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SPRINGFIELD, Mo. --In these fast times of fancy double releases, the Skeletons are on a singular mission, and that is to make rock 'n' roll as sincere as possible.

So last month, the high priests of the high forehead released "Waiting," their debut for Alias Records. To these ears, it's the most inspiring pop-rock recording of 1992. And due out early next month is "Rocky Box," a compilation of limber rockabilly covers featuring hobo singer Boxcar Willie, backed by the Skeletons.

Now that's a human touch.

Look at the big acts on the Billboard charts. Pearl Jam. Public Enemy. Kriss Kross. Michael Bolton. With the exception of R.E.M.'s ode to Andy Kaufman, where's the fun? The Skeletons put geranium back in the cranium.

Despite roots that start in the early 1970s with the regional new wave band the Symptoms (1977, 1978) and then the roadhouse-roots Morells (1980-84), all five Skeletons remain based in Springfield, far away from the marketing strategies and ostentatious temptation of urban centers.

During a recent set at the Regency Ballroom in Springfield, the band mixed new songs from its next Alias Records disc. The originals blended in with a passionate cover of the Percy Faith make-out classic "Theme from a Summer Place," Ben Vaughn's funky "I Dig Your Wig" and a cranked-up version of Tommy Roe's "Sheila."

"Doing all those new songs last night was real unusual," said bandleader-bassist Lou Whitney during a Sunday morning interview in his Column One recording studio in Springfield. Whitney was preparing to produce a local band appropriately named Wilder. Whitney is 49 years old.

"We've been rehearsing, and we've learned probably a dozen new tunes," he said. "Records were invented for people who couldn't be there.

"You have to keep that approach. If you do that, you're paying attention to the bottom line. It used to be that bands would go out and play, make no money - well, that's still the same - but they'd exist for a while before someone would come along and say they should make a record.

"Now, you've got the T-shirt, the manager, the logo and the stage look all in place before someone says, 'Hey, we'd better write some songs,' or, 'Let's rehearse.' That stuff seems to come on down the pike now."

The bare-bones approach is why the Skeletons have such an engaging pop sound. "Waiting" begins with five straight irresistible tunes - Skeletons' guitarist D. Clinton Thompson's loopy "Downtown"; followed by "Things We Need," keyboardist Joe Terry's rockin' tribute to self-indulgence ("... *we never give to no United Way, it's a curse that you carry, so call it by name* ..."); a hand-jive cover of the Easybeats' "St. Louis"; Thompson's "Devil in Me," which is punctuated by tough Clash-like riffs, and finally, a cresting rendition of Sonny Bono's "It's the Little Things."

"Hopefully this record will raise our profile to the next level," Whitney said. "Which would be like 'moderate independent success.' We all put our numbers down as to how we think it will do. I love the record, I really do. If it gets radio, it is going to do us some good. In Chicago, WXRT, WCBR and WKQX jumped on us, and automatically, we changed. We used to come to Chicago, and there were plenty of places to sit. Now we can play bigger venues."

After the rush of the record's first five songs, "Waiting" settles down to include Terry's ethereal "Rain Snow and Sleet" and his jazzy, hard-driving "Rainy Day Parade," along with Whitney's raunchy "That'll Work," which works Cubs announcer Harry Caray into the lyrics.

"Waiting" got its title from a couple of sources. The disc's cover features a 1983 photo by Kay Tolliver Whitney (Lou's wife) of a nervous guy in flood pants at a Fourth of July parade in Crocker, Mo.

Other Skeletons prefer to think the album is titled after the closing track, Ronnie Self's haunting "Waiting for My Gin To Hit Me." As a kid, Skeletons drummer Bobby Lloyd Hicks worked with Self in a Springfield recording studio. Self co-wrote the Brenda Lee hit "I'm Sorry," but never released "Waiting for My Gin To Hit Me."

"Ronnie's method of recording was to sit with a Coke case in front of him, play guitar in D, get real drunk and sing them songs real low with a real beat," Whitney said.

Hicks remembered, "He had nine kids and he brought in the four middle ones (ages 9 to 15) the day he demoed 'Waiting for My Gin.' They had a family tradition where every evening at home, they would get a long-neck bottle of Coke, pass it around in a circle and sing Ronnie's songs. So all these little kids knew these songs about drinking and death." (Self died in 1981.)

Terry added, "The demo of him doing it was pretty bare. We've tried to mutate it, hopefully into our own thing."

