

Cobras face musical reality they're making an album

By BILL BENTLEY

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A seasoned rock 'n' roll musician and a veteran of one of America's seminal Sixties bands with a half-dozen albums to its credit, was once asked why his group decided to make its first album. Without pause, the person answered, "Because that's what bands do — make records."

True. Beyond the endless nights of live shows and untold hours of rehearsal, bands somehow do not become "official" until they have their music stamped onto plastic, enclosed in a record jacket and merchandised in the nation's stores. Re-

gardless of regional notoriety and word-of-mouth exposure, a rock 'n' roll band isn't real until there is a record with its name on it for sale. After all, how many people had heard of the Knack, or for that matter, the Beatles or any other band, before the music splashed across the country via records on the radio and in the stores?

All of which prefaces what will be happening at Armadillo World Headquarters Saturday night when Austin's Cobras take the stage and the studio engineers at Onion Audio start rolling the tapes. The band is taking a stab at music business reality — long odds in a short deck, but



The Cobras are recording their first album.

And that's reality.

The Cobras' live recording session is scheduled at Armadillo World Headquarters Saturday night. Doors

open at 8 p.m. The band appears on "A Look At Austin" on Channel 36 at 2:30 p.m. Saturday and 4:30 p.m. Sunday.

the only game around — and making a record.

The Cobras are longtime flag-wavers for the proud tradition of rhythm and blues road bands, and have also become local heroes for their ability to rally local audiences around non-country music in the mid-'70s — no small feat here in the middle of Willie Jeff Jennings country.

With vocalist Paul Ray fronting the show, and tag team guitarists Denny Freeman and Stevie Vaughan fanning the fires, the Cobras made a distinct mark on Austin's musical city life. Their Tuesday night "Cobra Club" performances at Soap Creek became an institution, and in the Austin *Surf*'s third annual Readers' Music Poll in 1977, the group received the "Band of the Year" award. A single released then, "Texas Clover"/"Other Days," was a fixture on KOKE-FM's playlist. The future appeared straight ahead.

And even when a throat operation and recurring vocal problems caused Paul Ray's replacement by singer Bobby Hocking, the Cobras kept going strong. Tours throughout the South helped build a strong regional base, and press reviews praised the band as an outfit able to hold their own with headliners like Albert King and John Lee Hooker.

Hocking's departure a year ago put the Cobras at another musical crossroads, creating questions as to how they could continue their climb minus a strong lead singer. Drummer Rodney Craig didn't wait long to supply the answer. Moving the microphone back by his drums, Craig took over the singing spot. A low-key search ensued for a Ray/Hocking replacement, although they were sometimes joined onstage by Angela Strehli for searing renditions of rhythm and blues classics. The Cobras re-established themselves without appearing to miss a beat.

Enter Gerry Storm, permanent Cobra fan as well as, until two weeks ago, secretary-treasurer of the Austin Federation of Musicians. Storm had observed the Cobras' evolution from both a personal and professional view, and knew the band needed an outside hand to help make that necessary move all groups eventually face.

"I'd seen the group grow over a period of several years, and even when they'd lose their singers, the band would keep the spirit up," Storm says. "They would play a lot of out-of-town gigs, go up North and take care of their own business in the right way. And at the time, I also realized they were casting about for a chance to move ahead."

So as the Cobras were seeking a new lead singer

to give the band a solid front, Storm came upon the idea of a live recording session that would capture an overview of the group's music as it had evolved over the past six years.

By enlisting Paul Ray, now recovered from his vocal problems, and Angela Strehli, who has taken a more and more active role in the band, along with the recently added lead singer Larry Williams, Storm's initial conception of a "Cobra clan" recording took real shape.

But as with any independent endeavor, there was the money question. Storm cast lines for independent investors, with several Austin Cobra supporters coming to the call. With Armadillo Records recently re-entering the wax business through the release of a live Bugs Henderson Group album made at the Headquarters, Storm put one and one together and came up with a place to hold the Cobras' session.

"Storm came to us with the idea of a Cobra record at the right time," explains Armadillo chief Hank Aldrich. "We were having encouraging results with the Henderson release, and wanted to have Onion Audio take on a new project."

"From the strength of the Cobras' popularity around Austin and beyond, it appears a live album by the group could possibly take off. Rhythm and blues is getting attention again thanks to the Thunderbirds, Double Trouble and several other groups, and the Cobras' sound is as exciting and authentic as any band around. And with Paul and Angela also on the bill, a live session makes sense. It'll give their fans a retrospective of the band," Aldrich adds, "as in any recording project, it is always a substantial gamble, but this one looks like a good one."

Again, true. To take any independent record release and expect any degree of mass acceptance is a long shot. But by keeping recording costs down through the use of the in-house Onion Audio studio, and promotion budgets reasonable, the Cobras' shot has been deemed by enough interested parties to be a gamble worth taking.

So when the Cobras kick off Saturday night, whether Paul Ray, Angela Strehli or Larry Williams is standing center stage, not only will it be a slice of authentic-Austin nightlife, it will also be a night that will come back, in a matter of months, shrink-wrapped and on a 12-inch disc.