

Got hunk for your trunk:
early Grand Funk Railroad
(from left) Mark Farner, Don
Brewer, Mel Schacher; (below
right) the four-piece later
line-up (from left) Craig Frost,
Schacher, Farner, Brewer;
(bottom) Don today.



Don Brewer and Grand Funk Railroad

They began with power trio ambitions at the Union Hall. But after seven years of hard rocking, they ran out of track.

HELLO EARLY 1969

Mark [Farner, guitar and vocals] and I had gone through The Pack and Terry Knight And The Pack and The Fabulous Pack, and so forth, and we needed to come up with a new idea. We hooked up with Mel Schacher [bass] from ? And The Mysterians, who was a school mate of Mark's. He was definitely on board.

We first rehearsed at the Union Hall, Local 542 in Flint, Michigan, a big open room with a high ceiling. We'd go in there about eight or nine at night, they let us use it because we were nice guys and would clean up after ourselves! Grand Funk Railroad really began in that room, because we took all

the music that we'd been doing and reworked it. The whole idea was to be a power trio. A local guy [David West] was making amps especially geared for really, really loud rock bands and we hooked up with him. That really helped.

I don't think Mark was taking his shirt off right away [Farner was often bare chested on-stage and off]. That came later, from [manager] Terry Knight's Barnum & Bailey approach to rock'n'roll. He was very big on coaching us to, you know, exaggerate everything, your movements, singing, to make it sound like you're playing an arena. We looked up to him like he was our big brother, taking care of everything that we did and looking out for us.

One day in the Union Hall we started throwing around names and Terry suggested Grand Funk Railroad, after a song he'd written. In Michigan, we had the Grand Trunk Western Railroad. At that time, saying 'funk' was very risqué – people thought

you were saying 'fuck'! So it got a lot of attention, and we felt it was very descriptive of who we were, and very powerful as well.

About the middle of 1969 we did a little string of dates up in the North-east. I don't think we got paid for any of them. Not long after, the first Atlanta Pop Festival put us on as the opening act. We went over so well we played all three days. It was amazing, the biggest crowd we'd ever seen. We had to see if this new thing was going to fly, and the only way to find out was to get out there and do it.

GOODBYE SUMMER 1976

We'd been hitting it pretty hard. From 1969 to 1976 we were under contract with Capitol to do two albums and two supporting tours every year. We'd spend a week or two coming up with the songs, record them in a few days, rehearse and then hit the road and do 40 shows in 40 days. That's what we did for, you know, six years, non-stop. And we'd gone through all these other things, the ups and downs that go along with it [in 1972 they began a bruising legal fight against Terry Knight; the creative dynamic had also shifted with 1973's Todd Rundgren-produced *We're An American Band*], so by the time we got to '76 the band was really not on good terms. Frank [Zappa, producer] had a difficult time getting us through *Good Singin', Good Playin'*. I felt bad for him.

The writing was on the wall. We were actually supposed to go tour in support of that record and we cancelled the tour. Basically, it was kind of myself and Mel and [keyboardist] Craig Frost, and then Mark was on the other side of the fence. I think he really wanted to go off on his own, and the band felt that. That's what led to the band breaking up. I think we went through a couple of meetings, in my apartment in Flint and at the studio we had ['The Swamp']. It wasn't going to be permanent, and nobody was going to take the name and go off on their own. Mark started doing his thing, and Mel and Craig and I started another band called Flint. I never thought [Grand Funk Railroad] was going to happen again – obviously it did – but I can't imagine being back with Farner again. To this day [Brewer and Schacher still lead the band], we've always put on a Grand Funk Railroad show, no matter who the members are.

Later I found out that one of the writers for The Simpsons was a big Grand Funk fan, so whenever he had a chance he would either use the name or the music or something. I thought it was a great endorsement, to be one of Homer Simpson's favourite bands.

As told to Ian Harrison

For Grand Funk updates go to grandfunkrailroad.com



“Frank Zappa had a difficult time... I felt bad for him.”

DON BREWER

Getty (2), Allen Clark

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