

This interview was in October of 2024 and was taken in five parts. The interviewee, Ed Niespodziani (EN), was a founding member of Stevens Point band The Rejects. The interviewer is Bill Berry (BB). This audio was recorded inside of Ed's home. The entire interview is 27 minutes, 23 seconds.

First clip: Ed's Favorite Memories

BB (00:03): So here we are with Eddie Niespodziani, one of the original members of The Rejects, who also played in The Orbits and had a long musical history here in Portage County. Ed lives in Indiana but he's in Stevens Point here in October of 2024, and we're asking Ed to reflect a little bit about those wonderful days of rock music when we were all young. Ed, what are some of your favorite memories of those times?

EN (00:35): That's a tough question because there's a whole bunch of them. We, when we started the band, it was kind of just a fluke. We were just like everybody else at that time. Everybody wanted to be in a band, be like the Beatles. And so it was kind of a fluke. But we found out when we had our first gig that, oh hey, that works pretty well. Our first gig was at Wisconsin Rapids. And it went actually pretty well, given who we were. That was our first time in public. And so it was real, real interesting then. We also had a number of gigs where we didn't know how the hell we played there. I mean, there were some, there were some gigs where we'd walk in and there'd be nobody there. Not a soul in the place. We played one gig where we traveled all the way, way up north somewhere. I can't remember exactly where. But we finally get up there and it was like 42 below zero with a wind chill. And it was pretty damn cold in that bar. But we didn't play because nobody came out in that kind of weather. So it was a very different time. And what was interesting about the time is that everybody more or less listened to the same music. So what we were playing was popular stuff that everybody could relate to. Whereas today, everybody's broken off into, "well, I don't listen to that, I want to listen to this". And so it's a whole different audience today. Which is interesting for my son who's in a band and they play all stuff from the 70s and 80s. And yet, it's so popular they sell out everywhere they go. Music kind of changes.

BB (03:19): Was that you think because of AM radio and that pulled it all together?

EN (03:28): Well, at that time rock and roll was rock and roll. So it wasn't soft rock or hard rock or metal or anything else. It was rock and roll. So everybody listened to the same thing.

Second clip: Ed on Point Music

EN (00:03): Well, the music scene in Point at that time was really interesting because Stevens Point was actually a mecca where we could go anywhere in the state and people would ask us where we're from and we'd say Stevens Point and they would go, oh yeah, that's the place where all the musicians go. And that's what was happening here is that a lot of musicians were coming into Point because there was such a broad music scene here and they wanted to get in on that. So there were quite a few musicians from all over the state who would come here in the central part of Wisconsin, just a little bitty town of 16,000 people.

BB (00:56): The Orbis were right in the middle of that? The Rejects were right in the middle of that?

EN (01:00): The Orbis and Rejects were in the middle of that.

BB (01:02): So what were some of the venues that you played at in Stevens Point in Portage County?

EN (01:10): Well, as I said, the schools and that kind of thing. As far as bars go, we didn't play too many of those here in town. Don't know why, but we just never did. But we played at bars all over the state and we'd

always be asked back to come again next month or whatever. But here we never really played at any of the bars.

BB (01:42): You did play at one of the most famous venues in Wisconsin, that is the Indian Crossing Casino.

EN (01:48): Oh yeah.

BB (01:49): You had some fun stories about playing there. What was the story about when you played with Buffalo Springfield?

EN (01:55): We played with Buffalo Springfield and it was interesting because the owner really liked us there. And so he was bringing Buffalo Springfield in and he said, well, I've got the opening band for you. And Buffalo Springfield said, no, no, no, we have our own band that we bring in for opening. And the owner looked at him and said, well, that's fine, then I won't hire you. So we got the gig. And it was interesting because we met Stills and Young and Richie Fury and all of those guys. And it was an interesting night because Neil Young was upset with something. Don't know what, don't remember what it was or I don't think we even knew at the time what it was. But he played the whole night behind his amp, not facing the crowd.

BB (02:59): That was quite an accomplishment to play at the Indian Crossing Casino in Waupaca.

EN (03:05): Oh yeah. We played there about once a month. So it was, that was the big gig of the time. If you could play at the casino, you made it.

BB (03:21): What about, you mentioned that you played at Maria High School, which at the time was the Catholic High School for girls.

EN (03:31): Right.

BB (03:32): And that was supervised by the nuns and you had a story about how, about slow dancing as I recall?

EN (03:41): Yep. Well, we were instructed by the nuns that we could only play so many slow dances. We couldn't play too many. They didn't like that. And they would walk around during the slow dance with a flashlight and they would shine it between the couples. And if the light didn't go through and touch the wall behind them, they were too close. And the nuns made sure that they separated some.

