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## Former Tantrum bandmates sharing a stage again

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By **ROBERT LOERZEL** Contributor

It's been a long time since Phil Balsano and Phil Syniar played on the same stage together.

On July 4 at Elmwood Park Freedom Fest, the two local musicians will perform in separate bands -- Balsano will play keyboards with 1969, and Syniar will play bass with R-Gang. But back in the late 1970s, they were both members of Tantrum, a rock band from Elmwood Park that seemed to be on the verge of stardom.

Back in rotation

The July 4 festival is not quite a Tantrum reunion, but Tantrum fans can relive the group's heyday now by hearing their music on CD for the first time. In the last few years, Tantrum's complete recordings have become available through the British label Escape Music.

"We get fan mail from Germany and England," Balsano says. "There were a lot of people who remember us."

Before they formed Tantrum, Balsano and Syniar were playing disco hits and other '70s pop songs in a group called Skylady.

"We wanted to go heavier," says Syniar, an Oak Park resident.

The concept they hit upon was a four-piece rock band playing with three female singers -- sort of like a female version of Three Dog Night.

"We beat the bushes," says Balsano. "We auditioned close to 100 female singers."

Eventually, Tantrum lined up its trio: Pam Bradley, Barb Erber and Sandy Caulfield. Tantrum landed a record deal with Ovation, a medium-sized label based in Glenview. Two records came out: "Tantrum" and "Rather Be Rockin'," and the sound of women singing hard-rocking songs prompted comparisons to Heart.

This was at a time when bands could still get regional hits on Chicago radio stations, with hopes that the songs might later break through to national success. WXRT and WLUP put a couple of Tantrum singles written by Balsano, "Kidnapped" and "Rather Be Rockin'" into regular rotation, and music magazines started calling Tantrum the next big thing. The band toured nationally, and Tantrum songs were featured in ads for Pepsi, Zenith and Wrigley.

"We were just about to pop big-time, I think," Syniar says.

Going bust

But then the story of Tantrum took a turn that's all too familiar in the annals of rock music: Its record label went out of business. A third album that Tantrum had just finished recording, "Breaking Away," ended up sitting on a shelf.

Tantrum might have been able to carry on by seeking a new record label, but the group decided to call it quits in the early '80s. Not everyone was happy with the decision.

"I thought it was ridiculous," Syniar says. "We were nowhere near exhausted as far as songwriting or potential."

Balsano says he feels some regrets, too, although he also felt ready at the time to try something different. "The touring was getting tedious for me," he says.

In the years since Tantrum broke up, Syniar has played with Survivor and R-Gang, which specializes in Motown songs -- fun material for a bassist. "All the Motown songs have great bass parts," he says. "You're in bass heaven."

Balsano spent 10 years as a writer and producer of house music records. Later, as he took corporate day jobs, he starting playing keyboards in blues bands. Two years ago, he formed 1969, a cover group that specializes in

music from the year of Woodstock and Altamont.

There are no plans for a Tantrum reunion. The logistics of bringing together all seven members aren't easy, Balsano says, but he is glad to be sharing the stage again with Syniar.

"It's an awesome thing for us," he says.



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