



The Real Thing

MUSICAL TRIBUTE ACTS BRING THE SPIRIT OF BELOVED ARTISTS TO LIFE — AT BARS NEAR YOU

By Greg Weatherford / Portraits by Adam Ewing

PICTURE THIS: It's a hot August night in Richmond, and beneath the stars, the outdoor amphitheater at Dogwood Dell is full of enthusiastic Prince fans. They're ecstatic after a long set of Minneapolis funk and soul led by the slender, dulcet-voiced singer in a pompadour.

The lights fall low. As the guitar strums the first shimmering chords of "Purple Rain," the crowd takes a collective breath of delight. By the song's anthemic close, they're singing along.

But although they're singing to Prince, it's not Prince who hears them. Fronting the band in sparkly heels and a form-fitting jumpsuit is Anthony Cosby Jr., a Richmond-based actor and singer who in 2020 co-created "I Would Die 4 U: A Musical Tribute to Prince!"

Obviously, everyone in the crowd that night in 2021 was aware that Cosby is not Prince, and not just because Prince died years ago or because Cosby looks very

little like the legendary musician — he's a lot taller than the diminutive original, for one thing.

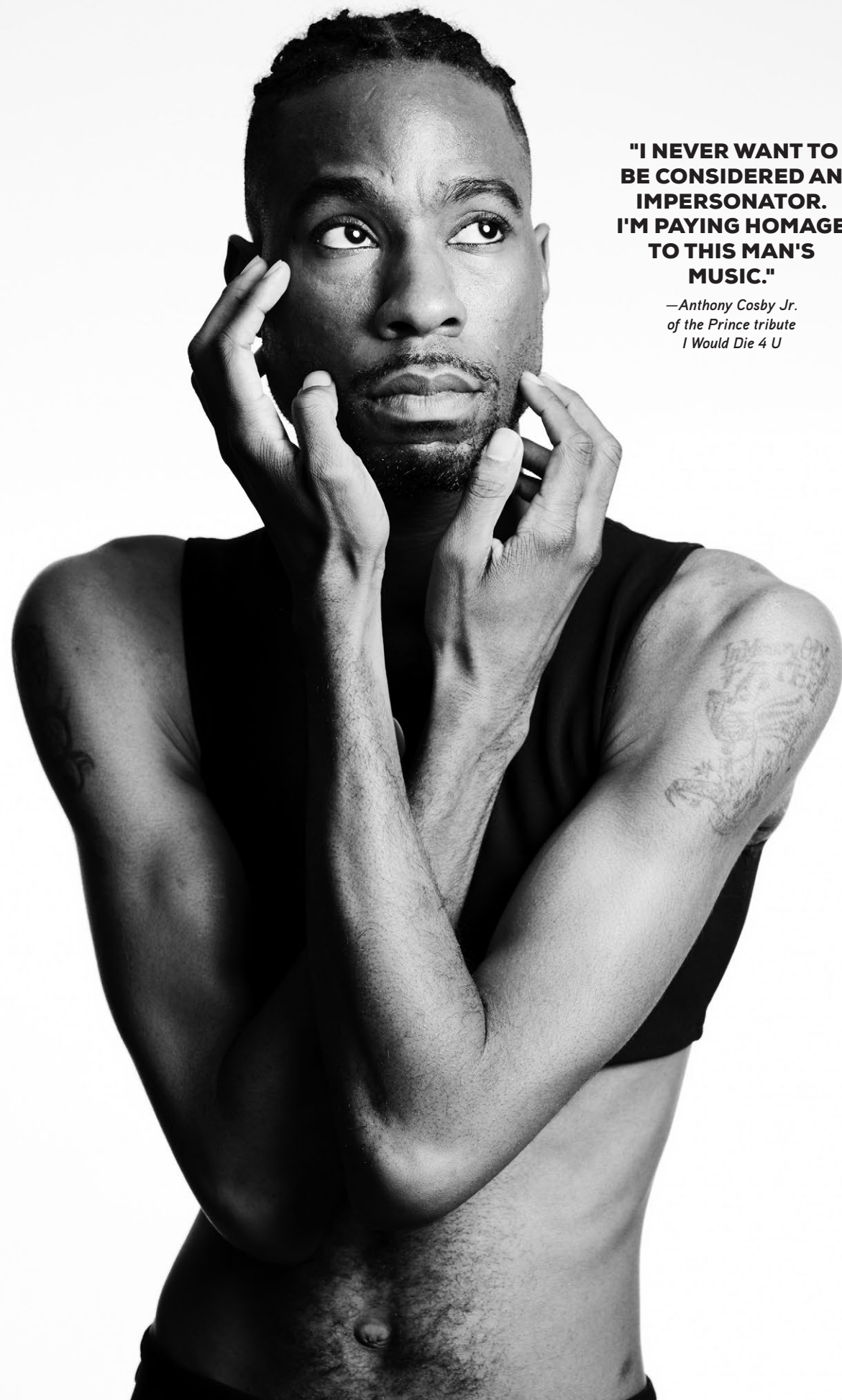
The audience gathered not just to watch Cosby but to join in tribute to a fallen artist. In an extended, elaborate act of shared performance, the band pretends to be Prince's real band, Cosby sings songs by the real Prince, and the audience pretends to be an audience at a real Prince show.

