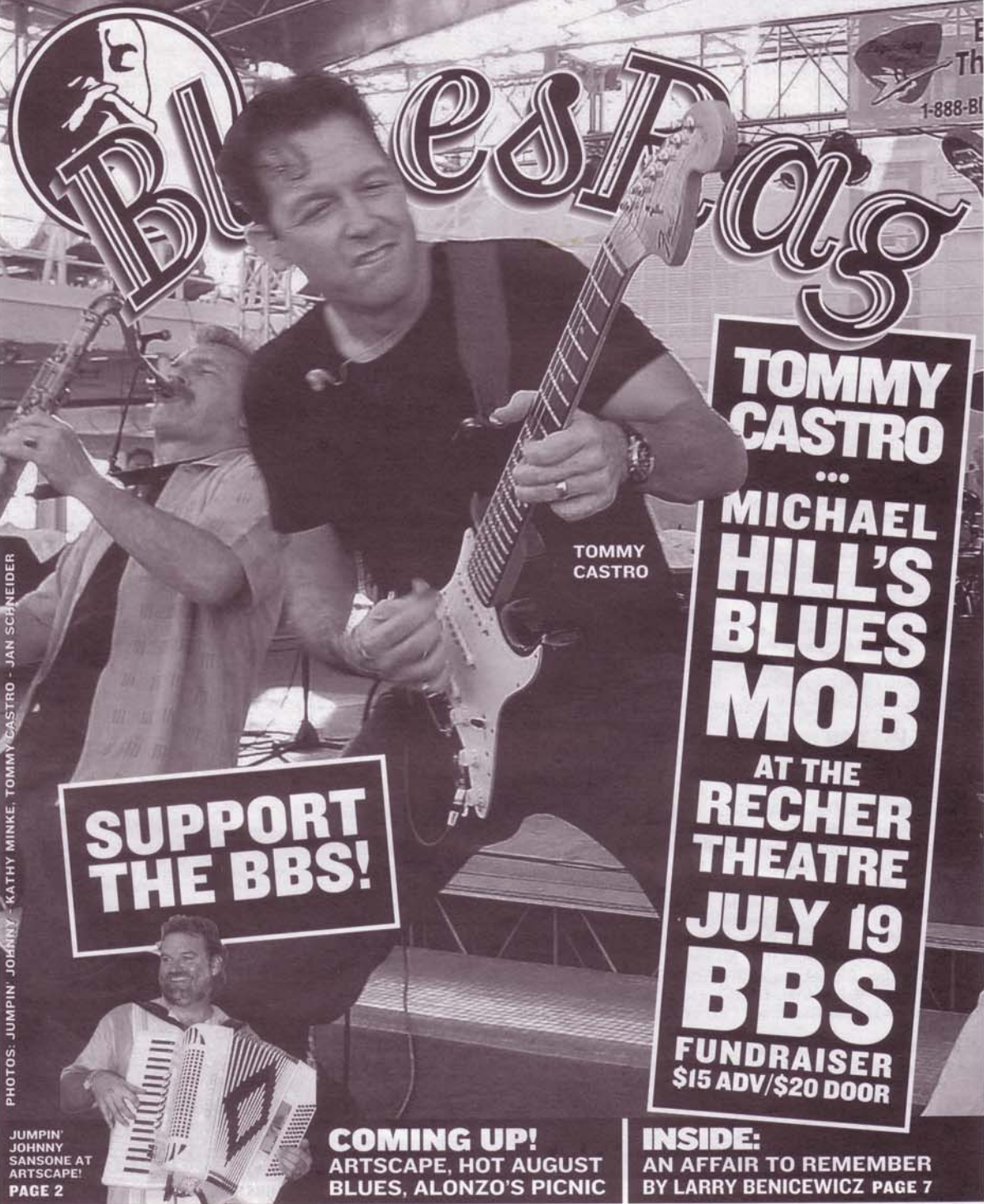


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PHOTOS: JUMPIN' JOHNNY - KATHY MINKE, TOMMY CASTRO - JAN SCHNEIDER

JUMPIN' JOHNNY SANSONE AT ARTSCAPE!  
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**INSIDE:**  
AN AFFAIR TO REMEMBER  
BY LARRY BENICEWICZ PAGE 7



The Spindles. PHOTO: LARRY BENICIEWICZ

## AFFAIR TO REMEMBER

talkin' about." And many "amens" were heard all around. In truth, they hardly resembled the slender and willowy teens that posed for their first promotion shot, but nevertheless strutted their stuff to the best of their abilities before the appreciative onlookers.

