

Devil-Ettes Shimmy Into Fame

Edited by James Sullivan

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No more rock-club attitude. The cool kids aren't afraid to make fools of themselves. They're playing dress-up and doing the Limbo.

At least that's the opinion of the Devil-Ettes, the 18-member-and- growing dance troupe that is fast becoming San Francisco's favorite traveling theme party.



``All of us grew up in the punk rock era, when you had to be super- cool," says Baby Doe, the leader of the Devil-Ette pack. ``We're sick of that. We want to go to shows and have fun, smile and be goofy."

The Devil-Ettes began almost by accident, late last year at Radio Valencia's annual Christmas talent show. ``Three or four of us didn't have any talent, and we felt really stupid," says Baby Doe. So they came up with an idea -- synchronized dancing. It was a smash. Twelve women, mostly staff members of Radio Valencia and its sister nightclub, Casanova, ended up signing on.

``We thought it was a one-time thing," Baby Doe says. But friends in bands immediately began asking the troupe to be their opening act. The Devil-Ettes opened for Virginia Dare at the Makeout Room in January. The show was a sellout.

Beth Lisick caught that show and asked the group to open for her next gig at Cafe du Nord. It was a match made in kitsch heaven; another sellout. Suddenly the line-dancing, bunny-hopping Devil-Ettes -- the Dazzler, the Cheerleader, the Barracuda and the rest -- had a career on their hands.

``At first people were really shocked," Baby Doe says. ``Everybody in the bar would stop what they were doing and watch us. `What are these girls up to? Strange!'" "

The Devil-Ettes work out special programs for each gig, developing fearlessly corny routines for long-forgotten novelty songs (``The Topless Dancers of Corfu" by Dick Hyman), vintage R&B (``Lucky Lips" by Ruth Brown) and primitive rock 'n' roll (Elvis, Eddie Cochran). At a recent ``Prom Night" party at Cafe du Nord, the ladies shimmied to Patti Page's ``My First Formal Gown" and Lesley Gore's ``It's Raining on Prom Night."

Bookings are pouring in. The group performs tomorrow night at the Makeout Room with the Inspectors. Next week they start a monthly appearance at the Hi-Ball Lounge, and on July 31 they take part in the SOMAR Gallery's ``DaDa Fest."

In September the Devil-Ettes will entertain at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' exotica film festival. They'll also host a show called ``Bongos by the Bay" featuring Preston Epps, the Oakland native who recorded the 1959 hit ``Bongo Rock."

Baby Doe says the Devil-Ettes knew they'd really arrived when they were asked to perform at this October's Las Vegas Grind, a three- night trash-culture event to be held at the Sin City throwback Gold Coast Hotel. When she and her live- in boyfriend Otto von Stroheim, editor of the exotica zine Tiki News, were hired to decorate the Gold Coast, they told the promoters about the Devil-Ettes.

Bands to appear at the Grind include the Trashmen, Los Straitjackets and the classic garage band the Wailers.

The Devil-Ettes recently held auditions for new members. Their routines -- and their day jobs -- can be hazardous. The dancer called the Saucy One has a bad back. ``I think she was shaking her groove thing too hard," laughs Baby Doe. And the one they call the Tumbler, a bike messenger, took a tumble trying to avoid a pedestrian.

Finding new members has not been a problem. Finding audiences hasn't, either.

-- James Sullivan

Ad-libs

Phil Lesh and Friends, Galactica, Government Mule, moe. and the String Cheese Incident headline Summer Session '99, August 20-21 at Berkeley's Greek Theater . . . The rejiggered Rollins Band throttles your skinny neck August 3 at Slim's . . . French electronic act Cassius tweaks the knobs July 31 at the Justice League . . . Saxophonist John Handy, the T.S. Monk Sextet and vibesman Bobby Hutcherson headline the first John Handy Jazz Festival, August 27-29 at San Francisco State University . . . Dilated Peoples perform July 23 at the S.F. Amoeba Records; Dance Hall Crashers are scheduled for August 24 . . . Toots and the Maytals, the Wailing Souls, Boukman Eksperyans and the Rev. Billy C. Wirtz are among those scheduled to appear at the Renegade Music and Camping Festival, July 30- August 1 at the Plumas Sierra County Fairgrounds in Quincy . . . Horn blower Ralph Carney will release his second solo album, ``I Like You (A Lot)," in September . . . Jim Campilongo, the Aquavelvets and the Scott Amendola Group have been added to tonight's benefit for Paul Pena (``Genghis Blues") at the Great American Music Hall. Others on the bill include Tuvan throat singer Kongor-Ol Ondar, Merl Saunders, the Ali Khan Band and didgeridoo master Stephen Kent . . . Police have asked the producers not to publicize the free Tower of Power concert July 25 at Stern Grove, lending new relevance to the question: ``What Is Hip?"

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