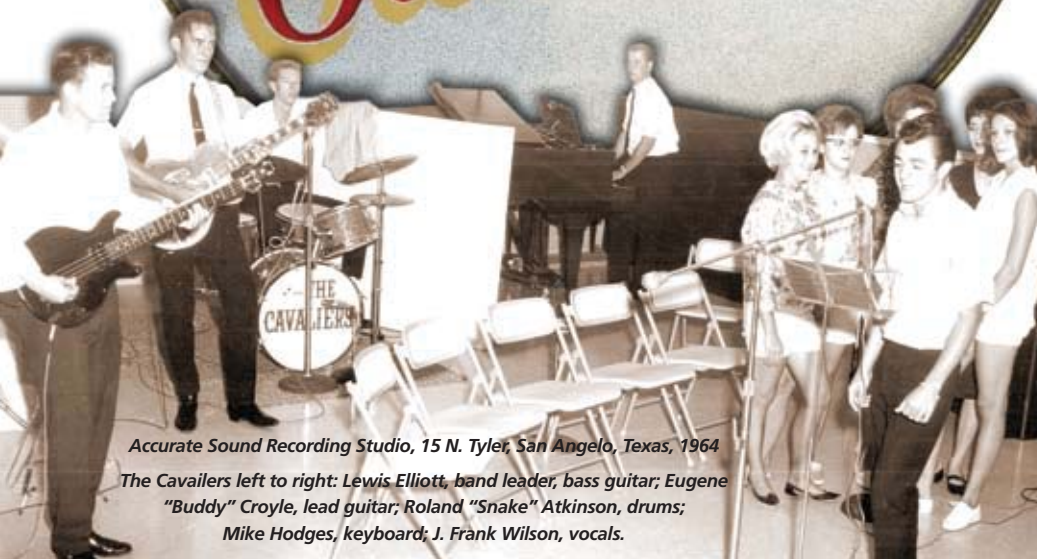


Last Call for

The Cavaliers

Stories by Preston Lewis



Accurate Sound Recording Studio, 15 N. Tyler, San Angelo, Texas, 1964

The Cavaliers left to right: Lewis Elliott, band leader, bass guitar; Eugene "Buddy" Croyle, lead guitar; Roland "Snake" Atkinson, drums; Mike Hodges, keyboard; J. Frank Wilson, vocals.

1964 Band photo courtesy of Lewis Elliott and American Classifieds. 2006 photos by Jim Bean.

Formed in the mid-1950s and named for a cigarette brand, the San Angelo musical group The Cavaliers hit the charts big-time in 1964 with the tragic teenage lament "Last Kiss."

But unlike a lot of one-hit wonders that earn a Gold Record and then disappear forever, The Cavaliers rolled on for almost 40 years, adding new members as earlier musicians moved on and continuing to play music in West Texas well into the new millennium.

During that time The Cavaliers always seemed to have an Angelo State University connection. Former ASU students who played in the band over the years included Lewis Elliott, James Thomas, Ronny Harrison, James Patterson, W. Mike Jones and Janice Burke.

Lewis Elliott stands at the top of former ASU students and The Cavaliers as he was the leader of the group when "Last Kiss" was recorded and became a hit. He played bass guitar on the teenage classic, which was recorded in San Angelo at Accurate Sound then located in a building that today serves as the offices for American Classifieds at 15 N. Tyler.

With the band between 1962 and 1966, Elliott cut "Last Kiss" with Buddy Croyle, Roland "Snake" Atkinson, vocalist J. Frank Wilson and a studio musician. After the song became a hit, Elliott toured the country with the Dick Clark's Caravan of Stars, sharing the bus with such musicians as future Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame Members Eric Burdon and The Animals, who

had the hit "House of the Rising Sun" in the summer of 1964.

He also shared the stage with acts such as the girl group The Royalettes and Brian Highland, vocalist for the 1960 hit novelty tune "Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini" and the 1962 Gold Record "Sealed With A Kiss."

"It was a magical time for us," Elliott said.

The magic, however, failed to last. Just prior to leaving for his second tour, the group's manager died in a car accident, ironically, and band members drifted apart before Elliott re-formed The Cavaliers in San Angelo in 1966.

After that their venues included everything from high school dances to "beer joints with chicken wire" to protect the band from thrown objects.

After leaving the band, Elliott worked for five years with Goodyear, then went into real estate. Today, he is the owner of Elliott Realty.

Though he joined the band two years after "Last Kiss" peaked on the national Billboard Top 40 charts at No. 2, nobody locally has been more closely linked to The Cavaliers than James Thomas, Class of '68, who kept the group together for almost 40 years.

And while "Last Kiss" is the lasting contribution of The Cavaliers to popular culture, Thomas thinks the band's most important legacy, at least during his tenure, was the number of band members it helped attend Angelo State over the years.

"I don't know how many graduates we put through, but it's been a bunch," Thomas said. "We encouraged them to get their degree and help themselves out."