And yet, while everything about it is fake, the performance and the emotions are real.

"'Purple Rain' — I can never sing it without crying," Cosby says. "I'm thinking about everything we've done, everything that led up to this moment. I'm thinking about the show we're doing, I'm thinking about this moment. And I'm looking each person in the band in the eye, and I'm saying, 'Thank you.' I'm getting chills just talking about it." >

Anthony Cosby Jr.
performing the
music of Prince

PHOTO BY JOEY WHARTON



"I NEVER WANT TO BE CONSIDERED AN IMPERSONATOR. I'M PAYING HOMAGE TO THIS MAN'S MUSIC."

—Anthony Cosby Jr.
of the Prince tribute
I Would Die 4 U

OFFERING AN EXPERIENCE

If theater is the art of turning playacting into true emotion, tribute shows like Cosby's are an even deeper dive into the vortex of art, imitation and reality.

Just ask Wrenn Mangum, a onetime rock musician and VCU art school graduate who for years eked out a living portraying Elvis Presley at parties, nursing homes and birthdays. While these days he dismisses his ability ("There were a million guys way better than me," he says), he won several regional Elvis impersonator contests and worked steadily.

Now retired from that role, Mangum thinks of the time he spent as the King as a lesson in empathy, connection and the power of ritual.

In some cases that ritual became particularly poignant, like the times he was hired to sing to people who were near death. "For me it was, 'This person is on their deathbed — what can I do to make these last moments as meaningful as possible?'"

Tribute acts seem to be having a moment. For decades, there have been bands that slavishly imitate the shows of artists such as Elvis, Led Zeppelin and the Grateful Dead — tribute act Dark Star Orchestra packs theaters by reenacting actual Grateful Dead concerts song by song and note for note — offering a live experience to many who would never have the chance otherwise.

Lately, that urge to honor the music of yesterday's stars has spread to smaller acts and smaller venues. A new generation of tribute bands has taken on the challenge of bringing other artists and their music to life.

In bars and festivals in and around Richmond, on any given weekend you could take in bands celebrating the songs and style of the Allman Brothers (Sky Dog), the Clash (Clampdown), California post-punk band X (X-Suckas), R.E.M. (Dead Letter Officers) and the Pretenders (Brass in Pocket) — to name a few.

Maybe it's simply nostalgia. Since the music reminds many people of a time

they remember as happier, seeing a tribute act can trigger warm feelings.

Maybe it's something more: a longing for connection.

"As older rituals become less important, people are seeking a ritual that is relevant to them," Mangum muses. "They're trying to find meaning. ... Music can trigger a spiritual memory. It brings them back to their past."

If you're someone who sneers at cover bands as less valid than all-original acts, these musicians have heard it before. Some of them even held similar views before they got into the act. But they all now point to the lessons they have learned by studying work that has been successful and applying those lessons in their own work or original music. And finally, as Will Jones of Neil Diamond tribute act Diamond Heist points out, "It's just a really good feeling to play for a couple hundred people who know every word of every song."

