

The band that never sold out sells out: NRBQ at The Kate on Friday

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NRBQ also at
Infinity Hall

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They've been called "the best pure pop band on the planet" and boast followers like Paul McCartney, Keith Richards, and Bob Dylan. Bonnie Raitt, John Sebastian, and Los Lobos have performed their songs. They served as the unofficial house band for The Simpsons from 1998 to 2001. And they've been packing bars, taverns and concert halls for the last four decades.

But try to find on the radio the rock band NRBQ, which will unleash its rowdy good-time music on a sold-out Kate crowd this Friday. Scan the Billboard Hot 100 chart over the past 40 years; the band, which made its name with such hits as "Magnet," "Ridin' In My Car," and "Me And The Boys," appeared a single time, peaking with "Get That Gasoline Blues" at no. 70 in 1974.

If you deem neither a measure of a band's worth, consider that NRBQ, an acronym for New Rhythm and Blues Quartet, has never made it onto a single ballot for the Rock and Roll Hall of

Fame. As for major record deals, the group has secured one every decade or so, only to be dropped after a few albums due to poor sales.

Despite this lack of industry respect and commercial success, as well as a series of line-up changes that has inspired indignation and portents of doom in their legions of "Q-heads," the power and popularity of the band that played one-nighters in just about any club that would have them, remains undiminished.

Perhaps it's a nostalgia for the "magic box," an old wooden box that would contain audience members' handwritten requests, which the band always performed whether it knew the song or not. Or the beauty of not knowing what would happen; the band was famous for their unpredictable live concerts, never performing with a set list and once blowing up a Cabbage Patch Doll on stage. Or founder Terry Adams' exuberant Jerry-Lee-Lewis-like antics and soaring musicianship on the keyboards.

According to Adams, the last remaining original member, the reason for NRBQ's enduring appeal is simple.

From the beginning, the 65-year-old said in a recent telephone interview, "I wanted to put together a band to make music, any music we wanted, any style, any time, regardless of the consequences."

And that hasn't changed, even if the group's constituency has. "With all due respect to the past, NRBQ is a living, breathing, ongoing sound," said the Louisville native who's fully recovered from the stage 4 throat cancer that was diagnosed in 2004. "I need to keep it going, keep making new songs, keep moving forward."

To judge from some of the original songs on the 2011 album "Keep This Love Goin'," it's clear that the band is still following Adams' — and NRBQ's — free-wheeling eclectic musical vision. Adams' tribute to zydeco legend Boozoo Chavis and his wife, "Boozoo and Leona," has drummer Conrad Choucroun propelling the bouncy, toe-tapper with tasty Cajun rhythms. "Sweet and Petite" could have been included on a 1950s doo-wop record or a gospel hand-clapper. And "In Every Dream" refiles Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor into a jaunty coun-



Free wheelin': NRBQ current line up from left - Terry Adams, Casey McDonough, Scott Ligon, Bobby Lloyd Hicks (photo by Lili Chilson)

try tune.

Above all, though, "The Animal Life," with guitarist Scott Ligon's upbeat ditty about his envy of birds who can fly whenever they feel like flying, epitomizes the zany, devil-may-care spirit of a band that continues its tradition of operating without a sound check and a set list.

Asked whether NRBQ would bring out the "magic box" for the capacity crowd on Friday, Adams was coy.

"I'm always open to future impossibilities," he said, an impish grin in his voice.

NRBQ performs at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Center, 300 Main St., Old Saybrook on Friday, Jan. 31 at 8 p.m. The event is sold out. For more information, call 860-510-0473 or visit www.theKate.org.

NRBQ also performs at Infinity Hall, 20 Greenwood Road West, Norfolk in Litchfield County on Saturday, Feb.

1 at 8 p.m. For more information, call 860-542-5531 or visit www.infinityhall.com.

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