BB (04:11): There was music at the Army or the Rec Center at that time too, wasn't there?

EN (04:16): Yeah. There was a lot of music there. Battle of the Bands was one of the big venues where we played against the Orbits, of course, and we played against other bands from other cities who they would bring in and have a battle of the bands.

Third clip: Ed on Rejects and Orbits

EN (00:02): The original members of The Rejects, it actually started with Dale Bartkowiak and myself. Dale and I have been friends since first grade and we did all kinds of things together in our youth. We were both Native American dancers and those kinds of things. So we decided to start this band. So we got together and we were sitting around one day trying to figure out how does this work? How does a band work? And we of course thought about Joe Ebel because he was a child prodigy. He knew his music. Joe was very good and he still is.

Then we had to figure out who's going to be on drums and we got my brother Thom who took over drums. And then there was a question of, okay, well, what do I do? And I said, well, I'll be the singer. Okay. So we would sit up in Dale's room and we would listen to song after song after song. Maybe we'd listen to this song 15, 20 times because that's how we learned all our songs. We just played the record and picked up what the chords were and all of that and that's how we learned them. I couldn't read music. Joe could. Dale couldn't. Thom couldn't. And then when my brother Thom graduated and joined the service, we got Pat Piffner who has been a professional drummer all his life. He played with everybody from the San Diego Symphony to the Moody Blues to you name it, he probably played with them. So that was the basic lineup at the end. It was Dale, me, Joe, and Pat Piffner.

BB (02:39): And then as many bands do, lineups change and things like that. You had a good run with The Rejects, probably about 64 to 68.

EN (02:54): Yeah, 67, 68, yeah.

BB (02:57): And then suddenly you were in The Orbits, which was probably the band that people saw you in competition with. It probably wasn't a competition but you were the two big ones.

EN (03:09): Yeah.

BB (03:09): How did that come about that you joined The Orbits?

EN (03:11): Well, it's the same thing with them as far as members changing. They were in the process of the lead guitar player quit and all this kind of thing. So they were in the process of rebuilding too. And when I quit The Rejects, or The Rejects broke up, Ron Hanson asked me if I would be interested in joining The Orbits.

BB (03:44): And at that time you were playing keyboard.

EN (03:49): Well, I don't know if you could call it that. I had a keyboard. But it was interesting because in The Rejects, our lead guitar player, a guy by the name of Ray Goddard, quit. He just walked up one day and said, by the way, I'm quitting next week. And we had a gig that week. And so Joe said, well, no problem. I'll take over lead guitar and Ed, you play keyboards. I never played keyboards before, so I said, yeah, okay, I'll do that. We practiced a couple of times and we did play a gig that weekend. I was up there most of the time on the keyboards with the keyboard turned off because I didn't know what the hell I was playing. So we took a break and this guy comes up to me and says, how long have you been playing keyboards? And I said, oh, about a week. He said, boy, you're pretty good for being a week. But I didn't tell him it was off most of the time.

Fourth clip, Ed on Stage Show

EN (00:02): When I finally got the teaching job in Columbus, Indiana, which to this day I'm convinced was an act of God, because I was working for Indiana University at the time, and we had a program that we were doing at the University with the public schools in Indianapolis, and the federals came in to give us an evaluation, and they liked it so much they said, "well, we're going to take this program and send it all over the United States". We were all excited about that, and three weeks later we all got fired. We all got a pink slip and that was the end of the program. So here I am without a job, my wife is pregnant with Nick, and what are we going to do? I don't have a job. So we went from Indianapolis down to Columbus, Indiana, and I was going to have an interview with Cummins Engine Company, the biggest maker of diesel engines in the United States, and so I came down for that interview, but on the way down I said, "I really don't want to do that. I want to teach". So I said, "I'm going to just stop in the school system and tell them I'm here". So I stopped in, and the

