

# THE WEEKEND WARRIORS

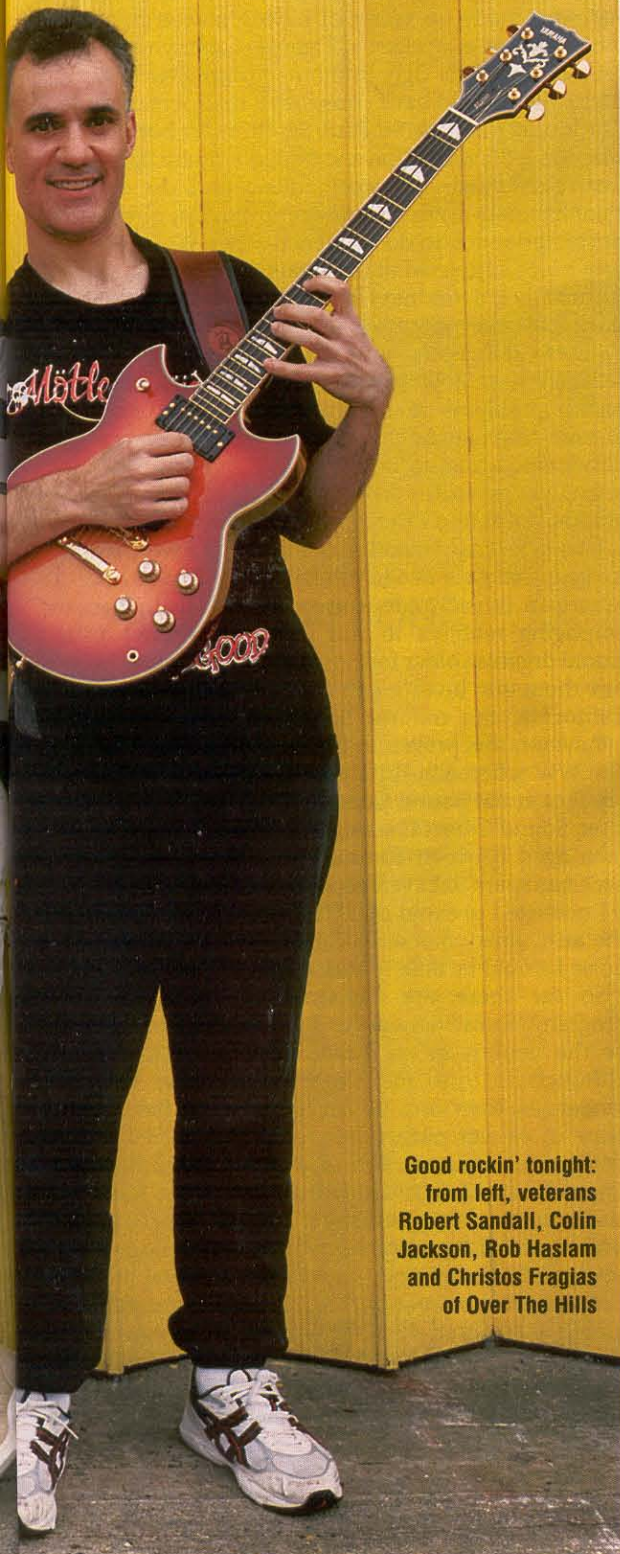
A national music organisation is encouraging middle-aged musicians to fulfil their



rock star fantasies. Robert Sandall and his new-found band members swapped

their air guitars for the real thing and took to the stage recently in Harlow, Essex to 'feel the noise'.

Photographs by **Gideon Mendel**



**Good rockin' tonight:**  
from left, veterans  
Robert Sandall, Colin  
Jackson, Rob Haslam  
and Christos Fragias  
of Over The Hills

ROCK MUSIC USED TO BE VIEWED AS A PHASE that a lot of us went through in our youth. Not any more, and certainly not tonight at The Square in Harlow. Our youth, it turns out, was just a phase that rock music went through before I and my three bandmates got together a little over a month ago. We've decided that it's never too late to make an exhilarating guitar-y noise. It will be an error-strewn noise if we're not careful, quite possibly a downright embarrassing noise even. And in public too.

