

Box Tops' Chilton has had a big influence on rock

by *George_Varga*

Alex Chilton could have permanently retired in 1974 and he would still be a near-mythic figure in rock, power pop and what was once quaintly known as blue-eyed soul.

AUTHORITY FIGURE - His work with The Box Tops and Big Star have made Alex Chilton, right, a legend. He is seen here with fellow Top member Gary Talley. CNS Photo. As the charismatic lead singer in such fabled bands as the Box Tops (from 1966 to 1970) and Big Star (1971 to 1975), if somewhat less so as a solo artist, he has had a profound influence on artists as diverse as Cat Power, R.E.M., Wilco, Garbage, Counting Crows, Teenage Fanclub, Aimee Mann, Green on Red, Matthew Sweet, the Posies, the late Jeff Buckley and many others. In 1970, Joe Cocker scored a Top 10 hit with his version of "The Letter." The original, a 1967 chart-topper for the Box Tops, featured a then-16-year-old Chilton on lead vocals.

Chilton's intensely soulful singing with the Box Tops led to him being hailed as America's answer to England's Stevie Winwood in the Spencer Davis Group. But he really blossomed in Big Star.

The band never scored a hit single or album, but it provided Chilton with a welcome outlet for his own songs and for his collaborations with Chris Bell. (The Box Tops' producers, legendary songwriters Dan Penn and Chips Moman, had been loath to let the young group record its own work.)

Yet, while Big Star quickly imploded and Chilton's songs and career turned into a real-life boulevard of broken dreams, his artistic influence grew.

The Bangles covered Big Star's "September Gurls" in 1986, while Cheap Trick's version of Big Star's "In the Street" became the TV theme song for "That '70s Show." Paul Westerberg, the former leader of the Replacements, was such a big fan that, in 1987, he wrote and recorded a song with his band titled "Alex Chilton." Its chorus goes: Children by the million sing for Alex Chilton when he comes 'round / They sing: 'I'm in love. What's that song? I'm in love with that song.'

Unfortunately for the reclusive Chilton, one of America's best rock and soul singers to never make it big, Westerberg was engaging in wishful thinking.

It's safe to say that very few children not directly related to him have a clue who Chilton is. And while a number of young and veteran musicians alike relish his music with the Box Tops, Big Star and on his own, their numbers are far too small to make him more than a quintessential cult artist.

"Even though I grew up in Memphis with Alex and Chris Bell, it wasn't until after the Box Tops reunited in 1996 that I found out they had been in a band together called Big Star," said bassist Bill Cunningham, who performs with the Chilton-led Box Tops.

Bell died in a car crash in 1978, the same year Big Star's third album was released. He was only 26.

Happily, all of the Box Tops' original members are still active, although guitarist-keyboardist John Evans stepped down in 2000 to focus on his work as a computer network administrator.

In addition to Chilton, 57, and Cunningham, 57, the band also includes two other original Box Tops: drummer Danny Smythe, 59, and lead guitarist Gary Talley, 60. On stage, they are augmented by keyboardist Barry Walsh.

"I don't know that the group dynamic is any different today than it was back in the old days," Cunningham said. "Certain ones of us still get along better than others, and we're probably just as childish and immature in some ways. The peculiar thing is how similar it is to like it was before."

Sort of, but different.

Back in the day, the teenage members of the Box Tops were together 24/7 for nearly four years. Since regrouping in 1996 after a 26-year hiatus, the band's original members have performed an average of 20 shows per year.

Intriguingly, the scarcity of performances by the Box Tops has helped make its time on stage far more enjoyable.

"That's exactly it," Cunningham said. "None of us depend on the band for a living, unlike when we were teenagers who were thrown on the road and had to live with each other, 365 days a year. We see each other so infrequently now that it's sort of a joy to get together."

Chilton, a longtime New Orleans resident, is the only band member who has pursued a solo career in music for pretty much all of his adult life.

Smythe is a freelance commercial artist in Chicago, while Talley is a longtime Nashville studio musician. He has recorded with Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings and Tammy Wynette and performed live with everyone from Dr. John and Billy Preston to Shelby Lynne and Warren Haynes.

Then there's Cunningham, who is such an accomplished contrabassist that he has performed at the White House with Pinchas Zuckerman and Itzak Perlman. He now works for the Federal Trade Commission in Washington, D.C.

"I try to keep that secret," Cunningham said. "It is a night-and-day difference working for the government and then going out on the road. I usually reserve my vacation days for any road trips; we only play a handful of shows a year."

Cunningham was the instigator of the Box Tops' highly unexpected reunion in 1996. It was prompted by his curiosity about how the band would sound if it recorded anew using modern technology.

"I just called up Alex, and he said, 'Sure. Who should we get?'" Cunningham recalled. "I said, 'I guess the original guys.' I called them up, and they said, 'Yeah, we'll do it, but Alex won't'. And I said: 'I called him, and he will.'"

The band, which released four albums from 1967 to 1969, recorded "Tear Off" for France's Last Call label in 1998. However, it consisted largely of vintage songs by other writers who had inspired the members of the Box Tops.

"I would like to do an album with all original material," Cunningham said. "Because we never have; we've always done somebody else's material, or some of Alex's. Some of us are writing. Hopefully, we'll (have) something in the not-too-distant future. It would be a discovery to see what we could come up with."

Box Tops' Chilton has had a big influence on rock by George_Varga