The band's philosophy of playing a variety of musical styles made The Cavaliers the most popular group in the area, performing during its heyday at everything from school dances to ranch socials in the 1960s and 1970s. The band's repertoire ranged from rock 'n' roll to country and western to crossover. Their most successful song after "Last Kiss" became "You Just Need to Love Somebody," which became a Cash Box pick-hit of the week in 1976.

After graduation from ASU Thomas worked 23 years for San Angelo National Bank and during that time remembers play-



James Thomas

ing the Christmas parties for banking competitors. “I’d sit on the steps and eavesdrop during our break to hear their propaganda.”

“We played for the people, a big variety of music, and we had fun,” Thomas said.

And, they made money. Some months, performing a couple nights a week, he made more money singing than he did at his \$475 a month job with the bank. “It was a pretty lucrative little hobby. I actually made money at a hobby rather than going out and losing golf balls at a dollar apiece.”

Because of his longevity with the band, many came to assume he was the original vocalist on “Last Kiss.” During performances, fans would bring their out-

of-town guests up to meet Thomas and introduce him as the vocalist on “Last Kiss.” Thomas said, “I wouldn’t correct them or say anything because it would’ve belittled them in front of their friends. Some of that got started that way, but certainly not intentionally.”

The band continued to perform under Thomas’s direction until three years ago when his motivations changed.

“When I was young, I would have played for free,” Thomas said, “but now I’d rather be home on a Friday and sitting in an easy chair than playing music.”

In his spare time, he still writes music, including a final verse to “Last Kiss.” When he is not sitting in his easy chair or composing songs, Thomas operates San Angelo Real Estate with his wife, Janie.

Ronny Harrison, Class of ’71, joined the Cavaliers in 1965 and stayed with the band for 24 years. He started out as drummer and later switched to keyboard. He also handled backup on vocals.

“We had a lot of good times,” Harrison said. His favorite memories are of performing at Rowena where the band was a regular at the local ODHS hall on family night and of backing up or opening for a variety of country-and-western stars, including Hank

Williams Jr., Mel Tillis, Ray Price and Johnny Bush, among others. “That’s kind of neat for a band of local guys.”

During his tenure, the band had a TV show on the local CBS affiliate. Harrison also acknowledged that The Cavaliers played for the first ASU frat party ever raided by the police. The Cavaliers were performing for Kappa Xi, which he and Thomas helped found and which eventually evolved into Lambda Chi, when they got a little too loud and rambunctious. The police persuaded them to turn the volume down.

In Harrison’s mind the raid was not nearly as embarrassing as being commissioned by a Fort Worth producer to record a song about the U.S. Space Program. Released at the time of the first manned mission to orbit the moon, the song was titled “A Mighty Big Moon Mouse!” about a rodent that ate a quarter of the moon.

“No more need be said about this song!” Harrison noted.

If “A Mighty Big Moon Mouse” was the low point of his Cavaliers career, “the best thing for me being involved in music and The Cavaliers was meeting my wife, Carol,” Harrison said.

Today he is the partner and president of Harrison Roofing in San Angelo.

James Patterson played with the band between 1967 and 1973. During that time, he earned his bachelor’s degree in 1971 and master’s degree from ASU. In fact, in 1972 he became the first person to receive an ASU master’s degree.

Patterson played bass and performed some lead vocals. “James Thomas had the pretty voice and handled most of the ballads and smoother songs,” Patterson said, “and I took the edgy songs, like Rod Stewart’s ‘Maggie Mae.’” During his tenure, the post-“Last Kiss” Cavaliers also recorded “It’s Up to You Girl,” “A Little Bit of Soap,” “Turntable,” “Wine, Wine, Wine” and “Somebody Help Me.”

He recalled the monthly dances at Rowena as being especially fun because of the family atmosphere. “It was a big community center with people from all of the small towns,” Patterson said. “Four generations might be out there, everyone from old grandma to grandbaby. It was just a nice wholesome family get together and that place would really get packed.”



Ronny Harrison

Photo courtesy of James Patterson.



James Patterson

During his tenure the band bought matching custom equipment including amplifiers and speakers with rolled-and-pleated upholstery highlights in cascade, a blue-green color. “We were quite a sight up there, looked like a ’57 Chevy,” he said.

Patterson remembered sharing a gig with The Cowsills, a 1960s group that had such hits as “Hair,” “The Rain, The Park and Other Things,” “Indian Park,” and “We Can Fly.”

“They were the more popular act at the time,” Patterson said, “but they played first and we came on second, still living on a little reflected glory from ‘Last Kiss.’”

After graduating from ASU, he left The Cavaliers and traveled with another band out of Abilene for a few months before starting his own group, Supreme Court Decision, which spent six years on the road and still plays several gigs per month in the Houston area.

He followed The Cavaliers’ musical format by incorporating a variety of styles in his band’s repertoire, ranging from country to baby boomer rock to big band swing to Latin. Summing up his years with the Cavaliers, he said, “Oh, I had a ball.”

