

# ROCK

## H-BOMB ROCK

### WHEN THE BLUES MET FUNK IN CINCINNATI

By Rafael Alvarez. Photos by Steve Manheim Photography.

**L**ike dark, raw honey; honey, baby, from the blue buzzin' bee. The piano player Robert "H-Bomb" Ferguson—who died in the Queen City over Thanksgiving weekend in 2006 at age 77—received his explosive nickname at the beginning of his career, not long after the term "race music" was replaced as the name for African-American popular music with "Rhythm & Blues."

When the thin, diminutive singer opened his mouth to shout the blues in the style of his hero Wynonie Harris (1915–1969), someone said it sounded like a hydrogen bomb going off. Which everyone knows is a thousand times more powerful than an atomic bomb.

"A very deep voice," his widow Christina Ferguson said when his obituary was being written, "magnetic . . . with a mix of gravel in it."

Honey, gravel, passion, and—when the bluesman was dining in the West End at the Big Louie Chili Parlor on Linn Avenue—his favorite repast: the meatloaf special!



#### A LESSON IN SHOWMANSHIP

Ferguson played by ear and nine-and-a-half fingers, the middle digit of his right hand somehow compromised along the way. And—in the last phase of his career, inspired by the theatrics of Rick James and George Clinton—he wore wigs, dozens of them in all the colors of Mardi Gras.

"I don't think he favored one color over any of the others but the band did," said guitarist Marty Charters, who as a teenager traveled from

Lexington, Kentucky, to see H-Bomb in Cincinnati clubs and wound up touring the world with him in the last phase of Ferguson's career. "We liked the ones that looked like real hair more than the pink and blue ones."

Did he require his band—the Medicine Men—to don wigs as well?

"Uh, no, thank God," said Charters, who played lead on Ferguson's last album, 1993's "Wiggin' Out" on the Earwig label.

Working with "H," said Lance Boyd, the guitarist with Ferguson's last combo, "was a lesson in showmanship. When he sang, it wasn't just some



*A very deep voice...  
magnetic...with a mix  
of **gravel in it.***

—CHRISTINA FERGUSON

of his signature colorful wigs.



guy singing. He *felt* the music and that feeling embraced everyone in the band. And that infected the audience.”

#### FROM GOSPEL TO BARRELHOUSE

Robert Percel Ferguson was infected by music almost from birth. The 11th of 12 children, he was born outside of Charleston, South Carolina, six months before the Crash of ‘29 ushered in the Great Depression.

His father, a Baptist pastor, encouraged Robert’s desire to make music, paying for piano lessons and setting him up on the altar of the church. But the tax exacted upon the son of this preacher man was burdensome: every note had to fall within the strict bounds of “sacred” music.

Like so many others of his generation, the boy loved boogie-woogie; may the Good Lord forgive him, young Robert loved the sounds of the barrelhouse—especially the work of Big Joe Turner, his elder by a decade—and often snuck off to play blues at a friend’s house.

Ferguson quit school in the 10th grade, began gigging around South Carolina, and, he told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1993, “A band came through and took me with ‘em.”

That band was led by fellow South Carolinian Cat Anderson, a longtime trumpeter for Duke Ellington. Next stop, Gotham City, where the R&B scene was vibrant [the blues were jumpin’ then, just about to give birth to rock and roll] and the saxophone ruled the bandstand.

In New York, Ferguson performed as “the Cobra King,” making pocket money working as a straight man for black comics like Redd Foxx and Moms Mabley, and began recording for Savoy Records in 1951.

He surely had his papa on his mind when he cut the single “Preachin’ the Blues” for Savoy in 1952.

“When I get to preachin’” sang Ferguson, “you’ll wish you had some gin.”

And though he was respected by his peers—sharing bills with B.B. King and Etta James—and initially resented by Wynonie Harris, who accused him of stealing his act—H-Bomb never detonated with the public the way he wanted.

Ferguson was a shooting star, one of those great blues entertainers destined to be a minor yet enduring figure in the history of the genre.

#### CINCINNATI AND KING RECORDS

It is said that he “drafted” to Cincinnati via the “chitlin circuit” in the late 1950s, the Eisenhower years, when the voice of Elvis and Chuck Berry’s guitar were the standard and the only piano the kids craved came from Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis.

Cincinnati had a prosperous postwar recording

 *When I get to preachin’*  
sang Ferguson, “you’ll wish  
you *had some gin.*”

industry in the 1950s—“hillbilly” music, gospel, and R&B—anchored by local businessman Syd Nathan, eventually elected to the hall of fame for both rock and roll and bluegrass.

Nathan’s engine for success was King Records, whose various labels released songs by Hank Williams, the Wings Over Jordan Choir, and—of true historic note—“Please, Please, Please” in 1956, the first single by James Brown and his Famous Flames. [Nathan wasn’t impressed by the debut of the Godfather of Soul—he reportedly called it “the worst piece of crap I’ve heard in my life”—but the royalties calmed him down.]

H-Bomb cut singles for Federal (a subsidiary label of King); two of the best remembered are “Mary, Little Mary” and the often anthologized “Midnight Ramblin’ Tonight.” One of his first Cincinnati-based bands was “H-Bomb Ferguson and His Mad Lads,” which became a regional favorite in the river area around Louisville, Lexington, and Cincinnati.

Ferguson made his longtime home in Bond Hill, near the corner of California and Reading and walking distance from a club called Sonny’s, now known as Sonny’s All Jazz Lounge. When his son Robbie became a teenager, the neighborhood began slipping and Ferguson and Christina moved to Hartwell.

All of it—from neon wigs to wailing at Cory’s on McMillan, facing off against Wynonie in “Battle of the Blues” shows, and a snake called Moo Moo resting on his shoulder during gigs—is covered in the 2009 documentary *Blues Legend: The Life and Times of H-Bomb Ferguson*.

“At some shows,” said Boyd, “it seemed like the whole room was grooving as hard as the band.”

Upon his death, H-Bomb Ferguson was cremated, and his ashes scattered in his adopted Cincinnati. If you wish to pay respects, dial up one of his great Federal recordings on your smartphone—“Boo Hoo” might be apropos—and find your way to Washington Avenue and Fifth Street.

There, on a historical marker as grand as any commemorating others who have left a mark on this country, is one that says: “H-Bomb Ferguson, May 9, 1929–November 26, 2006.” ♥