Whatever happens on this autumn Sunday evening shouldn't affect, adversely or otherwise, any career paths. No agents are waiting to sign us up (I am practically certain of that). More vitally, no day jobs are in jeopardy. Tomorrow Christos, lead guitar and vocals, will carry on being a senior business analyst (revenue management) with one of the big clearing banks. Bass player Colin will still be an electrical engineer. Rob the drummer's role as a project manager will take him, as it has for the past month, to Nottingham to oversee the fitting out of a new office building. Meanwhile our rhythm guitarist and backing vocalist (me) has another journalistic deadline looming: in this case writing up how the four of us – who have only met five times before, and each of them in a rehearsal studio – came to play our first and probably last gig together.

We go by the rather waggish name of Over The Hills. Also on tonight's bill at The Square are other recently minted rock bands whose members are old enough to know better. We've all been brought together by the Harlow branch of a national organisation called Weekend Warriors, which puts rock musicians of a certain age – either lapsed or late developers – into temporary groups, gives them free rehearsal time and in return requires them to perform, for one night only, in front of a real audience in a proper rock venue.

The Square, I notice, is certainly that. In recent weeks it has hosted concerts by some fairly famous new bands, including The Feeling. Cosmic Rough Riders will be here soon and there's an intriguing show coming up with a group calling themselves The Strange Death Of Liberal England.

Being a council-run joint, the walls are covered with notices prohibiting young people from doing things: ►



**Group effort: Over The Hills rehearsing – the day before the gig the band were still sounding ‘a bit ragged’**

## My guitar was still there in the attic, dusty but serviceable

◀ taking drugs in the toilets, obviously, as well as behaving “inappropriately” on the dance floor, whatever that might mean. My favourite veto is the one that bans the wearing of hoods “up” in the venue, presumably to discourage potential muggers. All in all, the sense that a group of drug-free, law-abiding oldsters like us don’t really belong here is pretty strong. But being Weekend Warriors, of course we don’t give a stuff.

Which doesn’t mean we aren’t nervous. Poor Rob, who only took up the drums two years ago “because I realised it was now or never”, hasn’t performed in public before and looks distinctly troubled. Christos has been a Warrior before, but only once. He is downing a large Jack Daniels and Coke in preparation for what will be his second terrifying encounter with an audience. He’s citing the importance of “staying focused”, and warning about the on-stage monitor speakers cutting out, leaving us adrift in noise, which was what happened the last time he played.

Colin and I are less fazed by the occasion, having performed in places like this when we were young. We gave up playing in semi-professional bands about 25 years ago, ahead of our 30th birthdays and the onset of proper jobs and family responsibilities. As you did then.

We had something then called the Generation Gap, which meant you had to stop having fun and begin

“real life”. To which we Weekend Warriors cry, rather belatedly: “Generation Gap? What Generation Gap?”

It still felt vaguely wrong, in our day, for middle-aged blokes to play in rock bands unless they were the Rolling Stones. The Punks, with their aggressive, sneery talk of “old hippies” and “boring old farts”, had called time on a whole generation of Sixties bands, many of whom, like The Who and Led Zeppelin, had at that stage opted for early retirement.

If anybody had told us rock-crazed baby-boomers, accustomed as we were to Margaret Thatcher’s joyless sermons, that the country would eventually be led by a PM who made no secret of having played in a band while he was a student at Oxford – and who recently reunited with his Ugly Rumours group after a 30-year break – we would have considered that person insane. The idea of Sir Mick, Sir Paul, Sir Elton, Sir Bob and Eric Clapton CBE would have sounded equally bonkers. It wasn’t so much that rock music and the political establishment were natural enemies; they simply had never had much to do with each other. Which was the way it was supposed to be. It was an age thing.

