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Philly rock legend Robert Hazard dies at 59

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ONE DAY in the late '70s, Bill Eib visited Robert Hazard in his Center City apartment and Robert told him about a new song he had written.

"I wrote it in the shower in 20 minutes," Eib said Robert told him. "It's kind of silly. See what you think of it."

"I listened to it and he couldn't believe I really liked it. He had dashed it off so quickly."

Not only did Eib, who was Hazard's manager, like the song, it seems the whole world took to it when Cyndi Lauper recorded "Girls Just Want To Have Fun" in the early '80s.

For better or worse, Robert became identified with the song, considered a seminal pop anthem. It was recorded by numerous singers over the years and even showed up in films. Miley Cyrus, the teen singing sensation, has recorded it, which probably will set off a new wave of popularity for the 30-year-old vehicle.

Robert Hazard was big in the Philadelphia music scene before Cindy Lauper sang his song. He was almost single-handedly responsible for putting Philly on the rock-music map by riding the New Wave to heights of popularity that exploded all over the country.

He died Tuesday of complications of pancreatic cancer after surgery at Massachusetts General Hospital. He was 59 and was living in Old Forge, N.Y.

"He was one of the biggest local performers ever," said Chuck Darrow, a *Daily News* reporter who was Hazard's road manager in the '80s. "He literally exploded out of Philadelphia."

In those days, R&B and jazz dominated the Philadelphia music scene. Hazard and his band, Robert Hazard and the Heroes, changed that. They packed in the crowds, sold out performances at local clubs and gave the South Street scene new life.

Hazard's popularity soared in the early '80s when he and his band recorded "Escalator of Life" and "Change Reaction," which got considerable air time in Philadelphia. WMMR, the premiere rock station at the time, got behind the music and helped make it popular.

Kurt Loder, a *Rolling Stone* writer, saw a performance by the group and wrote a lengthy and glowing story about them.

In 1982, the group released its debut album with five songs. It sold more than 300,000 copies in the Philadelphia area and got the group a contract with RCA.

They performed "Change Reaction" and "Escalator of Life" on Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" in 1982, and in other venues.

About that time, Rick Chertoff, a Columbia Records representative, was looking for material for Cindy Lauper's manager. He remembered having heard "Girls Just Want To Have Fun" some years earlier and had not been able to get it out of his head.

He took Cyndi to meet Robert at his Center City apartment. The rest, as they say, is history.

Chuck Darrow said his work with Hazard was "the most exciting time in my life."

"He was an incredible song writer and a marvelous performer," Darrow said. "He was like a rock star. He was magnetic and charismatic on stage."

"He was on the cutting edge of what was about to happen," said Bill Eib, who managed Robert through most of his career. "He single-handedly got Philly going.

"He was a great front man. He could get the crowd going nuts.

"He was a complex man, one of the most delightful people I've ever met. But he was serious about what he was doing. You had to get out of his way."

But Hazard was not an altogether happy camper. His heart was in folk music and his latest albums, "The Seventh Lake" (named after a lake near his Adirondak home), produced by the T-Bone Wolk in 2004, and "Troubador," released last October by Rykodisc, were heavily folk-flavored.

"His roots were in folk music," said Randy Alexander, a music publicist who managed Robert's later career. "'His local fame and international notoriety were not for the types of music that was the essence of his soul.

"He started out singing in local coffee houses," Alexander said. The new albums represented the "poet within him coming out. There were deeper stories within him.

"He was wonderfully charismatic," he added, "with deep penetrating eyes. His impact on Philadelphia music and the local rock scene was unparalleled. He should not only have a star on the Walk of Fame, but the city should build a statue for him."

Robert actually started his working career as a jeweler. He was born in Philadelphia to Bert and Lillian Rimato. His father was a jeweler on Jeweler's Row and an operatic tenor. Robert worked in his father's jewelry shop in his youth.

He grew up in Springfield, Delaware County, and attended Springfield High School. Shortly afterward, he was playing his guitar and singing his folk songs in local coffee houses and clubs.

Robert was a devoted father to his sons, Remy, 19, and Rex, 14.

"He was still reading bedtime stories to Rex," Randy Anderson said.

Besides his parents and sons, he is survived by his wife of 22 years, the former Susan Sealander, and a daughter by a previous marriage, Corrina.

Services: A memorial service was being arranged. *

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