

Col. Bruce Hampton and the Aquarium Rescue Unit

Biography

Founded as an outlet for the "out" musical philosophy of Col. Bruce Hampton, the Aquarium Rescue Unit's ever-rotating lineup became a fixture on the early jam band scene, eventually spawning members of the Allman Brothers Band, Phil Lesh and Friends, Leftover Salmon, and Frogwings. While never commercially successful, the band's hilariously fun fusion of bluegrass, rock, Latin, jazz, and impeccable chops became a template for much future work in the genre.

Growing out of a weekly Atlanta jam session hosted by the legendary Col. Bruce Hampton — a founding member of the infamous Hampton Grease Band, among other underground Atlanta-based outfits — the Aquarium Rescue Unit performed around their native Southeast with a rotating lineup (including future Blueground Undergrass founder Jeff Mosier and keyboardist Charles Williams) before settling on the group that would be heard on their two Capricorn Records releases in 1991 and 1993, respectively.

After recording their self-titled live debut in 1991, the band embarked on the first two H.O.R.D.E. tours during the summers of 1992 and 1993, where they found musical compatriots with bands like Phish, Blues Traveler, the Spin Doctors, and fellow Georgians Widespread Panic. Cross-pollination was frequent, with members of the Unit and other bands frequently guesting on-stage or in the studio with their tourmates (such as Blues Traveler frontman John Popper's multiple appearances on the Unit's studio debut, *Mirrors of Embarrassment*).

In 1993, mandolinist Matt Mundy retired from music and returned home to Georgia. Within a year, Hampton himself retired from the road, citing health reasons (though he would later return with both the Fiji Mariners and the Code Talkers). Following a stint featuring virtuoso bassist Oteil Burbridge on lead vocals, the band recruited Paul Henson to be their new frontman.

Without Hampton's absurdist wisdom, the band fell to the sum of their parts, putting out two unsuccessful discs of tightly wound but ultimately soulless funk-fusion. As touring began to taper off in 1996, drummer Jeff Sipe left the group to pursue avant-garde interests with Jonas Hellborg and later joined Cajun-bluegrass outfit Leftover Salmon. Though the band never officially broke up, they became essentially deceased, reuniting occasionally in Georgia for one-off gigs.

Both the band as a whole and their individual members found far more success in the late '90s, with the band's work acknowledged as an important forebear of the modern day jam band scene. In 1997, Burbridge replaced the late Allen Woody as bassist in the Allman Brothers Band (Unit guitarist Jimmy Herring also briefly replaced founding ABB guitarist Dickey Betts in the summer of 2000). Herring found nearly full-time work touring with both Jazz Is Dead (a fusion act occasionally featuring Mahavishnu Orchestra drummer Billy Cobham) as well as former Grateful Dead bassist Phil Lesh.

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