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When this band takes the stage, two friends will be there in spirit

By RYAN CORMIER / The News Journal

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Phil Young can still remember that feeling.

As he and the other members of masterful pop band the Knobs walked off the stage at the Dewey Beach Popfest last April, the guys had just put on what might have been their best set ever.

"We felt like kings," says Young, 37, who's easy to spot in a crowd with his massive sideburns and penchant for polyester pants and offbeat shirts.

Not only was it impossible for the band to play a bad note on that rainy night at the Rusty Rudder, but the band already had its third album, "The Knobs Breakup and Die," in the can, ready to shop it around to music labels. The album - complete with its dark, foreshadowing title - was the culmination of years of work and mounting personal losses for band members.

That was April. By mid-July, the band's singer, songwriter and head Knob, Phil Healy, was dead.

Drunk behind the wheel on his way home to Wilmington from the beach, he crashed into a state police trooper, killing them both.

Young had lost one of his best friends and immediately decided to channel his grief through music, getting together with his other band, the Cocks, just a day after Healy died.

Since then, Healy has appeared in his songs ... and his dreams.

"I can see the guilt on his face," he says. "He knows what he did."

For Young, the loss was hard to take, but he was well-prepared: It wasn't the first time he suddenly lost a close friend and band mate.

Kevin Cheeseman, Young's best friend and member of the Knobs, died seven years earlier, leading Young into a downward spiral.

But this time with Healy, it would be different, he told himself.

He was right.

And Saturday night he will play on the same stage at the Rusty Rudder. This time he'll be with the Cocks and many of the songs he will be singing are the direct result of Healy's untimely demise.

Bands swap members

The incestuous relationship between the Knobs, the Cocks and Young's other former bands the Rubber Uglies and Suckee would make even Woody Allen do a double take.

Mark Stallard, who shares the role as guitarist and vocalist with Young in the Cocks, played with Young in the Rubber Uglies from 1989 to 1993. The band also featured Cheeseman.

The Rubber Uglies eventually broke up and Young, Cheeseman and Stallard founded a new band called Suckee, whose first and only album was engineered by Healy.

During that same time, Cheeseman and Young also played in the Knobs.

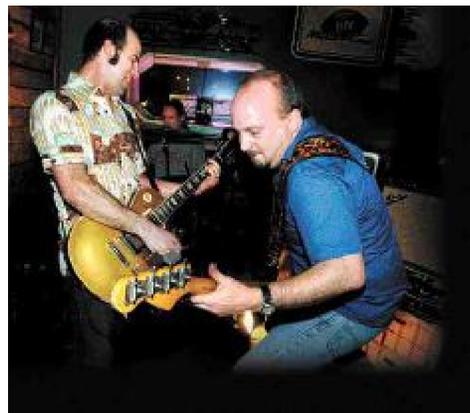
All this cross-pollination was natural since they were all good friends and spent hours together in the basement of Young's New Castle childhood home, which he eventually bought and currently lives in.

Cheeseman grew up around the block and made the Young basement a home away from home. The Cocks (Young, Stallard and drummer Kevin Burk) still use the same basement as a practice space and studio.

"It's a little like 'Wayne's World.' It's really scary," Young says of still being in his parents' basement.

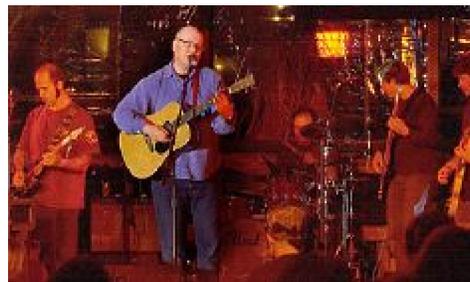
It was in that basement where good times flowed uninterrupted until 1997 when Cheeseman fell off a roof while working construction, breaking his back.

After a few years of surgeries and rehabilitation, Cheeseman was able to return



News Journal file/GARY EMEIGH

The Cocks: Phil Young (left) and Mark Stallard perform at C.J. Barts.



