leader. We all knew him as 'Marns' – he played cricket back then and used to hang out with my cousin, Enver Domingo as teenagers.

Another cousin, Edries Fredericks, joined the Flames around 1964 after winning a guitar off my dad, Ike Mayet. My dad had won the guitar in a

raffle at work and had announced at a family gathering, that anyone who could play it could have it.

Edries stayed with the Flames for about three years, touring the country and winning competitions like the Battle of the Bands. They had a Thames van – similar to the VW Kombi and Hi Ace taxis today- with flames painted on the sides and back, which we would see all over the city.

After one album and several singles, Edries left and was replaced by Mitchell ‘Baby’ Duval for a short while, until he too was replaced by a teenager from the Melbourne Road Flats, Terrence ‘Blondie’ Chaplin.

This was the final line-up that criss-crossed the country and recorded the seminal albums ‘Burning Soul’ and ‘Soulfire’ and several singles - Steve, Blondie, Brother and Ricky.

The Flames were SA’s first supergroup, setting trends and records wherever they appeared. They filled venues, had hordes of screaming fans in a froth and the puritanical apartheid state increasingly worried over the effects four “coloured” boys were having on the young white female population.

The band’s popularity was also indirectly responsible for the National Party legislating against mixed audiences at public music events and pernicious new laws would soon see black musicians like Winston Mankunku playing behind curtains to white audiences.

The Flames did a residency at the Tiles and Alfresco nightclubs along the Esplanade in Durban, playing four sets a night. Despite the hordes of white fans screaming and dancing to their music, they could not eat or drink in the venue and were forced to buy food from an all-night joint around the corner – a real hole-in-the-wall place. This often led to them being harassed by the police late at night and they were even arrested once.

The Flames practiced every day, and went from being a very good covers band to composing and creating their own material. Although it was mostly soul and R&B sounds on their two major albums made in SA (think Wilson Pickett and others of similar ilk), there was also an indication of a rockier future sound with the inclusion of their own version of Jimi Hendrix’s “Purple Haze”.

This new direction towards the progressive rock and underground genres was typical of the time. Just as, when earlier in their career they had imported records and played songs that hadn’t even been played on radio

yet, the Flames stayed ahead of the listening curve, setting musical trends again.

Having played all the major venues in SA, the Flames decided to hit London in May 1968. Steve, then 25 years-old, was given power of attorney by their parents and was responsible for Ricky, then 15 and Blondie who was 16 years-old when they left our shores.

The Flames were so naïve that they didn't realise they required work permits to perform in the United Kingdom. After sitting on the boat at Southampton for about four days while sympathetic news reports highlighted their plight, they finally received the required papers and headed off to London.

At the end of the "Swinging Sixties" London was still a groovy place for music, creativity and debauchery. The Flames gigged around and did a short residency at Blaises, the happening club at the time, sometimes backing vocalist Zayne Adams who was also trying his luck in London. Here at Blaises they were seen by Al Jardine and Carl Wilson from the Beach Boys, who offered them a recording deal.

They were soon heading to California to play and record for the newly formed Beach Boys record label, Brother Records. Opening for the Beach Boys, they toured the United States and gave command performances at the Royal Albert Hall and other big venues in Europe.

They changed their name to "The Flame" to avoid being confused with James Brown's backing band called "the Blue Flames" and went on to record rock's first ever Quadrophonic album in the world which included the hit single "See the Light" (that album is worth a pretty penny these days).

Sadly the distribution company went belly up and though people could hear them on national radio while the single "See the Light" did fairly well on the Billboard charts, there was no product for sale in the record shops.

In 1970 they came home for a short tour with Philly Meintjies sitting in on drums for Ricky and I saw them at Curries Fountain playing their own material as well as songs from bands like Traffic and the Stones.

On their return to the United States the Flames recorded a second album for Brother Records but it was never released and is still being disputed. Despite a major recording and distribution deal offer in New York, the

band broke up in 1972. Brother (Edris) went back to England and later married and settled in Holland where he died in 1978. Steve came home for a while then lived in Amsterdam and Swaziland following harassment for living and loving across the colour line with Marianne Knudsen, with whom he had four children.

Back home in Durban, he started playing with various local musicians like Buckeye Lortan, Mike Smith and Patchy Joe Appolis. By this time Issie, the youngest Fataar, had developed into a really good guitarist and was included in different formations by his big brother.

