

Rockabilly blues go with the brews

MUSIC PREVIEW

BARBECUE BOB AND THE SPARE RIBS: With Sleepy

LaBeef and Reacharound Rodeo Clowns. 9 p.m. Saturday. Maxwell's, 1039 Washington St., Hoboken. \$7. 798-4064.

By JIM MCGUINNESS

Staff Writer

The endless string of one-nighters. The low-paying gigs. The delicate balance between playing music and holding a day job.

Life in a bar band is precarious at best. Still, the sense of community between audience and band can transcend all other live music experiences.

Barbecue Bob and the Spare Ribs have been one of the metropolitan area's best bar bands for a decade and a half. On a good night, the group — incorporating elements of honky-tonk, rockabilly, and swing into a blues-based attack — sounds like Hank Williams hanging out with a bunch of late Forties Chicago bluesmen.

"We bring a certain energy to it," said Bob Pomeroy, the group's harmonica-blowing leader and lone remaining original member. "And we try arrangements that are different. People who come to see us have never seen it done quite that way."

What separates Barbecue Bob and the Spare Ribs — Pomeroy, guitarist Ira Spinrad, bassist Tom DiEllo, and drummer Malcolm Tex — from most of their peers is their irreverent approach to the blues. While



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other bands seek the perfect Little Walter harmonica trill or Buddy Guy guitar solo, the Spare Ribs put a personal stamp on their music.

"If there's something I don't like about a lot of white blues singers, it's the minstrel aspect of it," Pomeroy said. "Being overly reverential can be condescending. When I sing with a hillbilly yelp, it's because I'm singing what I grew up on."

The group's varied influences are in place on "After School Special," its new album on New Brunswick's Da Da Records. Recorded live at Coyote Studios in Brooklyn, the disc captures what's great about bar band music with one significant twist: Eleven of the 12 songs are band

originals (the lone exception was written by former band member Simon Chardiet).

Given the Spare Ribs' repertoire of more than 200 covers, the decision to record only originals was a bold one.

"One of the things about this label is that [Da Da head Karl Munzel] didn't want any cover material," said Pomeroy, who earns his living as a draftsman. "He really pushed me."

Material includes the Memphis soul-influenced "Lookin' for a Girl," the double-entendre rocker "Drinkin' and Gamblin'," and the soulful ballad "You're Not Around." While borrowing from the past, the group carefully guards against ripping off its heroes.

The "Swamp Thing" homage to Louisiana harmonica man Slim Harpo has an edge that would appeal to alternative rock fans. Similarly, the Bo Diddley-styled "Drivin' Me Crazy" has a New Orleans feel, courtesy of Charles Otis, the legendary Crescent City drummer who sits in as guest percussionist.

What ultimately drives the album home is the live-in-studio approach: Nine of the 12 tracks were recorded in a single afternoon (the remaining three were culled from a pair of recent 45's).

"If you're a good live band, you should try to take advantage of that in the studio," Pomeroy said. "We just went in and played."

Raised in southeastern Ohio, Pomeroy was drawn to the blues in response to the country records favored by his father.

"I hated country music," he said. "I got into blues because my next-door neighbor's older brother listened to stuff like like J.D. Hutto and Taj Mahal. To me, it sounded like the most opposite thing to country music."

After graduating from Columbia University with a degree in architecture — and playing in bands on the New York punk scene — Pomeroy and Columbia classmate Kevin Trainor put together the first edition of the Spare Ribs in 1981. A key development came when Pomeroy met Chardiet, then leader of Joey Miserable & the Worms. Together, the two conned bar owners into giving their respective bands a shot.

"At the time, there really wasn't a bar band scene in the city," Pomeroy recalled. "So we'd go to old-man bars, set up our stuff in the corner, and make an arrangement with the bartender to get paid."

For bar bands, getting paid can be a tricky proposition. Indeed, playing for the door on those nights when a bar is near-empty doesn't generate much cash. But for the Spare Ribs, playing music is more than just a vocation. Why else would they agree to play two gigs in a night? (Saturday night's set at Maxwell's will be followed by another two sets at the Great Notch Inn in Totowa.)

"We have a strategy and we'd like to be more popular," Pomeroy said. "But it's not just about money. I still play for the pure joy of it. I can't imagine not playing music."