

All-Female '60s Band Dealt a New Hand

BY CHRIS M. JUNIOR

Ace of Cups finally land a label deal, issue studio debut.

IT ONLY TOOK Ace of Cups 50-plus years to go from being a group ahead of their time to one where their time has finally come.

Acknowledged as San Francisco's first all-female rock band, which blossomed during the city's celebrated Summer of Love in 1967 and opened Bay Area shows for The Jimi Hendrix Experience and others, Ace of Cups released their long-overdue debut studio album in November (shown below).

The self-titled effort on High Moon Records was made with a little help from some longtime friends. That's fitting because it was musician friends who, by happenstance, provided the scenario for Ace of Cups to round out their original lineup.

At first, though, it was more like a folk duo than a full-fledged rock band. Around 1965-66, singer Mary Gannon and pianist Marla Hunt were "having so much fun making up songs" together, the former recalls. Drawn by the sounds and smells coming from a building one day on San Francisco's Clayton Street, Gannon (now known as Mary Gannon Alfiler) says she entered and met Diane Vitalich, who was in "an empty room and in her own world playing a full drum set." Soon Vitalich was playing with Gannon and Hunt. Guitarist Mary Ellen Simpson (now Mary Simpson Mercy), who heard from a San Francisco City College classmate about what Gannon, Hunt and Vitalich were doing, was the next musician to enter the fold. With Gannon on bass, the quartet got to work.

"We were practicing simply for the joy of it and imagined playing in the park and ballrooms with other bands from the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood," says Vitalich, adding that various band names, among them Charm School Dropouts (her idea), were being tossed around.

Playing the blues at Blue Cheer's house

On Dec. 31, 1966, Simpson attended a New Year's Eve party hosted by Blue Cheer at the band's Victorian house in Haight-Ashbury.

And similar to how Gannon first crossed paths with Vitalich, Simpson would encounter a musician on this night who would become a bandmate.

"I knew Blue Cheer's bass player, Dickie Peterson, so I'm sure I was invited to the party," Simpson Mercy says.

Also there to ring in 1967 was guitarist-harp player Denise Kaufman, who recalls being invited by one of the members of Blue Cheer. And at some point during the night, Kaufman wandered into an upstairs bedroom, where she saw "this blond woman sitting on the bed playing some really funky blues on guitar."

It was Simpson, who had broken away from the party to be with her instrument. Kaufman didn't arrive empty-handed, either, and proceeded to pull a harmonica out of her pocket.

"We started to play together," Simpson Mercy says, "and immediately after I heard the first sounds out of her harp, I thought, 'I've got to have her come over (and meet the rest of the band).'"

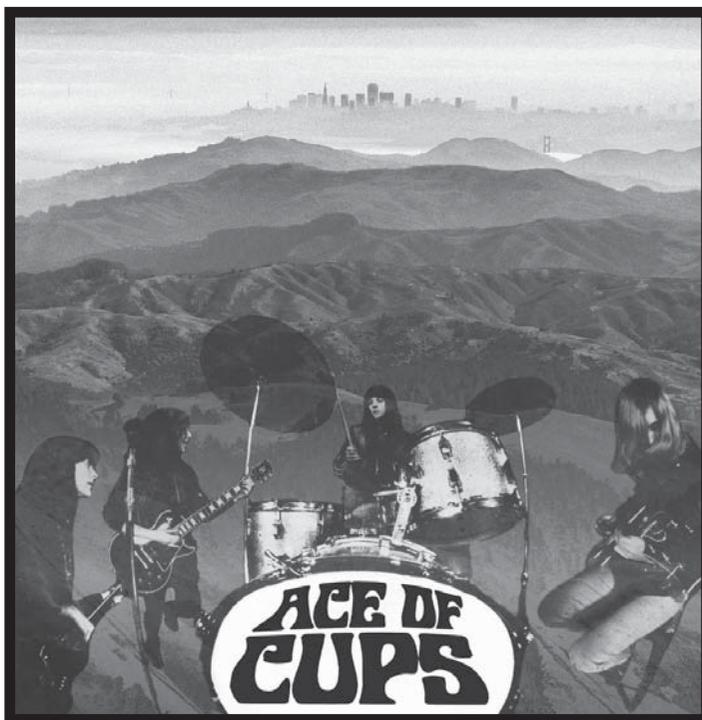
Simpson had Kaufman stop by 1480 Waller St., where Gannon lived, to meet everyone—and they clicked personally as well as musically.

"They were really fun," Kaufman says. "I played some of my songs for them right off the bat, and they liked them. And immediately,

they were jumping in with harmonies. They didn't have much equipment; it was rudimentary and funky as far as gear, but there was a great spirit, and everybody was having a good time."

Finding management and a band name

A few weeks after she began playing with her new bandmates, Kaufman took them to see her friend Ambrose Hollingworth Redmoon at San Francisco's Mount Zion Hospital. She'd met Redmoon there after he'd been in a car accident while on his way to see a concert by a band he managed, Quicksilver Messenger Service. The women stood around Redmoon's bed and sang a few songs for him and his hospital roommate, Leslie Scardigli, and afterward,



Redmoon asked if he could be their manager.

The musicians continued to see Redmoon at the hospital, and during one visit, their band name came to fruition.

“We were standing around Ambrose’s bed, and he passed a tarot card to one of us,” Kaufman says. “We each held the card—none of us had seen it before—and saw the offering hand holding the chalice with five streams of water flowing from it. Ambrose told us that the suit of Cups represented emotion, love, music, creativity and flow, and that the Ace was the highest expression of that. We loved the card and agreed we wanted that name.”

With help from Max Weiss, Kaufman’s boss at Fantasy Records (where she worked in the office), Ace of Cups rented some equipment from a store in Oakland, California.

