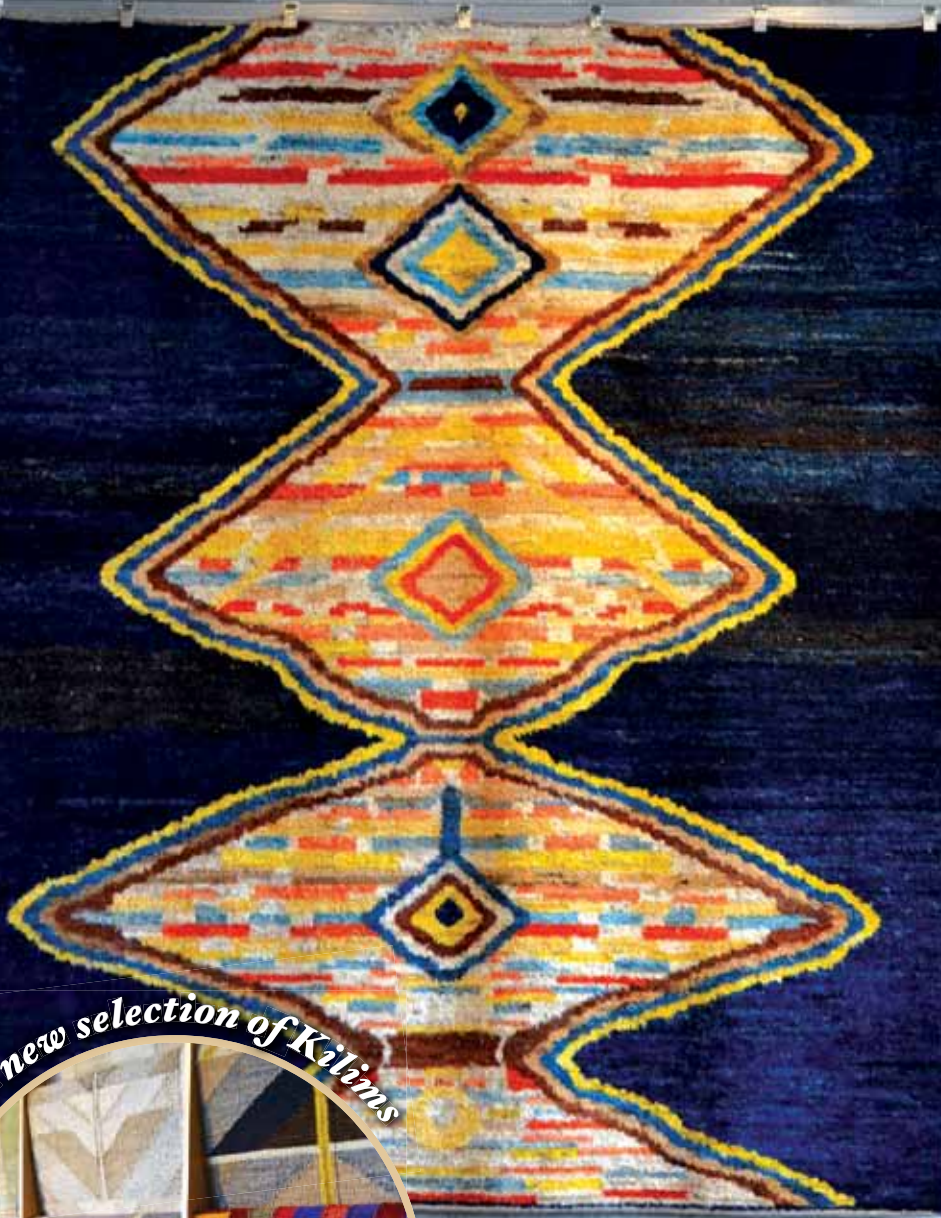


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Not
Prince

Cover Me

They say imitation is the **sincerest** form of **flattery**.
These **Maine musicians** channel icons for their day jobs.

BY OLIVIA GUNN

Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell hit us where we live when they sang “Ain’t Nothing Like the Real Thing” back in 1968. From butter to Coca-Cola, we get it. But here in Portland, there’s no denying the tribute and cover band scene can draw a crowd.

THE ARTIST FORMERLY KNOWN AS...

On April 21, 2016, **Dean Ford** awoke to condolences. “I was asleep, but my phone kept ringing and ringing. I finally answered, and it was a TV reporter asking me to come in to talk about **Prince**. I asked her

why, and that’s when I found out.” Prince, the artist Ford has echoed on Portland’s stages for many years, had died. In just a few days, Ford and his Prince tribute band, **The Beautiful Ones**, were expected to perform in Bangor and Portsmouth. “I didn’t want to ride the coattails of someone who’d just died,” Ford says. “But everyone kept saying, ‘People are going to need something.’” Ford took the gigs, even scheduling a last-minute show at **Port City Music Hall**, an emotional performance for local Prince fans. “I’d never looked out into a crowd before to see one person crying while another

was laughing and dancing.” It was a performance larger than himself, larger than a tribute. “It felt like a wake.”

