

SKUM

THE RISE AND LIES OF A NOTORIOUS W&M ROCK BAND

BY BEN KENNEDY '05



THERE IS NO LIMIT TO WHERE YOUR TALENT
CAN TAKE YOU IF YOU HAVE LIMITED TALENT



Skum was formed in 1984 by members of the William & Mary soccer team.

When confronted with a near-crippling lack of musical talent, most people take up a more realistic hobby and leave their dreams of rock stardom behind. The other three guys decided to start Skum.

Formed in 1984 by “renegade” members of the William & Mary soccer team, Skum became known for catchy songs, a rotating cast of band members, a few debaucherous years in Miami and eventually a tragic implosion. Their exploits and the ensuing wake of destruction are chronicled in “Skum Rocks!,” an upcoming documentary on the band’s rise and fall. It’s the stuff rock dreams are made of, made all the more impressive by how they got their start:

They did not know how to play their instruments. They were awful.

In 2008, director Clay Westervelt was coming off a string of successful documentaries and television shows when he got a cold call from someone looking for help with a film project. Westervelt was perfect for this project, the man said,

because his most recent documentary, “Popatopolis,” profiled another director who found success in spite of the odds.

“He sent over a bunch of footage and it was very difficult to watch,” said Westervelt, “but some of it was so intriguing.” The man had sent old home videos of a bombastic rock band, along with on-the-spot comments about that band from an array of celebrities. Westervelt was suspicious, but elected to take the project on anyway.

“I was very nervous about this movie from the beginning because it became clear fairly early on that I wasn’t necessarily going to be able to trust the information I was being given,” said Westervelt. “But that’s what these guys are masters at: making something out of nothing and making it go when it shouldn’t.”

The man was Hart Baur ’86, and his band, Skum, was back. Which is impressive, considering they probably shouldn’t have existed in the first place.

One night at the Green Leafe in early

1984, Baur and a couple of his soccer teammates thought it’d be fun if they had a band.

“We were always on the edge anyway,” Baur said. “I found a couple guys on the team who were willing to venture further out on the edge with me.”

That night at the Leafe, Skum was born. Todd Middlebrook ’85 became the bass player, just because he owned a bass. Scott Bell ’87 was dubbed the drummer, soon to

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— Hart Baur '86

sit behind a set of Mickey Mouse drums — which he didn’t know how to play. Baur would front the band with a \$60 guitar he bought later in Newport News, Va. Skum would play the finest cover songs 1984 had to offer, from bands like Van Halen, the

Clash and KISS. The mission — “meet girls and have more fun,” said Middlebrook — was clear.

A week later, the first band practice was held in the basement of Middlebrook’s dorm at James Blair Terrace.

“We made as much noise as you could possibly make with two amps and drums,” said Baur. “Apparently it vibrated the building all the way up to the attic. Within minutes, we had made enemies of the entire dorm.”

Skum barely played for half an hour before an RA came down and forced them to stop. But the guys were hooked, even if understaffed. Enter Jon Tarrant ’87, who — believe it or not — had studied at London’s Royal Academy of Music. His background was in piano, but he was recruited

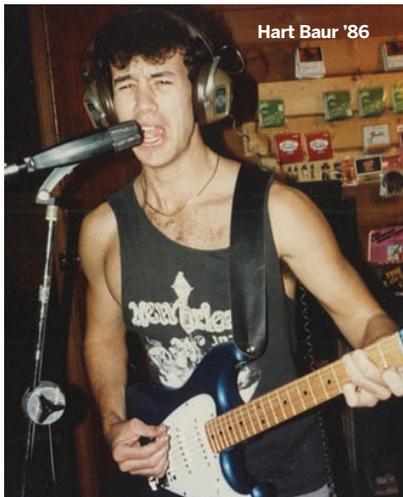
the soccer team’s laundry man, while “Bad Checks” was a story of a former teammate who fled the country after having an insufficient account balance. In large part, the early songs were about the goings-on around the Tribe soccer team, so the first gig was a natural choice: surprising a teammate with 300 people crammed into his house.

“It was a great party,” said Baur. “People went crazy cheering and it sounded god-awful, but it was a great moment with 300 of your closest friends.”

Soon Skum was scheduled to play Trinkle Hall, but rather than be outed as the terrible band they were, Skum passed out beer and called the cops on themselves. The police broke the show up before they finished the first song. The audience saw a

Mann, in the process. Later shows featured the band members each dressed in a different fast-food uniform, a July show dubbed Pumpkifest, and assorted other shenanigans. The local press ate it up, but Commencement was looming.

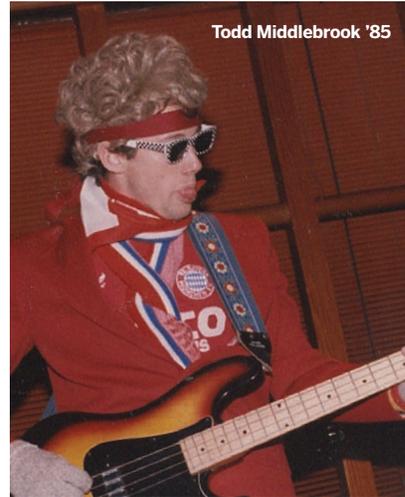
Middlebrook graduated first, and the band carried on with George as the only bass player. By his own graduation, Baur had caught the rock band bug, and wanted to keep Skum going in his hometown of Miami. They bid Bell, George and Tarrant goodbye and headed south. All the original members remain friends, but “Skum Rocks!” half-mockingly suggests that the split was not entirely harmonious; George is featured in a phone tirade against his replacement at lead bass. Tarrant suggests Skum failed at piecing his life back together.