Patterson later earned his doctorate in history from the University of Houston and today serves as a history professor at Houston Community College and an adjunct

faculty member at both the University of Houston and Houston Baptist University. He is also active musically with the Cross-Tronic Christian Techno Project, in which he combines electronic music with Christian evangelistic themes. The first album was “Put on the Armor of God” followed by a second, “Eternity.” Information on the albums is available at his website, <http://cdbaby.com/cd/crosstronic2>.

W. Mike Jones, Class of ’71, might be considered one of the original multi-taskers. He played lead guitar and did vocals



W. Mike Jones

with the band from 1969-71 while taking a minimum of 15 hours a semester at ASU and working at Landers Automotive for \$1.15 an hour.

“My time was so crazy with working, night classes and playing,” Jones said. “I’d say it was lots of fun and lots of long drives. For two years we played once a month in Del Rio.”

He played “Last Kiss” enough to grow sick of it. “Yes, yes! Same old four chords over and over again.”

The group performed at a lot of parties, school functions and fraternity socials, including the one that drew the police raid. “It was a wild fraternity party, but nothing serious,” he recalled. “Back then about the worst thing anyone did was drink.”

The band also played some seamier venues as well. “I got so burnt out on bars and beer joints, I haven’t been in one since,” Jones said.

“It was fun at the time,” Jones said. “It always starts out fun and then it turns into a job. What started out as a hobby, as fun, became a hard-core job.”

After leaving the band with his general business degree and a psychology minor from ASU, Jones went into real estate briefly before getting into electrical contracting. Today he owns Bullock & Taylor Electric Co.

Except for a three-year break between 1975 and 1978, Janice Burke played drums for The Cavaliers from 1974 to 1999. Like several other band members, some of her

fondest memories with The Cavaliers are of playing at Rowena.

“It was so laid back, family-oriented,” she said. “Everybody could bring their family with babies over in the corner on little pallets, just real casual. It wasn’t the bar scene and having to contend with that.”

Even when they did play the bars, Burke remembered “the guys were real protective of me.”

Burke, who earned her associate degree in nursing in 1972 and her bachelor of science in nursing in 1983, both from ASU, remembers playing a lot of hospital functions.

She recalls her first hospital performance when Dr. Ralph Chase and Dr. Sterling Gillis couldn’t believe “their baby nurse was up there beating on the drums.”

Highlights of her musical career included playing both at her sister’s wedding and at the 40th anniversary performance at Rowena. Her last performance with The Cavaliers, appropriately enough, was at the wedding of the son of a friend in medical records where she worked. Today Burke is a neonatal nurse with San Angelo Community Hospital, her employer for 34 years.

“I wouldn’t take for all the years I played with The Cavaliers,” Burke said. “It was a good stress reliever. It was a lot of good memories and a lot of fun playing with a lot of good musicians.” ■



Janice Burke

Last Kiss answered

Anyone who ever hears the opening of “Last Kiss” is bound to remember it.

*Oh, where oh where can my baby be,
The Lord took her away from me
She’s gone to heaven so I got to be good
So I can see my baby when I leave this ol’ world.*

From there the song details the tragic tale in the era before mandatory seat belts of a teen driver who crashes into a stalled car, then watches helplessly as his date dies in his arms.

Recorded by The Cavaliers in San Angelo in 1964, “Last Kiss” rose higher on the charts than all but a handful of songs that year and the tunes that topped it were by such recognizable names as The Beach Boys, The Beatles, The Supremes, Bobby Vinton and Dean Martin.

The song was sung by J. Frank Wilson, a Lufkin native who joined The Cavaliers while stationed at Goodfellow Air Force Base. Other performers on the recording were Cavaliers leader Lewis Elliott on bass guitar, Roland “Snake” Atkinson on drums, Buddy Croyle on lead guitar and a studio musician.

Written in 1962 by Georgia rhythm and blues singer Wayne Cochran and based on an actual car-tractor trailer accident near his home, “Last Kiss” was the last of a string of teen tragedies that captured the public’s imagination in the early 1960s.

The tune was popular enough in 1964 to draw the attention of *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker, who wrote that it and another accident tune “are basically hillbilly ballads done in the slick and commercial rock ‘n’ roll style with the monotonous cacophony the children love.”

Baker pontificated that unrequited love had long been the staple of song and literature but lamented that “the instrument of romantic tragedy is not battle or wasting malady but a miserable automobile.”

The song was introduced to a new generation in 1999 when Pearl Jam re-released it and the tune climbed to the top of the charts three decades after its original release.

James Thomas, who assumed duties as lead vocalist for The Cavaliers two years after the release of “Last Kiss,” has sung the song hundreds of times since he joined the band. A few years ago, Thomas decided to add a final stanza to the sad song.

He included “Last Kiss Answered” on one of the promotional CDs he recorded with The Cavaliers for his realty company. After the original lyrics, a female vocalist responds with these words:

*Well, hello darling, I can see you from here
Don’t you worry, don’t shed a tear
The Lord knows I miss you, He can see
My love will last forever for all eternity*