Thanks to Kaufman’s connection at Fantasy, Ace of Cups were allowed to practice at the label’s recording studio on Treat Street in San Francisco. (The Golliwogs, the pre-Creedence Clearwater Revival band featuring Fantasy shipping clerk John Fogerty, also practiced at the studio. “John and I were the only young people working there,” Kaufman says.)

Scardigli, whom Kaufman says received a large settlement from the car accident that hospitalized him, threw his support behind the band, putting up money to buy new equipment from Sherman, Clay & Co. in San Francisco. He also gave Ace of Cups “the gift of time together and no worries about finances for while,” adds Kaufman, by renting a place for the musicians in Marin County, enabling them to leave their day jobs so they could live and practice in a three-bedroom house on Autumn Lane in Tamalpais Valley.

Experiencing Monterey Pop, opening for Hendrix

As for the first Ace of Cups show, Kaufman admits, “There’s sort of conflicting stories about that.” Details related to other early concerts also vary. Around February-March 1967, while the band were still living in San Francisco, Kaufman recalls “dragging a few amps and some drums to a little club in the Haight for maybe two or three times and playing a few numbers.”

Redmoon (whose business card for Ace of Cups read “All Lady Electric Band”) landed his clients a gig in spring 1967 at a teen club on the grounds of a high school in Etna, California. According to Gannon Alfiler, the band drove to the show in a van with no windshield, “and on the way back home, it poured.”

The weather was much better in mid-June for the Monterey International Pop Festival, which Ace of Cups (sans Kaufman) attended as guests of The Electric Flag. In the weeks prior to the three-day event, Ace of Cups let the Chicago band rehearse at the house in Marin County. And while hanging out at the hotel where The Electric Flag were staying during the festival, something special caught Simpson’s ear.

“I was in the bathroom brushing my hair or something, and I heard this sound coming from the stage off in the distance,” she

Ace of Cups in 1967 (L-R): Mary Ellen Simpson, Denise Kaufman, Diane Vitalich, Mary Gannon and Marla Hunt.



says. “I thought, ‘Oh my god, who is that? We have to go over there *immediately*.’”

That’s what they did, making it to the festival site to catch the rest of the set by The Jimi Hendrix Experience. Another chance to be blown away by Hendrix came later that month, when Ace of Cups opened for him and his band at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco—for which Hendrix asked to borrow Simpson’s amp.

“He struck me as a very humble fellow,” Simpson Mercy remembers, “and he promised he wouldn’t blow up the speaker, which I was very grateful to hear.”

Hendrix was impressed by what he heard that day at Golden Gate Park. In an issue of the British magazine *Melody Maker* published later that year, he mentioned Ace of Cups among some of the “groovy sounds” he experienced touring in America.

Breaking up, reuniting and recording

More high-profile opening slots around the Bay Area followed for Ace of Cups over the ensuing years; they included The Youngbloods in January 1968, Quicksilver Messenger Service in October 1968 and The Band in April 1969.

What did not happen was signing with a record label.

“We never really got an offer,” Kaufman says. “There were people who came to see us, but none of those big labels ever made us an offer.”

She suspects that preconceived issues related to marketability may have been a roadblock.

“We were five women; we all sang—there wasn’t a lead singer,” says Kaufman. “Our influences were many, so you couldn’t just put us in one bag musically. We had R&B-sounding songs, we had soul-sounding songs, we had some country, definitely some folk and also psychedelic-rock influences. So I think we were a little more eclectic (than most other bands).”

Several factors contributed to Ace of Cups disbanding in 1972—among them band members having children—but over the ensuing decades, the five musicians kept in touch and would periodically get together to play in various configurations.

Then in 2003, an Ace of Cups album finally appeared—however, *It’s Bad for You But Buy It!* (released on the Ace Records-distributed Big Beat) was a collection of concert performances and rehearsals. The wheels were put into motion for the band’s

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?



Ace of Cups in 2018 (L-R):
Mary Simpson Mercy, Mary
Gannon Alfiler, Diane Vitalich
and Denise Kaufman.

first studio effort in May 2011, when High Moon Records founder George Wallace, who was already familiar with Ace of Cups, heard the reunited quintet perform at a 75th birthday concert-benefit in Richmond, California, for 1960s counterculture figure Wavy Gravy.

Wallace felt that Ace of Cups should work with a female producer, and the band agreed. But after interviews with a few women didn't result in a good fit, Ace of Cups turned to Vital-

ich friend Dan Shea, whose vast studio credits include Santana.

"Dan had done his homework; he had already listened to a bunch of archival tapes," Simpson Mercy says. "He said everything we wanted to hear, asked the right questions and expressed the right vision for us," Kaufman adds.

Kaufman, Vitalich, Simpson Mercy and Gannon Alfiler spent about two and a half years recording their studio debut at Laughing Tiger in San Rafael, California. (As for pianist Hunt's absence, Kaufman says, "There were creative differences, and we were going in different directions.") Ace of Cups capitalized on the High Moon opportunity, recruiting Bob Weir, Taj Mahal, Buffy Sainte-Marie and other notable guests while recording enough material for a second album (due in the spring).

"(Wallace) would say, 'Let's do some more,'" Simpson Mercy says. "His way of looking at it is you don't know (what the future holds). He knew there was a time limit, and he wanted to get as much as he could out of us."

The four women are embracing the excitement and goodwill that comes with a band's studio debut.

"My cool factor has gone up over 75 percent," Gannon Alfiler says. "My kids, who are all grown, they're sending me texts: 'Go for it, Mom.' Even my grandchildren are proud." ●

Go to www.aceofcups.com to order the new album.

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