Hart Baur '86



Baur and John Tarrant '87



Todd Middlebrook '85

as a second guitarist to help out Baur, who “didn’t even know what tuning was.”

“I auditioned,” said Tarrant. “Which is kind of funny, given that they sucked.” Tarrant made the cut and joined the band, now practicing near the heart of Old Campus on South Boundary Street.

“We were terrible,” said Bell. “We were laughing the whole time we were playing because it was so bad, but we were enjoying it. At first we started to try to play real songs — like other people’s songs — and realized quickly that we didn’t have the chops to play any real songs. We started making up our own.”

Almost-classic tunes like “We Are Skum” and “Hanging Out With Fred” emerged from late-night dormitory song-writing sessions. Fred, incidentally, was

rock band fighting the law; the band saw their legend — and their ranks — grow even further. Herb George ’89 later joined the band as “lead bassist,” a move they claimed was unprecedented in rock history. Now Middlebrook, like Baur, could focus on their trademark energetic stage show, while George and Tarrant handled the music. Bell, for his part, had his role locked down.

“My right foot is just constantly going 100 miles an hour,” he remembered. “That’s my bass drum in every song. In no way, shape or form am I a drummer.”

Skum soon entered a Battle of the Bands, where they played for 90 seconds before protesting the supposed poor sound quality and storming off the stage — impressing yet another guitarist, Jerry

“They went on to their lives at that time and we went on to our lives,” said Middlebrook. “Throughout, I cannot tell you the fondness that we have for each other.”

Bell remembered it slightly differently. “The part [in “Skum Rocks!”] about me getting fired because I was too handsome and got all the chicks — some of that is absolutely the truth.”

“Skum Rocks!” tackles the Miami years with even more ferocity than Skum’s time at William & Mary. They added bassist Pat Burke, a high school guitar prodigy named John Eaton, and a litany of itinerant drummers. Armed with Baur’s and Middlebrook’s charisma and bonafide musicians in Burke and Eaton, Skum set about terrorizing the East Coast with increasingly legitimate rock & roll.

It started to work — barely. By day, Baur was teaching high school. By night, he was opening a concert at West Dade Prison with “I Fought The Law,” featuring a random Skum fan replacing their usual drummer, who was too young to get into his own show. The band raised tens of thousands of dollars to record their first album, “Lost at the Circus,” independently, which they burned on more parties, groupies and paying damages for the havoc they caused. The album that eventually came out of their sessions was hyped as “the next White Album,” but it all came crashing down when “Lost at the Circus” was itself mysteriously lost. The band was devastated. Skum split and left the rock lifestyle behind for good. Probably.

“[Skum represented] some of the most enjoyable years of our lives,” said Middlebrook from his home in London. “On the other hand, we had gone on to our adult lives. So when we heard the tapes were found, it was, ‘OK, what do we do now?’”

After nearly two decades, “Lost at the Circus” had been found stashed in an old associate’s bathtub. Baur, ever the show-

man, immediately started going to work. Before long, he had re-assembled the early ’90s lineup (with yet *another* drummer), began restoring the “Lost at the Circus” tapes and booked Westervelt to shoot the documentary. Alice Cooper narrates “Skum Rocks!,” which debuted in September at the Raindance film festival in London. It’s a twisted tale that careens from Old Campus to South Beach to Memphis and then London, featuring dozens of cameos from rock legends and Hollywood stars. One notable alumnus even riffs on Skum from the set of the “Daily Show.”

In the end, the parties and girls didn’t turn out to matter as much as the brotherhood and inspiration. The film is dedicated to the memory of former guitarist Jerry Mann, who passed away of diabetes complications in 2011. Tarrant and Bell flew to the London premiere to support their old bandmates and friends.

“I never believed that the band could carry on and still live in 2013,” said Bell. “But that’s what they have really accomplished here: they’ve gone to Abbey Road Studios in London and cut tracks there.

They did amazing things that I would never believe they could do.”

“Skum Rocks!” may begin as light-hearted, unbelievable insanity, but it’s shot through with a classic message of inspiration. After all, not every middle-aged ex-rocker has the chance to get the old band back together.

“As you get more stuff and have more bills, the tendency is to be a little too conservative. The film reminds me to live a little — to take a chance,” said Tarrant, who certainly hadn’t planned on joining a rock band all those years ago. “I was a math major.”

“There is that nostalgia for sure,” Middlebrook said, “but I love being 50. I am so much less afraid. You know what you want and you go for those things.”

“This is about going for your dreams no matter how old you are,” said Baur. “We’re just using rock and roll as a platform for that.”

And you can catch Skum live — 23 years later — in Melbourne, Fla., on Jan. 17.

For more on the band and “Skum Rocks!,” visit www.skumrocks.com. 



PHOTO COURTESY OF SKUM

The 2013 edition of Skum, plus entourage, relaxes between events at the London premiere of “Skum Rocks!” in September 2013.