Since then a fondness for loud guitar music seems to have become something that unites, rather than divides, teenagers and their grandparents. The sexagenarian Rolling Stones – notwithstanding the health problems that have beset Charlie, Keef and Ronnie – are playing their biggest tour yet. Every kid, of either sex, wants to be in a band and put his or her music on websites like MySpace. Sales of electric guitars, amps and drums have gone through the roof.

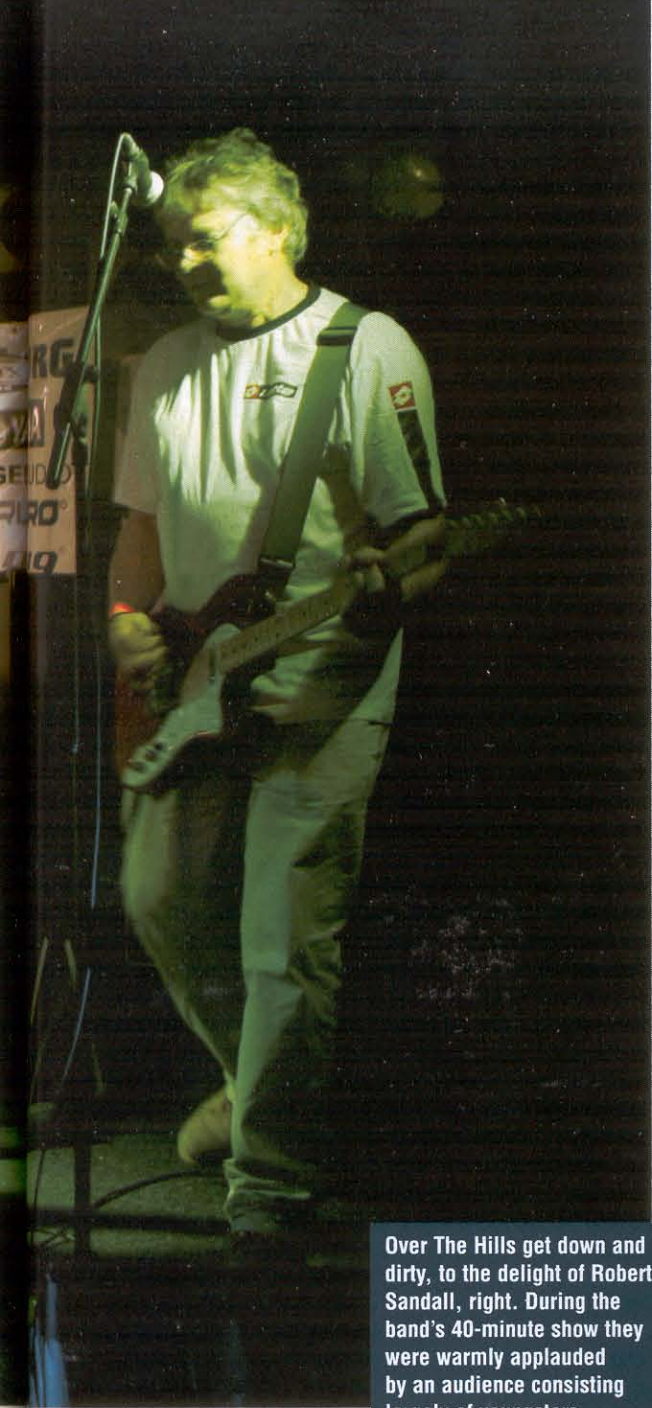
It was clever anticipation of this boom in the demand for gear that gave rise to Weekend Warriors. In 1993 the American music trade association NAMM began encouraging retailers to run free programmes which would organise older folk into bands and, it was hoped, lure them into investing in new equipment. Starting in California, the natural home of all Peter Pan-like behaviour, this proved to be a big hit, and in 2005 the first WW scheme in Britain was launched in Stockton-on-Tees at the Sound Control store. Four programmes later, Sound Control has signed up 70 Warriors, mostly men aged between 40 and 60. The shop claims that each has spent, on average, a staggering £1,500 on gear.