The Skeletons closed their set at the Regency by combining "Waiting for My Gin To Hit Me" with a full-tilt, double-keyboards cover of Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It." Hicks' three pre-teen kids, Brian Wilson, Bayley and Lindsey, gathered

around the drum set singing with their father on "Waiting for My Gin To Hit Me."

Such sincerity could not be questioned.

Even if all else fails, the Skeletons have made Boxcar Willie a happy hobo.

In some circles, Boxcar is one of those toll-free television singers like Roger Whittaker who no one is quite sure about. Formerly a Texas disc jockey named Lecil Travis "Marty" Martin, Boxcar released his first television album, "King of the Road," to the tune of over 3 million copies. Boxcar also was the 60th member to be inducted in the Grand Ole Opry.

"Mr. Willie," as the Skeletons call him, has gone on to become the unofficial mayor of Branson, Mo., about a half-hour south of Springfield, where he operates the successful Boxcar Willie Museum and Gift Shop and Theater.

But the pairing of the Skeletons with the 61-year-old Box is one of those spiritual once-in-a-lifetime musical alignments, like Frank Sinatra dueting with Cyndi Lauper or Tom Jones covering a Van Morrison song.

"Rocky Box" consists of 14 revved-up country and rockabilly tunes and a Boxcar original called "Hank, You're Like Your Daddy." The record, which will be released on Boxcar's label, opens with Ronnie Dawson's frenetic "Rockin' Bones" and closes with a FacesStones-style version of "Achy Breaky Heart."

The joyful thread throughout "Rocky Box" is Boxcar's appointed Texas vocals meeting the twangy guitar of the Skeletons' D. Clinton Thompson. A former member of the Ozark Mountain Daredevils, Thompson has a frosty and terse sound, reminiscent of the direct style of Sun Records-era rockabilly players.

And Boxcar certainly seems to be having a Boxblast.

Almost every song features a cornball fade-out where Boxcar plays off his persona. At the end of Jerry Glenn's nonsensical "16 Chickens (And a Tambourine)," Boxcar says, "Call me Col. Sanders Willie." At the end of "That's Alright Mama," Boxcar says, "It's gonna be all right, Willie." At the end of Johnny Cash's "Train of Love," Boxcar says, "Call me Boxcash Willie." And yes, even at the end of "Achy Breaky Heart," there's Boxcar saying, "Call me Achy Breaky Box."

The guy can't help it.

"I was knocked out," Boxcar admitted in a conversation in the Boxcar Willie office behind the Boxcar Willie Theater, as Moxie the Shih Tzu dog kept fetching a soggy tennis ball. "All these cotton-pickin' rock 'n' rollers have been switching over to country all these years, so out of all the people in the world to make a rock 'n' roll album, who would you least expect it from?"

Since 1979, Boxcar Willie has been recording his country hobo tunes at Column One studios in Springfield, which is how he met Whitney, who worked at the studio before purchasing it a few years ago.

In a separate interview, Whitney said, "I thought of doing this some time ago. We were having lunch on another matter, and I just pitched the idea. At first, he was a little on the edgy side about it. He didn't know any of us that well. We all talked real fast."

But over the summer, Boxcar Willie and the Skeletons went on to record 13 songs in 48 hours at Column One studios. They had so much sincere fun, they went back in the studio for two more tunes.

"I used to sing those songs ('Maybelline,' 'Memphis,' Maddox Brothers & Rose's 'Sally Let Your Bangs Hang Down,' all on 'Rocky Box') at dances," Boxcar said. "Hell, you can't do train songs all the time. You had to do those songs to survive in the dance hall business."

"I've always felt the success of running a dance band is to have different beats. If you do an uptempo tune and turn around and do a slow song, the whole dance floor will be full of people holdin' and huggin' one another. Then play a fast song, and they'll be out there jitterbuggin'."

There are no plans for Boxcar Willie/Skeletons live gigs, but give Whitney some time. "I'm going to pitch it to him," he said. "I want to do (the TNN show) 'Nashville Now' real bad. I'd also love to play the Grand Ole Opry. We have the uniform for it."

Boxcar Willie was so inspired by "Rocky Box," he designed black sweat and T-shirts for the Skeletons. The front of the shirts features puffy skeletons and the backs say, "Skeletons - Springfield, Missouri," in a Harley-Davidson motif. Boxcar also suggested the Skeletons wear black jump suits with bones running down the sides of each leg. The Skeletons have yet to act on that idea.

"I've never been excited about an album like this," Boxcar said. "With the right break, this album could do something. It really could. I'm not just saying that. I make two or three albums a year, but I don't brag on them like this one here."