TRUST THE ART

"I have always been a huge Prince fan,"

Cosby says. If not always, exactly, at least since fifth grade, when after being suspended from school, he had to take a long road trip with his uncle. There was one cassette in the car: Prince's classic album "1999." By the time Cosby rode back home, he recalls, "I knew every word."

Now an accomplished singer and actor, Cosby has held roles in many Virginia Rep productions, including "Dreamgirls," "La Cage Aux Folles" and the musical version of "Sister Act." In 2019, fellow actor Scott Wichmann invited him to play Sammy Davis Jr. to Wichmann's Sinatra in a revue based around the Rat Pack. Around the same time, Cosby appeared as Nat King Cole as part of several "Legends on Grace" performances at the Libby S. Gottwald Playhouse in Dominion Energy Center.

Those experiences inspired his one-man show at the HofGarden on West Broad, in which he performed music by Cole, Davis and Ray Charles.

"That was such a success, and it was such a good feeling, that I thought, 'I could actually do this thing,'" Cosby says. "I was picking up the phone and >



I Would Die 4 U appeared at Hardywood Park Craft Brewery in October.

OPPOSITE PAGE: ADAM EWING; RIGHT: JOEY WHARTON



Full Moon Fever performing at the Broadberry

had started making calls because I was ready to go on tour.”

That was February 2020. “And you know what happened next,” Cosby says wryly.

During that first year of pandemic distancing, Cosby admits, “I was going crazy.” Casting about for something different from the crooners he had played, Cosby hit on Prince. He liked the storytelling and clear characters in Prince’s songs (“I was working part time in a five-and-dime,” “Dorothy was a waitress on the promenade”) and had sung some at karaoke.

He contacted bassist Neal Perrine, a recent graduate of James Madison University’s jazz program who had backed him up in the cabaret shows. Perrine swiftly agreed: “It seemed like a lot of fun. Anthony is a magnetic person, so I knew if the music could be taken care of, the show would be very good.”

Perrine put together the band, while Cosby connected with skilled costumer Keith Walker. Their debut was on Halloween 2020 at the HofGarden’s Loft Space, followed by a showing of the movie “Purple Rain.”

Pleased with that first show, the band continued. As he looked deeper into the repertoire and concert footage of Prince,

Perrine, who acknowledges he had been at best a casual fan of the celebrated Minneapolis musician, found himself inspired by the way Prince seemed to have no barrier between creative impulse and performance.

“It’s almost like he’s shedding these layers and getting to this level of pure energy,” Perrine says. “He always seemed to be so uninhibited in just being himself. That’s why people resonate with the music so much. Because we all have that in us.”

Since then, they have done eight Prince shows, including two at Dogwood Dell and one packing the Broadberry — many of them full-on performances with dancers, a string section, horns, lights and costumes — changing up the song list each time. They insist they are not trying to impersonate the original but instead are looking to honor his art.

“I never want to be considered an impersonator,” Cosby says. “I’m paying homage to this man’s music with a group of my friends.”

And what has Cosby learned from Prince? “Not feeling the need to do the thing that’s expected,” he responds. “To trust the process and trust the art.”

For his part, Perrine says, “This show

has made me a better person in many ways. It’s taught me how to accept people and love people. And to do something way bigger than yourself.”

GENUINE APPRECIATION

Tom Petty was known for his simple yet powerful songs, his reedy voice and his lifelong dedication to his fans.

No wonder so many of them turn out to see Full Moon Fever, the Richmond-based band dedicated to Petty’s catalog. Does the band look and dress like the Heartbreakers? Not really. Does the singer try to look and sound exactly like Petty? Nope. Does the band connect with listeners? Oh yeah. Veterans who say Petty helped them get through hard times. Young people starting bands of their own. People in tears after every show.

In 14 years of fronting Full Moon Fever, singer Prabir Mehta has seen it all. Especially since Petty died in 2017. “It’s become bigger than us,” he says. “There is a genuine appreciation for the music. ... I know all these songs, everyone in the audience knows all the songs. There’s something magical about it.”

Mehta, a songwriter and well-known fixture of the Richmond music scene, was a lifelong fan who saw Petty perform at several concerts before he died, the last time in 2014. He admires Petty for his songs and his sincerity. The rock star repeatedly fought the music industry on behalf of his fans, sometimes to his own detriment — like when he let fans buy discounted concert tickets through his fan club so they wouldn’t be gouged by scalpers who had snatched them up for resale, or the time at the peak of his stardom when he refused to release an album until the record company canceled plans to charge fans more for it.