Steve was the itinerant entertainer until the end, playing his last gig at Zacks on 17 January 2019, the Friday night before he died in his sleep.

The Zack's Friday night sessions were a decade old and included an open mic/ jam session for aspiring musicians. It was a gathering point for old friends, musicians and music lovers and had a family feel to it with many regulars. Steve would play the first set solo and then it was open mic time, generously inviting and encouraging others to perform, often jamming with them. There were Friday night regulars like Richard and Graeme Ellis, the Reverend Danny Chetty, Nathan Isaacs, Mozzie the taxi company owner and many more. The owner of Zacks, John Humphreys and his sons even played there one Friday night, whilst Steve also featured visiting musicians like Neill Solomon, Tim Parr, Philly Meintjies. Steve even did a set with Blondie when he was here in 2011.

That night Steve and Blondie performed an acoustic version of the most popular song the Flames ever did, "For Your Precious Love", a song they recorded twice.

First, with Baby Duval on vocals and then, the later definitive version of the Oscar Toney Junior hit, with a 15-year-old Blondie nailing it in two takes.

On the latter version Steve does the spoken intro - "Into each life a little rain must fall" etc and at the end of it says, "now maybe Blondie will give you a better understanding of what I'm trying to say" and so Blondie's rich, soulful voice soars off to immortalise a love song that's been popular in SA for over fifty years. Half an hour in the studios and a lifetime on the airwaves.

Once voted in a radio station's survey as the most popular love song of the last half a century in South Africa, it was requested at every gig Steve played.

Despite this obvious popularity for so long (one woman even came up to Steve after a gig and said she had lost her virginity while the song was

playing and would therefore never forget it), there were no material rewards for the band.

No royalties, no radio needle-time payments despite many thousands of spins on radio stations across the country, nothing to show for a song that lives in the consciousness of many South Africans.

Gallo Records owned the rights to the song and later sold that part of its catalogue to Benjy Mudie's Fresh label. They in turn repackaged the albums and have been selling them ever since, but still no royalty cheques arrived in the post for Steve, Ricky and the rest of the band.

Steve was philosophical about this, rather buying the re-released CDs and selling them at gigs, saying he didn't have the energy to deal with being ripped off. Having turned his back on the industry at a time when a major recording and distribution deal was in the offing, he returned to Durban where he was just another member of society and had no big rock star ego.

There are still disputes with Brother Records over the release of the second Flame album and Ricky and Blondie are also fighting about royalties for songs they composed and recorded whilst with the Beach Boys.

Steve had performed in huge venues across the world – from the Fillmore East in New York to the Royal Albert Hall in London – but he remained the same easygoing, accommodating, friendly person I'd grown up in front of.

Once at a community day in a churchyard in his Hillary hood, he started to perform the classic "For Your Precious Love" when, after each verse he was first joined by a bassist, then a drummer and finally a pianist before the song ended. He remarked "well that's a first for me – starting a song as a soloist, becoming a duo, then a trio and finally ending it as a quartet!"

The last time I saw Steve was when guitarist Henri Donjeany, a Durban musical export to Switzerland, did a short set at Zack's.

We chatted and Steve said he, Ricky and Blondie were discussing a Flames reunion tour in SA, possibly in May or June this year, depending on Blondie and Ricky's touring schedules. Ricky is on the road for ten to eleven months of the year, often with Bonnie Raitt and others. Blondie has just begun another US tour with Brian Wilson, the musical genius behind many of the Beach Boys greatest hits. They'd all last played together in March 2011 at the Cape Town International Jazz Festival, followed by a gig on the Durban beachfront the next day.

Blondie calls him “the servant and keeper of the Flame”, Steve would just say “Stay fired up”.

“Once a raging fire, now reduced to a flickering glow” the immortal words of the great Robbie Jansen, for me, aptly sums up the Flames and Steve Fataar or as Buckeye sometimes called him “Steel Guitar”.

Travel well Steve/Marns – thanks for the tunes and choons .

Steve Fataar, musician and founder of the Flames, was born 14 March 1943 and died on the 18 January 2020. He is survived by his daughter from his first marriage Zanine Sewell and many grand and great grandchildren, all in Australia; also by Marianne Knudsen and their children Tara, Camilla, Dane and Lyla, AND Aunty Biba who is now 98 and lives in Sydney.