I managed to avoid that. The guitar was still there in the attic, dusty but serviceable. Good enough for the noise I would be able to extract from it, anyway.

So far there are 21 stores operating Warrior programmes in this country. Tones in Harlow proved to be the nearest to my home in north London, and although it took me slightly longer to drive to rehearsals than any of my designated bandmates, none of us was particularly local. Colin lived on the other side of Essex, Rob was based in Suffolk, and Christos had an awkward journey round the M25 from his home in Buckinghamshire. Tones had sorted us out with a good little rehearsal room, fully equipped with amps and microphones, in a light industrial business park near Harlow station. We met every Saturday for a month and rocked diligently for at least four hours.

Playing in a band again for the first time since 1982 felt, well, different. In the first place, none of us smoked. In my day, just about everybody in bands ▶





Over The Hills get down and dirty, to the delight of Robert Sandall, right. During the band's 40-minute show they were warmly applauded by an audience consisting largely of youngsters



◀ was a determined smoker, roll-ups were king and rehearsals were invariably conducted in a thick, warm fug. Now, whenever we took a break, it appeared that mineral water was the new tobacco.

Another point of difference was how tiring it all felt. I don't remember ever noticing how much an electric guitar weighed. Over The Hills taught me that standing with a Fender Telecaster round your neck throughout a Saturday afternoon can take a terrible toll on a man's back. At various points I found myself playing sitting down – unheard of in any of the bands of my twenties and certainly not remotely rock'n'roll. The one who suffered most from the sheer exertion of playing was Rob the drummer. It was a cruel irony that our least confident member musically had opted for a job that would have taken it out of a man far younger and fitter.

Our chosen repertoire didn't help, frankly. The songs we all felt most comfortable with tended to be big metal ballads like *Sweet Child O' Mine* by Guns N' Roses or Whitesnake's *Love Ain't No Stranger*. Aside from the fact that they were all recorded by famous groups in the Seventies and Eighties, the one thing that our selections had in common was that they were meant to be played loud, which was inevitably hard on Rob. Not even the spreadsheets which Christos emailed us with all the lyrics and chords could prevent Rob from losing his way as his left leg seized up, or his arms began to ache. At our last rehearsal, the day before the gig, we still sounded a bit ragged.

But that's just tough, because tonight's the night and there's no backing out now. We're about to go on stage in front of an audience of a hundred or so punters, many of whom look young enough to be our children. Which is exactly what many of them are.

By now we've got butterflies in our stomachs, our legs have gone a bit wobbly – and we're on.

*Some time later...* It's funny how the audience suddenly disappears from view when you're finally up there, blinded by the spotlights. And how quickly nervousness translates into intense concentration. Most of all it's a huge relief to discover that after all those hours of rehearsals and long slogs up the M11, playing live rock music is indeed – is still – one of the most uplifting experiences known to (older) man.

Predictably, three of us make a number of glaring errors but we generally start and finish together. Our leader Christos is note-perfect; Rob plays better than I've ever heard him. On the far side of the stage, Colin seems to be having a great time. Our 40 minutes goes by in a flash of noise, interspersed with what sounds, rather astonishingly, like genuine applause. Then we're off. The feeling of elation we all feel is vividly expressed by our four idiotic, face-splitting grins.

The man from Tones comes up to tell us we're the best bunch of Weekend Warriors he's staged so far. He probably says that to all the bands in the hope that they'll be stopping at his shop soon to check out some gear. But given that the weekend's over, and nothing else I've done lately has been half as much fun, I decide to believe him anyway. ■

*For more details on Weekend Warriors, see the Music Industries Association website, [mia.org.uk](http://mia.org.uk)*