

# Portsmouth Times

eastbayri.com

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2013

VOL. 1, NO. 44

FREE

## They've got a feeling for The Beatles



RICHARD W. DIONNE JR.

John Flanders, Ray Davis, Mike Jackson and Kevin Sullivan (from left) of the band Abbey Rhode emulate the cover of a similarly named Beatles album from 1969. This photo was taken on Park Avenue last week.

*Abbey Rhode works hard to replicate every nuance of the Fab Four's songs*

BY JIM MCGAW

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The challenge of being in a band that covers The Beatles? Make just

one little mistake, and everyone knows it.

"Every little lick, every little drum beat is essential to the song because everybody remembers them; they're iconic songs," said Kevin Sullivan, 63, one of the guitarists in the band. "A thousand bands play 'Johnny B. Goode' in

different ways. But with the Beatles you can't really do that."

Oh, and you better not get the lyrics wrong, either. "We've got to be on our toes, because if we sing the wrong words they're going to know right away," said Kevin.

The Beatles cover band — Abbey Rhode doesn't consider

itself a tribute band since members don't try to dress like their heroes or use fake British accents — has been pouring over the Fab Four's songbook for nine years. Most members — guitarist John Flanders, 65, bassist Ray Davis, 64, and drummer Mike Jackson, 54 — are from Portsmouth, while Kevin,

who grew up in town, lives in Newport.

All come from various musical backgrounds, but their collective love for the Beatles drew them together.

"The reason I play bass is because of (Paul) McCartney. That was my inspiration," said Ray, who grew up in Kent, Ohio before playing in bands such as Detroit Street, Little Brother, Radio Ranch and Blue Blood after moving to Rhode Island.

Mike said The Beatles were the first rock and roll band that caught his attention. "To me they were just the best-sounding rock band around — their voices, the sound of the guitars, Ringo's back beat," he said. "All that stuff just blended like nobody else. When they were in the studio they weren't really breaking a sweat but the energy coming out of their instruments was really unbelievable."

John first started playing Beatles covers with the late Barry Cowsill of the Newport band The Cowsills, which served as the inspiration for the television show "The Partridge Family." Barry later moved on, but Kevin joined the fray, followed by Ray.

When asked why the Beatles still resonate more than 40 years after their breakup, Kevin points to the songs.

"When you look and try to pull

See **BEATLES** Page 4

## Plunge will wrap up 375th year the way it began

*Brave swimmers to jump in Dec. 31 at Island Park*

Portsmouth plunged into its 375th anniversary year on Jan. 1 when the largest turnout ever of Island Park "seals" jumped into sub-40-degree waters off Park Avenue.

It's only fitting that another group of brave souls will end the gala year the same way, with a noon jump at Island Park Beach

on Tuesday, Dec. 31.

The event will cap off a banner anniversary year for Portsmouth, which celebrated the 375th anniversary of the town's founding in 1638. Volunteers from the Portsmouth 375th Steering Committee and its various subcommittees organized many well-attended events throughout the year, including a town-wide parade, historical lectures, tours, concerts, family picnics and more.

In May, the volunteers helped

arrange for the Portsmouth Compact — the 1638 document signed by religious dissenters that marked the town's founding — to be brought to Town Hall for a one-day visit. It was believed to have been the document's first appearance here in 374 years. Over the Labor Day weekend, mayors from three other Portsmouths (England, Virginia and New Hampshire) visited town.

See **PLUNGE** Page 2



Brave swimmers run from the icy waters at Island Park Beach on Jan. 1, 2013. This year the plunge will be held one day earlier to cap off the Portsmouth 375th celebration.

## So long, Mrs. Kneller!

**Beloved teacher retires from Hathaway School**

PAGE 3



## Shutout victory

**PHS icemen leave Mt. Hope out in cold**

PAGE 7



# BEATLES: Abbey Rhode breaks down and studies the Fab Four's songs

From Page 1

them apart, you realize that the chord structure of some of these songs are not just a three-chord blues," he said. "These songs were well-crafted by a bunch of 20-somethings. There song structure is pretty amazing, even to this day. I think it's not unlike when people talk about the classics — Beethoven, this or that. In popular song, they're it."

Added Ray, "The thing about the Beatles that's fascinating to me is they do so many different styles of music — rockabilly, ska, the ballads, the really hard rock stuff, there are little jazz snippets and old English ballads. And it's not easy to play."

### Still learning

Of the 200 or so Beatles songs, Abbey Rhode plays about 75. "It's really cool because you get to look forward to more songs to learn," said John, adding that the band never tires of playing these familiar tunes.

Kevin said the band can't fake it when it comes to duplicating the Beatles' music. "We approach as if, how would the Beatles approach this if they were out on the road as a four-piece?" he said. "As we all know, after 1966 every song were never played live. When we approach a song like 'A Day in the Life,' we've got to give it that feel of an orchestra behind us, even though we don't have one. I think we do a pretty good job of it."

Like the Beatles, Abbey Rhode sings three-part harmony on many songs. "The Beatles' vocals are beautiful; that still gets to me to this day," said Ray. "When we work together, we really work on that and we do three parts. I'm very proud of the way we do our vocals as a band."

Some songs — "I Am the Walrus" is singled out by all members



RICHARD W. DIONNE JR.

Ray Davis, John Flanders, Kevin Sullivan and Mike Jackson of Abbey Rhode pose in front of Flo's Clam Shack in Island Park.

— are more challenging than others. But the band takes great pains to isolate and study each instrument or sound in a Beatles recording.

"That makes that song more realistic. It could be just one note," said John.

