

TV's evolution

Technology of television has come a long way
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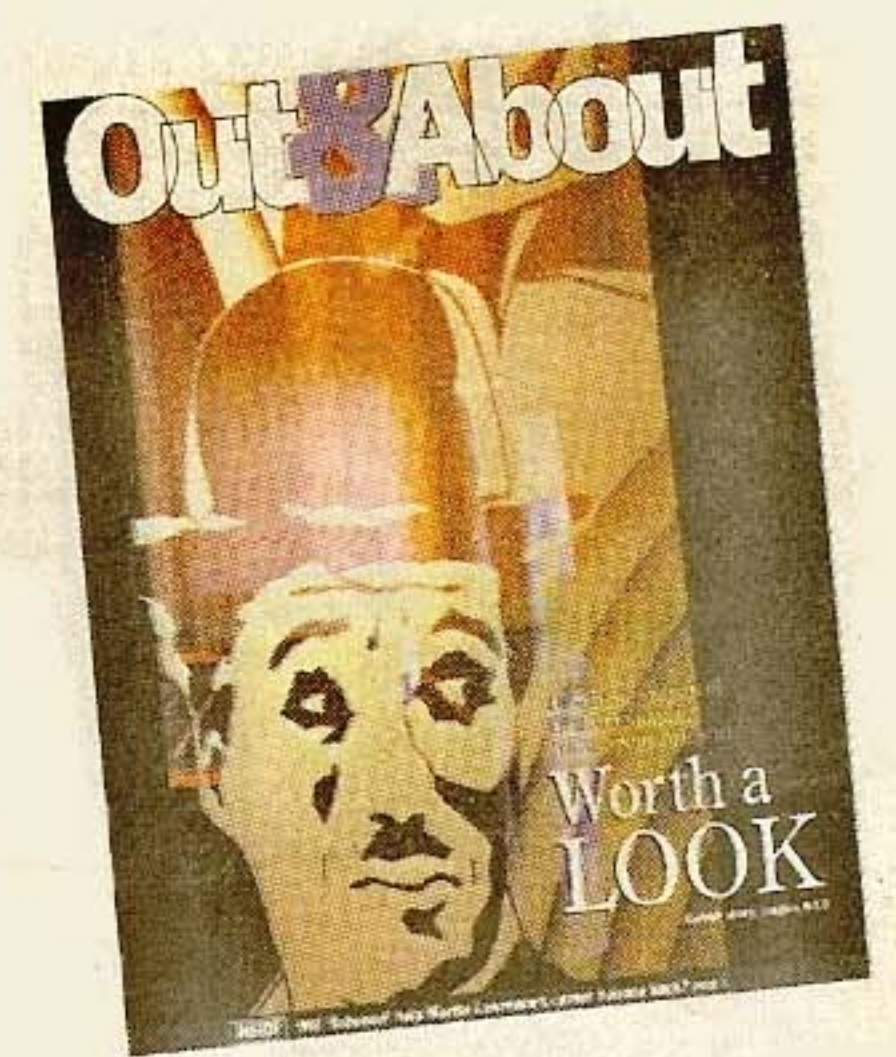
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LOCAL ARTISAN



ROBYN SHELDON / FOR THE SUN

Vernam Cipher plays often at Ballydoyle in Downers Grove.

Tom Garritano / Downers Grove

By Meg Dedolph
STAFF WRITER

There's something about the South, said singer-songwriter Tom Garritano. "The South has a lot of negative connotations to people, which I understand, but they've contributed so much culturally to the U.S. and the world," he said.

Perhaps it was the relaxed attitude toward people who liked playing music for fun, or the way musicians held onto the styles of their region, but he found his own time spent in the South helped shape his tastes in music.

"Living in the South, I saw people who would just pull out their instruments for fun on the porch and play in public for fun, and it was an honorable

thing. It wasn't, 'Oh, they're not going anywhere.'"

Garritano, who uses the stage name Vernam Cipher, started playing guitar and writing his own music after finishing high school in the late '70s, and when he moved back to the Chicago area after spending time in Washington, D.C., and Tennessee, he started playing with his current band.

The group features Holly Pintozi on drums, Joel Batty on fiddle, harmonica and mandolin, Mike Marsden on bass and Sal Salvato on guitar, in addition to Garritano on vocals and guitar.

What had been a lifelong hobby became a more serious pastime about seven years ago, he said.

"This is a very un-rock 'n' roll thing to say," he said. "When my kids were born, I gave up golf. It felt like a punishment being away from the kids for any chunk of the weekend, the only time I could

spend with them. I needed a different hobby I could pursue in the evenings, basically."

Even less rock 'n' roll is his other, less flippant reason for taking his music more seriously.

His father was a talented amateur actor who was constantly involved in theater, despite a less-than-rewarding day job, Cipher said.

"He was gradually losing his faculties due to age, and my leap into performing helped me feel connected to him, especially the part of him that was so alive that he'd pour energy into acting despite being worn out from a day of work," he said.

Now his kids like watching the band's shows.

"I think it's important for kids to see their parents doing things they really like," he said. "I think otherwise, they get the impression that being an adult isn't fun, so when they see you doing something you love, I think it's just a positive for them to see the excitement and joy it brings."

They played their first gig in October 2003 and since then have appeared at places including the Hide-out in Chicago, the Sandwich Opera House, bookstores and coffeehouses.

But they play most often in Downers Grove at Ballydoyle, where band members host a weekly open mike.

"We have used Ballydoyle as our home base," he said. "We really have appreciated the chance to play there are often as we have. We're kind of like the house band there at various times."

The band plays a mix of covers and originals, depending on the venue.

"I think people who live in the city are sort of trained to gravitate to original music," he said. "The clubs in the city in most cases will actively discourage bands from playing mostly covers, which is fun, because we have plenty of original songs. But we've also been lucky in the places we've played in the suburbs have never insisted we play only covers."

What does the name mean?

It's an encryption code. It's the theoretically uncrackable encryption scheme. And it sounded like a good hillbilly moniker. My last name doesn't lend itself to that kind of music. The people I've admired a lot tended to be ones who changed their names, like Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello.

What did you get from your sojourn in the South?

I had only the beginnings of any knowledge of what I would call Southern music. I don't distinguish so much between blues, country, bluegrass, all that. I think it all comes from the same sources in lots of ways. When I think of Southern music, that's what I think of, not necessarily Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Do you find yourself revisiting the same themes in your songwriting?

We all take inspiration where we can find it. I do find myself subconsciously drawn to these themes of technology and peoples' struggle with it in a positive and negative sense.

Personally and professionally, that's something that's omnipresent in my life.

What's on the iPod?

Marvin Gaye is never far from the rotation. Professor Longhair, Modest Mouse, My Morning Jacket. I like Nick Lowe. Norman Blake and Tony Rice, the Kinks are always in rotation, The Clash, the Handsome Family... The Ramones. I was pretty heavily into punk rock.

What's next for the band?

We need to go in and record some more. We have a CD with six songs on it — three studio, three live, four originals, two covers. Clearly, now that we've been playing and have really built up our repertoire of original and cover songs, we need to go in and make a proper CD-length recording of a dozen or so songs. I'm looking forward to doing that between now and the end of the calendar year. **aa**