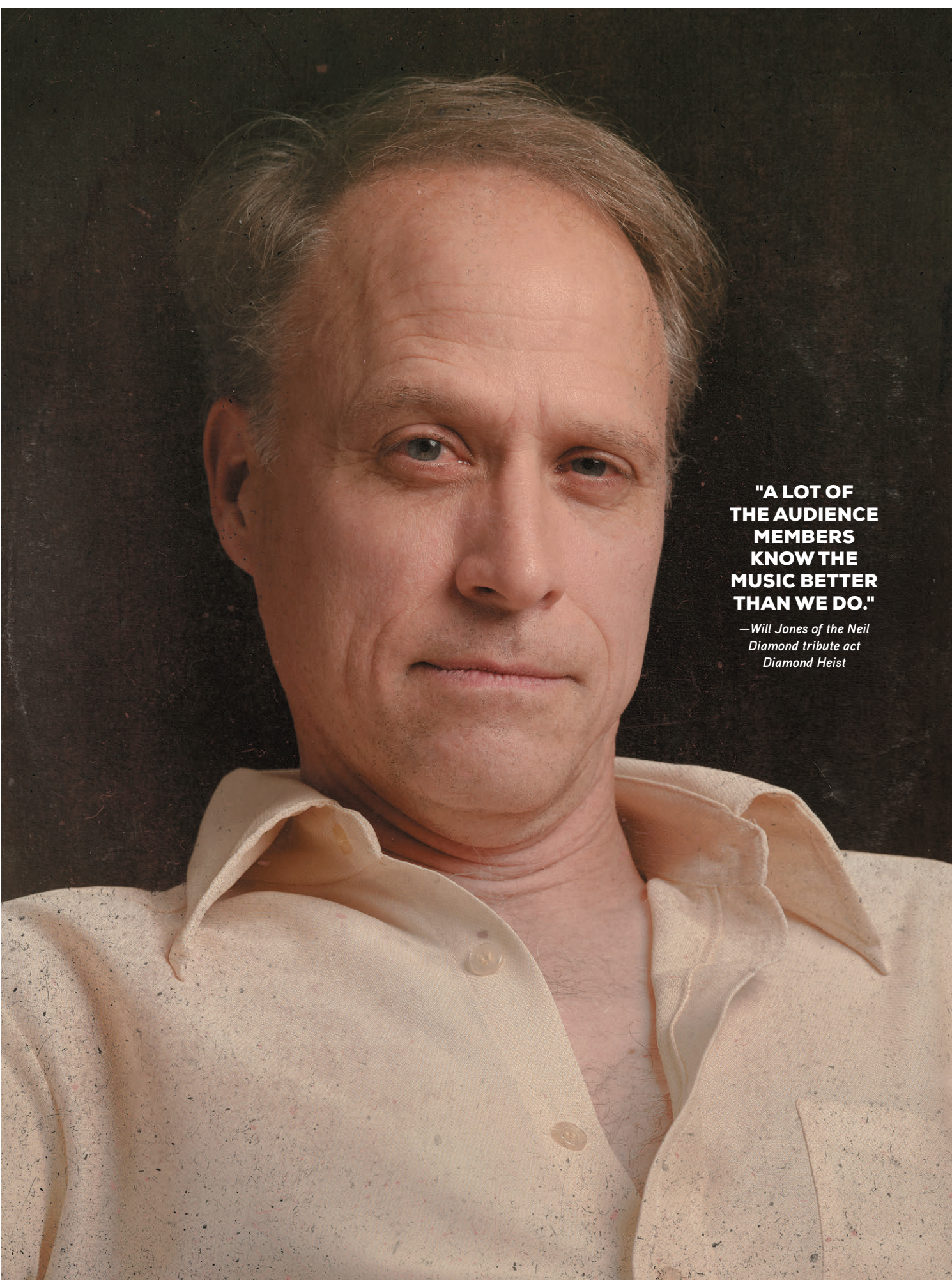
At their best, Petty’s songs are as simple and powerful as a stream of pure water. In its 20 to 30 gigs per year, the five-member Full Moon Fever aims to capture that same approach. “It’s important that it not get forced or insincere,” Mehta says. “If it ain’t sincere, why is it here?” >



"PEOPLE SINGING ALONG TO TOM PETTY ARE CELEBRATING THEIR MEMORIES OF THESE SONGS."