Take "A Hard Day's Night," for example. "There's a cowbell part during the bridge, and if I try to do that and play the high hat, then it loses the feel completely — suddenly there's no wash in the back; it's all quiet," said Mike. "That would stink, so I've figured out a way to hit the cowbell with my left hand while I was riding the high hat with my right hand and hitting the snare drum at the same time. There was no diminishment in the feel. You know, you learn what ways to bring that in. If you can't do it, you can't do it. But if you can, it adds a lot."

While Abbey Rhode works hard to do the original recordings justice, John acknowledged that the covers are not carbon copies. "Most people when they're sitting out there and we're playing, they all say, 'Holy mackerel, you guys played that exactly the way it was record-

ed!' And we say, 'Who you kidding?'" said John, who often plays both guitar and keyboard on the same song.

### Can't play them all

There are a handful of Beatles songs that the band decided not to include on its set list because they're too difficult to reproduce on stage. Both "Day Tripper" and "Got to Get You Into My Life" were dumped because the voice parts were too high, said Ray. "And on some of them, when you change the key they just don't sound good," he added.

Abbey Rhode also doesn't play "Eleanor Rigby" because Paul McCartney's only accompaniment on the 1966 recording was a double string quartet. "We're not opposed to a couple of synth things here and there, but when it gets to the point of really sounding fake we shy away from it," said Kevin.

"Rain" was cut because the band felt it needed more guitars to do it justice live, even though the drummer pushed for playing it. ("I wanted my Ringo moment," Mike said.) As for "Norwegian Wood," the band had trouble replicating the sound of its sitar, a notoriously difficult-to-play Indian stringed instrument favored by George Harrison.

"I even went out and bought a sitar. I couldn't string the frickin' thing, never mind play it," said John with a laugh.



Abbey Rhode takes great pains to isolate and study each instrument or sound in a Beatles recording. "That makes that song more realistic. It could be just one note," says guitarist John Flanders.



"The thing about the Beatles that's fascinating to me is they do so many different styles of music ... and it's not easy to play," says bass player Ray Davis.



Kevin Sullivan was tapped by Yoko Ono to deliver a mysterious envelope to estranged husband John Lennon on Christmas Eve in 1974.



"When they were in the studio they weren't really breaking a sweat, but the energy coming out of their instruments was really unbelievable," says drummer Mike Jackson.

As for their favorite songs to play, it varies from "When I Saw Her Standing There" for John to "I'm Only Sleeping" for Ray.

"But there's not one song that we play by them that I don't like. Playing in a cover band, that's like a godsend," Ray said.

They're also appreciative of their fans — young and old — who

come out to their shows at venues such as Greenvale Vineyards in Portsmouth, Sandywoods in Tiverton, Sakonnet Vineyards in Little Compton, the Canfield House in Newport and the occasional bar such as Fifth Element in Newport. The group also performs at many parks during the warmer months.

### Don't stay out late

"We like to play in the afternoon because we're old guys and we'd like to go home," quipped Kevin. "We don't want to be out there until 2 or 3 in the morning."

Because of the Beatles' intergenerational appeal, parents often bring their kids to the concert shows. "They know a lot of this stuff and they're dancing all over the place," said Ray.

The band even has fans in the neighborhood surrounding John's house, where the band rehearses in a room that's a virtually shrine to the Beatles.

"This is the first band I've been in where the neighbors don't call the cops over the noise," joked Ray.

Abbey Rhode will play New Year's Eve at The Canfield House, 5 Memorial Boulevard, Newport.

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# A Christmas Eve delivery to John Lennon

*Abbey Rhode guitarist Kevin Sullivan shared this story — parts of which appear in Albert Goldman's book, "The Lives of John Lennon" — about his holiday meeting with the ex-Beatle and his then-estranged wife, Yoko Ono, in 1974. At the time Mr. Sullivan, who grew up in Portsmouth, was 24 and living in New York City.*

"I was friends with Yoko's psychic. His name was John Green and he wrote 'Dakota Days.' I was over there Thanksgiving dinner and Yoko came by; she was delivering turkeys to the homeless. She was separated from John Lennon at the time. I was there with some friends and she was sitting around on the floor with us, having some wine.

"Then I got a call about two weeks later from John Green: 'Kevin, Yoko had a good feeling about you. She wants you to do this special job for her. Go see her at the Dakota.'

"So I get to the Dakota. The elevator opens up and I'm greeted by Yoko. There's a white rug, a white little pyramid in the hallway and she's dressed in white. I've got a blue jean jacket, blue jeans and clogs. We go into the room overlooking Central Park and there's a white grand piano, white couch.

"She says, 'I've got this job for you to do. I want you to fly down to Florida and deliver these papers to John Lennon. Make sure you hand them to him.' She gives me the envelope, she gives me a check and she gives me money for expenses along the way. She books the flight. I'm going on Christmas Eve.

"While I'm on the plane, I see that the envelope she gave me is not sealed. And I opened it up. It's the dissolution papers of Apple Records, signed by George Harrison, Ringo Starr and it hadn't been signed yet by Paul McCartney.

"I go down to Florida and I get out of the airport. It's Christmas Eve and the only cab drivers are Jewish. I give him the address and he says, 'You know where that is? It's West Palm Beach.' It's like a \$70 cab ride.

"So I get to the condo and who greets me at the door but May Pang (the woman in a relationship with Lennon while he was away from Yoko). And it's (music industry executive) Morris Levy's condo — the guy who produced the 'Rock 'n' Roll' album by John Lennon, the one he didn't want released.

"I see John in the other room on the floor with (then-11-year-old son) Julian, watching a Disney special — cartoons and stuff. He comes out and we shake hands and I hand him the stuff and May Pang's making small talk with me.

"That was my little moment of closeness to the Beatles. The funny thing is that about seven years later, I joined a band in New York and two of the members actually played with John Lennon on his 'New York City' album."