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In the Region

Aging Rocker Tries to Reclaim a Lost Dream



Dith Pran/The New York Times

By KEVIN COYNE

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Asbury Park, New Jersey

IT was a hard winter for the boys of summer, the graying rock 'n' rollers whose barroom bands fueled so many soaring, sweaty Shore nights back when it was easy to believe that everybody, in the crowd as well as on the stage, was on the verge of something big.

“Bobby Alfano, Billy Chinnock, Big Danny Gallagher,” Lance Larson said, ticking off the names of friends who have died since last summer, all of them too young, all of them veterans of the clubs in this small boardwalk city that was once [New Jersey](#)'s equivalent of the [Beatles](#)' Liverpool.

“And we almost lost the Wonder Bar, too,” he said, sweeping his arm to take in the Ocean Avenue nightclub that he revived a few years ago and runs with his girlfriend, Debbie DeLisa, and that is threatened by the city's waterfront redevelopment plan. “But we get another summer at least.”

And so comes another summer in a long-gestating reclamation — of Asbury Park, and also of Mr. Larson. Once on the A-list of ambitious Shore musicians hoping to follow [Bruce Springsteen](#) and Jon Bon Jovi into the promised land of rock stardom, he spiraled all the way down through heroin and into jail.

“It went, ‘whoosh,’ ” he said, making a flushing sound, “so fast. It was my own doing. I destroyed my career.”

For the last few months, though, Mr. Larson, 55, has been spending most of his days at City Lights, a recording studio in nearby Farmingdale, working on something that he never quite managed to finish 20 years ago, and that fans and friends who knew him through his wild and dark years never thought they’d see: his first album. “I got to the point after so many years that I thought it just wasn’t meant to be,” he said.

But last winter, on one of the carpentry jobs that help through the slow times at the club, he was playing some of his old songs on a boombox while he rebuilt the basement steps of Tim Feeney’s home in Avon. Mr. Feeney, 44, was particularly taken by “Song for the Soldier,” which Mr. Larson had written for his late father, a marine who earned a Purple Heart during World War II. With the backing of Mr. Feeney, who spent five years in the Army and now owns a software company, Mr. Larson recorded the song and released it just before Memorial Day, making it available as a free download for anyone serving in the military.

Mr. Larson also wrote some new songs and dusted off some others he had first recorded back in the mid-1980s, then stowed in a boxful of tapes in his mother’s basement. “That was when I had my downfall,” he said. “When I started getting into heroin, I just forgot music. I didn’t play for 10 years.”

He landed in jail for four months in 1999, facing charges of credit card fraud — using cards that weren’t his to buy things he sold to support his habit. The judge gave him probation instead of a prison sentence, and when he got out he met Ms. DeLisa, herself a recovering alcoholic. They ran some hot dog carts on the boardwalk in Bradley Beach, then in 2002 took over the abandoned Wonder Bar, a blocky concrete building across from Convention Hall that looks as if it could have been an auto body shop in a previous life, but that has a storied Shore pedigree. It’s the place where Clarence Clemons, who later became the E Street Band sax player, was playing the night he met Bruce Springsteen, and where Mr. Springsteen himself once filmed a music video.

They painted the facade the same signature medicinal green as the doomed and lamented Palace Amusements — demolished in 2004 to make room for condos — and made it a kind of clubhouse of the old Asbury music scene. The glass showcase near the stage is filled with old photos and clippings, including one that features Mr. Larson’s most visible contribution to rock ’n’ roll iconography: the cover shot of Bruce Springsteen’s blue-jeans-clad backside from “Born in the U.S.A.”

“There’s the red hat,” he said, the one he gave Mr. Springsteen one night, just after his own father died, that started in the Stone Pony and ended with a long, consoling drive together.

Jon Bon Jovi sang with Mr. Larson on that first stab at an album 20 years ago, and he sang with him again recently for this new one. The 10 tracks are nearly finished, in time for what Mr. Larson hopes will be a summer release and a tour. The first stop will be the Wonder Bar, which recently got a reprieve from redevelopers’ bulldozers and will remain open at least until October. “I’m sure that if we don’t stay here, there’ll probably be another place for us somewhere,” Ms. DeLisa said.

Between studio sessions, Mr. Larson plans to extend the patio bar under the candy-striped awning for the summer crowds. “I feel like a bee who’s finally landed,” he said, his gravelly voice underlining his battered wisdom. “I buzzed around for so long and now I’m sitting on top of the flower.” He added, “I don’t want to take off again.”

At the studio, he punched up another track from the new album, the newest he wrote for it. "Lucky Day," it's called. "I just finished the lyrics three weeks ago," he said.