—Prabir Mehta of the Tom Petty tribute band Full Moon Fever

OPPOSITE PAGE: ADAM EWING; ABOVE LEFT: JOEY WHARTON



"A LOT OF THE AUDIENCE MEMBERS KNOW THE MUSIC BETTER THAN WE DO."

—Will Jones of the Neil Diamond tribute act Diamond Heist

Along with leading his own groups, Mehta teaches contemporary music ensemble at University of Richmond, runs a consulting firm and is chair of Gallery5's board of directors. Recently he has begun branching out and playing in different settings, including his own one-man tribute to They Might Be Giants — the cheekily named He Might Be Giants. In the wake of the pandemic, he says, "I'm realizing I have a need for as many outlets as possible."

Full Moon Fever shows, which often feature guest vocalist Kenneka Cook, have become celebrations of Petty's connection to his audience. "People singing along to Tom Petty are celebrating their memories of these songs," Mehta says. He feels the same.

INTERACTIVE AFFAIRS

So you want some sincerity? We're talking Neil Diamond.

The singer-songwriter once hailed as the "Jewish Elvis" built a long career out of soaring ballads and pop tunes with unstoppable choruses. Just try not to join in when "Sweet Caroline" or "Red Red Wine" starts playing.

The regional Neil Diamond tribute band Diamond Heist began life as a tossed-off number. Singer Will Jones was helping out with Hamaganza, a charity event that for years raised funds and gathered donations for food banks through a series of annual concerts that were better known for their embrace of kitsch and ramshackle performances than for musical quality.

"I said, 'OK, I'll do 'Sweet Caroline,'" Jones recalls. That went well enough that he added Diamond's song "I'm a Believer," made famous by the Monkees, to the set.

Friend and drummer J. Dean Owen suggested they continue the band. After a few false starts, the group had its first real gig at Cary Street Cafe in 2014. That went so well they were invited to play one Saturday a month — for four hours a show. They took the offer and kept up that schedule for almost six years. (Owen left the band not long after its founding; he died in 2019.)

Diamond Heist got its name because Jones and company were not sure they could live up to the exacting standards of Diamond's many fans. "A lot of the

audience members know the music better than we do," Jones says. "They have specific expectations."

Despite pressure from friends and other musicians to have the band turn to parody — nothing is more tempting of mockery than the sincerity and dramatics in which Diamond specializes — Diamond Heist chose to go a different path. "The music is good, and the songs are great," Jones says. "We aren't at all interested in doing anything that could be experienced as making fun."

Diamond Heist shows have become interactive affairs, with many longtime Neil Diamond fans driving long distances in order to join show after show. "People come to early shows sometimes wearing Neil Diamond concert T-shirts. When we play 'America,' people pull out little American flags."

Jones, a longtime journalist with the Richmond Times-Dispatch who now works as a communications pro for Chesterfield County, has spent much of his life writing and playing music. His acoustic group, the Wayward Bills, is a feature at restaurants and breweries across Virginia. But the Neil Diamond experience, somewhat to Jones' surprise, has been transformational.

"It's helped me be a better musician and a better singer," Jones says. "If you're doing a tribute, the repertoire is chosen for you in a lot of senses. You have to figure out a way to make it work."

Does it ever get boring to play, say, "Cherry Cherry" for the thousandth time? "We recognize that tribute bands exist because of the audience," Jones says. "If people want to hear 'Sweet Caroline' a second time, we'll play it. If people are that excited, it feels fresh."

Despite fans' enthusiasm, Diamond Heist doesn't try to imitate Diamond's bombastic live shows or his intense, brooding charisma. The band and singer simply do their best to perform Diamond's music effectively and affectionately, Jones says. "You're trying to capture the spirit." ■



Diamond Heist performing at Main Line Brewery in October.

OPPOSITE PAGE: ADAM EWING, SHIRT COURTESY HALCYON VINTAGE CLOTHING; RIGHT: JAY PAUL