So what draws fans year after year to see The Beautiful Ones’ Halloween show, “**Purple Brainz?**” For starters, Ford doesn’t consider himself a Prince “impersonator.” When Ford performs, he gives it everything—unlike, he says, many of the Prince tributes he’s seen come to the stage in the past year. “They pop up everywhere. And it’s lit a fire under me, because they’re all awful. They throw on a wig, throw on the jacket, and half-ass their way through the music.”

PORTLAND AFTER DARK

It's possible that the striking physical similarities between Ford and "the Purple One," on top of performances with Prince's own keyboard player, Dr. Fink, have boosted Ford's confidence along the way. But this isn't just a hobby—this is his livelihood. The art of imitation doesn't come without its concerns, however. "I've asked myself, do I want to have a career as another person? When I perform, I don't perform as myself at all, and I've wondered if I'm going to lose myself." Because just rendering a song doesn't lift a crowd. It takes something more, and Ford has it. "Then again, I get to go on stage, I see people having the time of their life, and it fills me with happiness. I could play 'Brown Eyed Girl' for the rest of my life and be happy. But I'll never, ever play 'Wagon Wheel.'"

Annual events like **Purple Brainz**, **Beatles Night at State Theater**, **Tribute to Stevie Wonder with Kenya Hall & Friends**, and the regularly scheduled **Tribute 2** shows at **Empire** have become driving highlights of the city's event calendar. **Lucas Salisbury**, Empire's events manager, says the hype is all down to familiarity. "People like to sing along."

THE COMEBACK

Following a long absence, The Clash of the Titans, a live series in which musicians compete while channeling their favorite bands, returned to Empire on February 15. "The community really missed it," says Lucas. "A lot of local bands developed out of the Clash shows. They bring musicians together and ignite original projects." Through June this year, music-lovers can hear some of their favorite Portland musicians, along with new performers, for just \$6. "It was common to hear The Clash was cliquy," says Salisbury. "So going forward, we're going to reach new talent and revitalize it."

Spencer Albee, creator of The Clash and Beatles Night, knows the reason behind The Clash's success. "Top-notch musicians" have a blast playing on a night "they'd otherwise be at Ruski's or on tour." According to Albee, The Clash is unlike other cover nights "that use karaoke tracks" and "schedule their cover

bands on the weekend when original bands are trying to draw a crowd."

This season, among the new faces, look for appearances from your favorite former-Empire musicians. **Renée Coolbrith** will take to the stage as Florence Welch of **Florence and The Machine** in April, and **Colleen Clark** will perform as **Fiona Apple** in May and as **Miley Cyrus** in June.

PHIT FOR A TRIBUTE

While Clash of the Titans embraces everything from hip-hop to pop, there are

some bands that just seem to speak to New England. **Pardon Me, Doug** formed in 2012 after Benjamin St. Clair, Kevin Roper, Chris Chasse, and Cameron Gray found themselves intrigued by the music of the Vermont jam band **Phish**. "Every city has a [Grateful] Dead cover band," says St. Clair. (And Portland is no

exception—**The Maine Dead Project** plays regular shows in the city). So St. Clair and Roper decided to test their talents with the

"I'd never looked out into a crowd before to see one person crying while another was laughing and dancing."

Not
Phish



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complex songs of Phish. Phish has been a Maine favorite since the days playing at the **Tree House Café** [now **Zen Chinese Bistro**], so Pardon Me, Doug didn't just stumble on any old fan base. Phish fans are "family with a 'ph,'" Roper says.

Matt Kennedy, who first saw Pardon Me, Doug at Clash of the Titans, has been listening to Phish since high school. He's even been to 33 of their live shows. Now, Kennedy is trying to see every Pardon Me, Doug performance he can. "Every time Pardon Me, Doug plays a show, it's like a mini-reunion for all the local 'phans,'" he says.

St. Clair and Roper admit they never set out to be *the* Phish tribute band, but when you're featured in an Oregon State University online course entitled, "The Philosophy School of Phish," you must be tributing the right way. On May 5 at **Portland House of Music and Events**, Pardon Me, Doug will celebrate its 100th public show, and they're promising a big one. Maybe, just maybe,

the show will attract a special guest? Remember, there ain't nothin' like the real thing, baby.

Jon Fishman, Phish's drummer and Lincolnville resident, says that Pardon Me, Doug is the ultimate compliment. Asked if he'd ever consider sitting in with the band, Jon says "he might" but that the chances of "running into them at a gig are slim."

I guess being in a band, running the Lincolnville General Store with your wife, and raising five kids can keep you busy. When he's not on the road, Jon doesn't get out much, preferring to hang out at home. "Maine is where my instruments live, but I like the woods, the space, the silence, and lack of traffic." ■



Double take: National tribute acts are ready to rock Port City Music Hall. **Start Making Sense** will cover Talking Heads on Jun. 16; and **Lez Zeppelin**, an all-female Led Zeppelin tribute band, will channel the songs and hairstyles of Robert Plant et al. on Mar. 30.

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