

Charleston City Paper

OCTOBER 19, 2005

## In Hot Pursuit

In search of sexy retro remixers The Detroit Cobras

BY SHAWNTÉ SALABERT



**The Detroit Cobras  
w/ The Reigning Sound  
Thurs. Oct. 20  
9 p.m.  
\$10, \$8 (adv.)  
Village Tavern  
1055 Johnnie Dodds Blvd.  
884-6311**

**[www.village-tavern.com](http://www.village-tavern.com)**

The Detroit Cobras found their way into my CD player early last summer, via a Michigan-heavy mixed CD made by a Michigan-born friend of mine. In between tracks by Sufjan Stevens and The Dirtbombs, the single, retro opening note of The Cobras' "Shout Bama Lama" sounded, followed by Rachel Nagy's sultry, yet lackadaisical rock 'n' sass voice singing what sounded like a lot of nonsense that mostly rhymed with "Alabama," from what I could tell. Jibberish or not, before I knew it, I became one of those morons who press the "repeat" button before the song even ends ... over and over and over again.

The Detroit Cobras are catchy, sing-along-in-the-car infectious, that's for damn sure. They take old, generally obscure B-side rock 'n' roll and R&B tuneage (The Cobras' version of "Shout Bama Lama" owes its lineage to Otis Redding) and infuse it with sexy punk rock spirit. They're not a cover band; they're a live Motor City remix machine, swathed in tattoos, leopard print, and old jeans.

My new musical love affair found me in hot pursuit this summer, once I learned The Cobras were making a rare Southern stop in Charleston this fall. I was headed to New York and they were headed to New York, and dammit, we were going to meet in the middle somehow. I was going to look at Rachel's dirty blonde Bettie Page bangs, ready my pen and paper, and ask, "How the hell did you guys dream this shit up?"

The mechanics of the Cobras' history are easy enough to understand ... the rag-tag group (Nagy hadn't even sung a note before she joined the band) basically said, "Hey, let's play some songs we dig," and started raiding the music vaults in 1995. In a city whose place on the musical map is cemented by Motown, and more recently, a revived version of garage rock, the Cobras' lustful mix of both found a ready audience, spearheaded by Nagy's come-hither voice and founding member Mary Ramirez's heady guitar.

But I wanted to know more than the press release basics ... you don't hear a song as sexy and inventive as the Cobras' "Shout Bama Lama," and a voice like Nagy's, and easily cast them aside. How did the Cobras transcend being just a cool cover band?

After a series of pestering inquiries and despite a lack of response from the band's new label, the slowly evolving Bloodshot, I figured I'd take the backstage route, a sort of lame version of guerrilla journalism. On one of the hottest, stickiest August nights ever boiled up from the depths of Hell, I got off of the F train on Manhattan's Lower East Side and joined the incredibly long line snaked down Houston in front of the Mercury Lounge. The Cobras' show was an early one and the sun still shone on an entire M.A.C. counter's worth of eyeliner and red lipstick waiting in line.

After many fidgety minutes with no movement in the line, a couple five feet behind me asked no one in particular, "Hey, so who are we in line to see, anyway?" They beat a hasty retreat when they were answered with resounding glares from the Cobras' faithful.

Sadly, the line never reached its ultimate destination, leaving a lot of disappointed hopefuls to head off in search of a \$5 beer -- myself included. The show had been packed from the get-go, fueled by a heady combination of excitement for the Cobras' newest release, *Baby*, and well, just the opportunity to see them tear it up live. I sulked down the street, dejected that everyone else was in on the secret, and they got there before me.

Round two found a more successful connection with Bloodshot and a chance

to get some answers. Nagy's voice sounds exactly like I would expect it to -- except it's on my answering machine at midnight, apologizing for either a) missing my call, b) not returning it, or c) some combination of the two. She spits out a short list of possible callback phone numbers, none of which are her own, and tosses out a laugh with the words, "I hope I didn't ruin Christmas."

Sure, I'm still holding out hope that we'll all suck down some PBR together after a show, chatting about why the band decided to include their first-ever original, the innuendo-ridden "Hot Dog (Watch me Eat)," on *Baby*. Or why they allowed their version of "Cha Cha Twist" to be featured on a commercial. Or how they weathered the White Stripes-induced PR storm that descended on their Midwestern home.

But for now, them's the breaks.