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San Francisco Chronicle

'Psychotic Reaction' band to stage reunion

James Sullivan, Chronicle Pop Culture Critic

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San Jose's Count Five, the archetypal one-shot rock 'n' roll band, had such a short stay in the limelight that Lester Bangs had to invent an entire career for them. In a typically loopy tribute for Creem magazine, "Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung," the late rock critic dreamed up a five-record career for the Five featuring such forgotten gems as "Schizophrenic Rainbows: A Raga Concerto," an ambitious album track clocking in at 27 minutes.



The reality is a lot more concise. A surf and frat-party band in its genesis, the Count Five hit the big time when their delirious Yardbirds-y stomp "Psychotic Reaction" clawed its way to No. 5 on the Billboard chart in late 1966.

The band rode that success for a year or so, sharing bills with the Beach Boys, the Hollies, Van Morrison's Them and the nascent Doors. But follow-up records fell flat, and by 1968 the five members had let the group lapse. Quietly they returned to college, turning down a reported million dollars in bookings.

Thirty-five years later, the Count Five will recoup a tiny fraction of that long-ago sacrifice when the band reforms for a gig Aug. 22 at the Edge nightclub in Palo Alto. It's actually the second time they have reunited. The first was in 1986.

"It was like riding a bike," recalls singer Kenn Ellner, an entertainment lawyer who once managed the careers of the band Cold Blood and basketball player Meadowlark Lemon.

"The first rehearsal (in 1986) blew everyone's mind. You can tell when it's good."

It was a product, he says, of the group's incessant rehearsing in its heyday. Unlike so many '60s rockers, who found themselves frustrated when Hollywood producers insisted on

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replacing them in the studio with session players, Ellner says the Count Five was blessed with real talent.

"The reviews were always great," he says. "People got what they expected, and then some." In particular, bassist and founding member Roy Chaney and the late drummer Butch Atkinson formed an impeccable rhythm section, a rare commodity at a time when pickup garage bands were as prevalent as sandlot ballgames.

Chaney and guitarist John "Mouse" Michalski, both now contractors, have remained in close contact over the years. Rhythm guitarist John "Sean" Byrne, who originated much of the band's material (including "Psychotic Reaction"), will also be on hand for the reunion.

The current Count Five revival came about last year, when Ellner joined fellow Bay Area throwbacks the Syndicate of Sound at their own reunion. Planning to sing the Five's signature song, Ellner called Michalski to borrow one of the Dracula capes they once used as part of their stage show. Their timing was perfect: This month England's Ace Records is releasing a 24-track retrospective, with a half-dozen previously unheard tracks.

Despite Ellner's reputation as the mover and shaker of the original group (his father, Sol, was the Count Five's manager), he claims little awareness of the current resurgence of interest in garage rock. He does, however, know that it feels right to be playing again.

"The truth of the matter is, we were actually a real good band."

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E-mail James Sullivan at jamessullivan@sfgchronicle.com.

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