News Journal file/GARY EMEIGH

The Knobs: Young (left) and Phil Healy play a knockout set at the Rusty Rudder in 2003.

to Suckee and the Knobs. After a long struggle, it seemed as if he was back. But in the spring of 1999, his injuries caught up with him and he died suddenly of an aortic aneurysm. He was 34.

The death hit everyone hard, especially Young, who first met him when he was 9.

"He was my best friend. We were always together. I had to get used to living again," Young says in between gulps from a can of Miller High Life, sitting in the basement where he and Cheeseman spent more time than he'd probably admit.

Left alone, and at a loss

After Cheeseman's funeral, Young had a lot of alone time. And that wasn't necessarily a good thing.

"It was really bad," he says. "It got unbearable."

He spent a year in counseling to help him grapple with the loss of his closest friend.

He buried some of Cheeseman's ashes in a fire pit the two had dug together at Young's trailer in Millville, known as The Oasis.

And during the summer of 2000, Young spent a lot of time at the trailer, grieving and learning the guitar parts of the Knobs' catalog, since he was becoming the band's lead guitarist after years as its drummer.

"I just drank beer and learned those records," he says. He spent endless hours by the fire pit - ground he considers almost sacred.

But at the same time, Healy's mother died and there were also breakups with longtime girlfriends. Young's mother died two years later.

What rose from the ashes of that time for the members of the Knobs just may be one of the most perfect pop records never heard, the appropriately titled "The Knobs Breakup and Die."

Filled with Healy-penned songs about death and the battle to recover from such devastation, the album was a visceral reaction to the dark times the band members had gone through.

Since Healy's own death, it has become become a road map for grieving friends and family of Healy.

"Say Goodnight," which anchors the still-unreleased album, includes a refrain that took on new meaning after Healy died: "May you dream of healing angels/And hear from those who've passed/Let them tell you that these dark nights of loneliness won't last."

Young last saw Healy at Comegy's Pub in Wilmington, where they met with a Spark reporter and photographer for a cover shoot for an upcoming story about the band.

Healy wasn't drinking at all. After years of struggling with alcohol, he told Young he was putting the bottle down.

"He said, 'I'm going to stop drinking. I said, 'Cool. We have a great album coming out, and we need to be on the ball.' That was it. That was the last time I saw the guy."

That weekend, Healy returned to his old ways while down at the Delaware beaches attending a funeral for a friend.

The funeral was Saturday July 17, 2004, and Healy, a 41-year-old schoolteacher, drank heavily that night and decided to drive.

In his Toyota Corolla, he ended up traveling north in the southbound lanes of Del. 1 before he collided with state police Cpl. Christopher M. Shea, killing both of them. Healy's blood-alcohol level was .336, more than four times the state's legal limit for driving.

Young says he had received a call from Healy that night before the accident, but Young had fallen asleep. He still wonders what would have happened if he had talked to his troubled friend that night.

"Maybe if I called him that night ..." he says, trailing off.

A different way of coping

But Young, who is now happily married, has dealt with the loss of Healy differently than Cheeseman.

He thinks it's partly due to having gone through a loss already, but also because of the circumstances surrounding Healy's demise.

"With Kevin, I took a year off and almost lost it," he says.

After Healy's death, he was immediately in his basement with the Cocks writing songs.

"You can't get any worse than what he did on the way out," he says of Healy,

who left Shea's wife and children without a husband and father. "He was a great songwriter and all that, but he killed a guy. It's hard to say it, but that's what happened."

After years of writing and practicing in Young's basement, the Cocks emerged a few weeks ago, playing a show at C.J. Barts in Wilmington.

"We said, 'What are we doing?' We had all these songs, but for what?" says Stallard, 38. "It was a nice release to get out there and play for people."

And with Saturday night's high-profile gig at the Delaware Music Festival, the band is ready to show their faces on a regular basis in Delaware clubs.

Throw in planned recording sessions this summer and you have a band that's determined to survive.

Some of Young's songs are unflinching looks at the deaths of his friends.

On "Turns Around the Corner," he speaks directly to Healy as a man who has endured much pain over the past seven years.

"Don't leave me alone/Some of us die when we're left alone/Don't leave me alone this time/Hell, I wonder where you've gone."

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