I hardly recognized soul singer extraordinaire, Kenny Hamber, as he came onstage. He now shaved his head and, being the huge man that he is, exuded a rather menacing air. But having met him on many occasions at the Covingtons' New Haven Lounge in north Baltimore, I can assure you that he's kindly and eminently approachable, always in the mood to talk music. Sweating profusely, this gravelly-voiced crooner, backed by a trio of young black girls, put his heart and soul into each number and soon had the audience eating out of the palm of his hand. A true professional, he was completely at ease and comfortable before such a throng and, in short, he delivered the goods. They, indeed, got their money's worth and more.

Kenny, who now resides in Connecticut and also received a lifetime achievement award, was

born in Baltimore and cut his teeth first in gospel music, singing at the Weldon Baptist Church. This led to several local doo-whop ensembles, who, by nature, specialized in four and five part vocal harmonies, often a cappella. Although Baltimore was never considered a blues capital, it could boast of several, influential, pioneering groups such as these, including the Orioles, Cardinals, and Magic Tones.

In fact, Kenny later became lead singer of another, the Hitchhikers. In 1960 he recorded "Tears In My Eyes," backed by such vocal aggregates for both Spar records and local Zenette, both versions which became instant collector's items worth over a hundred dollars apiece, as well as his two singles for the aforementioned Jimmy Bishop's Arctic records of Philadelphia in the late 60s. In between, Kenny also recorded for the obscure De-Jac records and later in 1969 for the equally arcane Mean records. His role in Baltimore R&B history is significant and deserves a thorough biography and we've agreed to a tete a tete. I hope I'm up for the task, so involved was he in the community

music scene of that period.

Next up after Kenny Gamber was a group that needed no introduction, the Intruders. The original cast of characters—Sam "Little Sonny" Brown, Eugene Doughty, Phil Terry, Robert "Big Sonny" Edwards, and (later) Bobby Starr Ferguson—were heavy hitters in the national soul market of the 60s and 70s, with huge smashes such as "Cowboys To Girls," "Love Is Like A Baseball Game," "When We Get Married," "She's A Winner," "I Wanna Know Your Name," and "I'll Always Love My Momma." This prolific Philadelphia ensemble, originally a doo-whop exponent, which launched its career in 1961 on George Goldner's NY City-based Gowen as the 4 Intruders, profited immensely from its dozen-year association with local writers and producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff and appeared on no less than three of their City of Brotherly Love labels during that span of time (1965-77)—Gamble, Philadelphia International, and TSOP—before disbanding in the late 70s.

In 1980, Eugene Doughty formed a new group, singing tenor without the others, and continued as manager after retiring for health reasons. Eventually, though, Bobby Starr, who first came aboard in 1970, temporarily replacing Little Sonny, rejoined this more recent incarnation. In the mid-90s both Doughty and Little Sonny died, leaving Starr as the only survivor. And I could not ascertain whether the other two charter members—Terry or Edwards—accompanied Starr onstage this night.

Whatever this most current configuration, they put on an amazing demonstration of both singing in unison and choreography. Still, it did not sit well with me that this group was included on tonight's program. After all, it was to be a celebration of Baltimore's contribution to soul. Were they added merely to lend credibility to the whole package or just to jack up the price of admission? As far as I was concerned, the slate, even without the Intruders, could have stood on its own merits. And if you needed another local folk hero to fill a slot, what about bringing Al Brown & his Tunetoppers out of mothballs, the same horn man who created the dance craze, the Madison in 1960? He'd do just nicely.

But the powers that be in their

infinite wisdom did see fit that the top headliner tonight was to be our own Softones, although the vocal group's resume is not nearly as extensive as its predecessor to the platform.

This Baltimore quartet, which tours widely both nationally and overseas, is composed of lead tenor Marvin Brown with backup vocalists Elton Lynch, Steve Jackson, and Byron Summerville. It should not be confused with the two rather esoteric doo-whop ensembles who recorded in the 50s—the Soft Tones on Sampson in 1955 or the Soft-Tones on CeeBee (1062), whose only recording on this latter label, "Oh Why," has evolved into a \$4000 collector's treasure. Instead, this Charm City-based outfit is much younger, having commenced recording 1973 on Avco, the same NY City-headquartered label that put the Stylistics on the map, and later in the mid-70s on H&L of Englewood Cliffs, NJ, which also contracted the Stylistics during that same time frame.

By this time, however, I had run out of film. But I can report that the Softones more than lived up to their name. Talk about smooth as silk, seamless vocal harmonies.

Well, there you have it. Sorry you missed the show. But since it is billed as the "first annual" reunion, I can only suppose that a reprise is intended down the line sometime, hopefully in the near future. We're not getting any younger and we've already lost a few of these former stars of the glory days of soul along the way. These kinds of happenings do not receive front page coverage. So keep a sharp eye for the fine print in the entertainment section. Take it from me. Be it this time or next time. It will definitely be worth the while.



Kenny Hamber. PHOTO: LARRY BENICIEWICZ

