

Old garage band rocks into retirement age

Geriatric rock no longer restricted to the likes of Jagger, Richards

ROCHESTER, N.Y.

On a cramped stage in a dim bar, the Invictas are getting ready to rock.

Twanging and tuning are a band of musicians in khakis with white hair, day jobs, grown children and — improbably — plans to keep playing power chords when other people their age are fine-tuning golf swings.

“I’m pumped!” drummer Dave Hickey jokes as he walks in. “I took my Geritol, I took my vitamins!”

The Invictas made their bones in this city 40 years ago, packing houses by ripping through songs like Louie, Louie, Satisfaction and their own hit, The Hump.

Now in their 60s, the band members have reunited, a garage band that refuses to die.

This is geezer rock at the other end of the spectrum from Mick Jagger prancing around stadiums for fat paycheques.

The money is lousy, the hours crummy, the age questions sometimes sarcastic. Is there a statute of limitations for singing Sweet Little Sixteen?

But the Invictas are undaunted.

The evening before the Invictas’ show, Herb Gross, 62, drives to practice in the band’s ’84 hearse. It has a rumbling exhaust and The Invictas painted on the side, just like the hearse from the band’s heyday. Passing drivers stare. This is OK by Herb, who aside from being the Invictas’ singer is a professional ad man who works tirelessly on behalf of his band.

Herb put together the band’s summer tour of local bars and festivals from his home in Charlotte, N.C. The Skip ’n Go Naked Tour (named after a drink, not the activity) starts at the California Brew Haus, a big, shopworn bar next to Kodak’s massive industrial complex in Rochester.

Also practicing is bassist Jim Kohler, who at 63 is the oldest Invicta and who also has the best rocker look,

with shoulder-length, curly grey hair. He calls himself the Keith Richards to Herb’s Jagger, and like the famous duo they are both wiry men with big personalities. Dave, 59 and a grandfather, plays drums. His brother Bruce Hickey, 57, plays guitar.

They mostly look like suburban dads. Bruce even rides to the gig in a minivan and borrows his son’s amp, which blows a fuse at practice.

They stumble on the bridge of Midnight Rambler during practice and have trouble finding a groove. Still, they seem confident it will all gel the next night. After all, it always used to.

Their comeback is helped by the fact that baby boomers have held on tight to the musical tastes of their youth. Beth Navarro recalls sneaking into Tiny’s when she was underage to dance to the Invictas. Now 55, she began catching their shows again last summer with her husband.

“Sometimes you think, ‘Boy, I’ve lost it,’” she says. “But when I see them I think, ‘We’re still hanging in there!’”

Navarro is at the bar for the Invictas’ tour kickoff. The audience is a bit sparser than the band is used to — some middle aged couples plus Bruce’s kids and a pack of their friends, one of whom keeps yelling, “Bass solo!”

Still, Herb looks up from his guitar and promises, “We’re going to play our hearts out for you!”

Augmented by two crackerjack musicians, lead guitarist Dave Profeta and keyboardist Sammy Gruttadauria, the group tears down memory lane with Brown Sugar, Mustang Sally and You Really Got Me.

Herb blows harmonica and wades into the audience. He leans back and chops at his guitar. He lifts his Invictas ball cap to finger back his damp silver hair. Jim is loose-limbed on the bass while Bruce stands steady. They all sing Yeah! for the chorus of Money Money.

Navarro and her friends dance by



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The Invictas’ Herb Gross, left, and Jim Kohl perform recently at the California Brew Haus in Rochester, N.Y. The band’s heyday was the 1960s, but it continues to rock, even though most of its members are now moving into their 60s.

the stage and are joined by the younger group. By the time Herb asks, “You guys ready to Hump?” the small crowd is primed. Young and old put their hands behind their heads and shimmy as the band sings.

Soon enough, it will be back to the grind. Tonight, the Invictas are dealing with age the way so many baby

boomers do: by ignoring it.

“When I was kid, your parents were old. But this is the baby boomers,” Jim explains. “Why can’t I get up there? I’m 63 years old. I’m having the time of my life! I probably won’t break even. I don’t care.”

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