lady who was usually behind the desk, who was the gatekeeper, you couldn't get past her, she was sick. So the lady who took over closed my file and said, "okay, it's up to date". So she called the superintendent upstairs, and this is two weeks before school starts. She called the superintendent upstairs and said, "hey, I got this guy who's interested, what do I do with him?" And the superintendent asked, "what does he teach?" "Social studies." "Send him up." Ten minutes before I got there, the guy whose job I got called and quit. And so I was in the right place at the right time. I started out at the junior high, then I moved to the high school. And in the high school I developed a class called Social History of the 50s, 60s, and 70s. I figured, you can't teach that without the music, because the music will tell you the whole story of what was happening at that time. And so I decided I would put on this concert with a live band, all students, and it would show how music both reflected and influenced what was going on in society. The first show we did was during my class period, so, during the school day. It went pretty well, so I decided to do a second year. The second year, the auditorium was half full, because kids were cutting class to come see this thing. They told me then, "okay, you can't do that anymore. That's the end of that". So I said, "okay, can I do it at night?" And they agreed that I could do it at night. So I started a program called American Pie; the Magical History Tour. We had a theme every year. So one theme would be, So You Say You Want a Revolution. And we talk about all the social turmoil that was going on at the time in the 60s. One year we did The Rock and Country, taking a look at how rock music reflects American society, and then how country music reflects American society. We did one on the Magical Her-Story Tour, which was all women. We had all girls do all the singing, and their mothers gave the commentary to link the songs with the history. That was basically my job, but on that one we just had the mothers do it. We did one where it was strictly American music, where we started out with actually a Native American dance group came in, started on their drum, did their song, and then the band would come on and segue into their drum beat, and we would do a rock song. So we did all kinds of different things with that.

BB (05:42): It was very popular in the community too.

EN (05:45): Quite. We sold out every year, and it was a case where I had a professional band. I tried doing it with students, but with the students, they would say, "okay, that person can't sing the song in G, so let's do it in D". And they would look at me like, "yeah, how do you do that?" So I got professional musicians who came in and were actually the band. But the kids did all of the singing. We had a backup group of five girls who did all the backup singing. The groups had to dress the part, so if they were the Supremes, they had to dress like the Supremes. And the parents jumped in on this, and they would make sure the kids had the long gloves and the long gowns and all of that. We even had a professional hairdresser come in to do the hair for everybody. So they would fit the time that they were representing. We had a seventeen-piece brass section. We had a seven-piece flute section. We had all of that kind of thing.

Fifth clip, Ed on Yacht Rock Review

BB (00:02): Well, Ed, your music career that started in Stevens Point, went on to Indiana and many other locations, has continued because your son Nick is a key member of a very popular band. Can you tell us about that?

EN (00:20): Yeah. Nick, when he was young, would constantly be listening to music because I would have music on all the time. We thought he was going to be our scientist. He was exceptionally bright. He even won what's called the Well Scholarship to go to Indiana University in Indiana. The Well Scholarship paid for all four years, all of your expenses, and you would go overseas to any university attached to IU in any foreign country you wanted to. So he went to England and did that. When he got to Indiana University, actually his senior year in high school, he picked up a guitar and that science dream went out the window. He decided, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to do this". And so he got to Indiana University and he took a number of courses, all in music. Although his major was English, he had all these music classes. He was in a group called the Soul

Brothers? Soul Sisters? Soul Review, that's what it was called. He became a singer with that group. It was interesting because they would come out on stage and everybody in the group was black, except Nick, he was the only white guy they had. But he played in that, then he started his band at Indiana University, moved to Atlanta because the music scene there was better, and started the group called the Yacht Rock Review. They did Yacht Rock, which is the term given to all the music from the 70s and 80s, like Hall & Oates and those groups. So he started a group called Yacht Rock and it was interesting because he had all these musicians from Atlanta and seven out of the nine members were from Indiana University. So they started that and it was actually a fluke because they were playing their own original music and the band just wasn't going where he wanted it to go. So they were sitting around one day talking about what they should do and they came up with this idea, "well let's just play one set of this real schmaltzy stuff. Like Hall & Oates and all that". So they practiced that and went out and played and it became very popular. All of a sudden they were wanted, they were playing in all kinds of places. And so they changed the band around a bit. They ended up with seven guys, all of them professional musicians. And they started the group called Yacht Rock Review and it just took off. They've been together now for 14 years and they will do a show every summer in Atlanta called Yacht Rock, the Religious Festival thing, whatever the name is, I can't think of it. But they would start this program and they would actually bring in the original artists. Like they played with Toto, they played with Hall & Oates, they played with anybody you can think of who became popular at that time. They would be the backup band and these guys would come in and sing and play and stuff like that. Then they really took off, they got a booking agency out of Nashville, Tennessee, for Yacht Rock Review. This agency booked everybody from Willie Nelson to you name it, they booked them. And they took in Yacht Rock Review and Yacht Rock Review was the only cover band that they had. They played everywhere, all the way from Mexico to Greece, just, and everywhere in the United States you can think of.

BB (05:53): Must be very proud, Eddie.

BB (05:57): Yeah, and they're still doing it today. They just finished a tour this summer. Last summer they played with Kenny Loggins all summer. This summer they play with Train and REO all summer. Yeah, but they're still touring on their own. So they're quite popular and wherever they go they sell out everything.

BB (06:20): So The Rejects are still going in some ways.

EN (06:25): In some sense, yeah, they're still going.