

BoDeans' song touches sister of girl murdered 40 years ago

archive.jsonline.com/news/milwaukee/bodeans-jay-leno-song-touches-sister-of-girl-murdered-40-years-ago-do56iht-149398055.html

Long before he was a BoDean, Kurt Neumann was a kid growing up near 51st and Lisbon who found his sense of security shattered by the discovery of a murdered girl in the garage next door.

More than 40 years later, Kurt has written a song about it. Songs emerge from deep in the soul, and this one has waited a long time to come out.

Kurt recently reached out to Donna Willing's sister to let her know how 9-year-old Donna's death - even though they didn't know one another - had profoundly altered his path in life. Neumann's family moved to Waukesha County within months of the murder in 1970. The shocking crime had left them shaken.

"I can't say life would have been bad staying where I was. But it would have been very different from what it was, going out to Waukesha and eventually meeting Sam Llanas and starting the BoDeans and going on to do all the music I had a chance to do," Kurt told me.

Donna disappeared Feb. 26, 1970, on a walk to the bakery in her neighborhood near 33rd and Lloyd in Milwaukee. She was seen getting into a green car. A man discovered her body that same day under a car in a garage in the 2400 block of N. 51st St. She had been raped and strangled. The case was never solved, though it remains open and under investigation.

Kurt, who was then 8, remembers coming home that night from a dinner out with his family. The alley was full of police cars. His parents tried to shield him from the details of what happened, but he recalls the downstairs neighbor saying she might have seen the killer while taking out the trash.

"That really scared the hell out of me because I thought certainly this guy was going to try to come back and kill everybody in the house because he didn't want any witnesses," he said.

At that time, Kurt somehow had the impression that the girl was 14, rather than so close to his own age.

His parents must have kept the newspaper away from him because he did not learn her name or other details.

Kurt grew up and found fame with the BoDeans, one of the most popular bands to come out of Wisconsin. He now lives near Austin, Texas, with his wife, Barbra, and their seven children.

But he never forgot that horrible night on his block.

"Through all my life, I've always wondered what is the story here, what happened, what did she do or not do," Kurt said.

And he never shook the feeling that the killer could just as easily have snatched and killed him instead. Late in 2011, these thoughts and fears suddenly emerged musically.

"I was just playing my guitar, and this song poured out of me very quickly. I was like, 'Wow, why didn't I ever write about this before?'"

The opening line of the song takes us right to that garage: "When I was a kid, barely 8 years old, they found a girl, innocent and cold."

And the next lines reveal Kurt's sketchy knowledge of the crime: "She was 14, was just another day. Beautiful girl that couldn't get away."

That girl "gave me something real, something good," the song says. And the chorus makes Kurt's larger point: "We all wanna feel something good, I know. Free and alive, far away from the ghetto. I wanna feel, something good, I know. Feel like a star, smiling on Jay Leno."

The song has that oblique title, "Jay Leno," and it's the second track on the band's new record, "American Made," set for release June 12. The band, minus Llanas, who went off on his own, is scheduled to play Summerfest on July 4.

"When you watch Jay Leno and people come on there, it seems from a distance that their life is so wonderful and everybody is happy and laughing. Often people reach for the stars, and I was just using that 'smiling on Jay Leno' as that kind of reference," said Kurt, adding that the BoDeans never appeared on Leno's show.

Barbra Neumann said Kurt often talked about the murder and had driven her through the old neighborhood.

Earlier this year, she Googled his 51st St. address and "girl murdered," and up popped detailed accounts of what happened to Donna Willing. It was the first time they were hearing her name.

By then, the song was finished and heading for the album. Kurt decided not to change it. The song is more about his perception of the traumatic event and how it changed his life, he said.

The Neumanns learned the name of Donna's sister, Virginia Davis, who was quoted in a [2009 Journal Sentinel article about the crime](#). They sought her out.

Virginia, of South Milwaukee, was pleasantly surprised to hear that Donna's death had inspired a song, though she admitted she's more of a '60s rock fan and was not too familiar with the BoDeans' music. She was just 4 when Donna was killed, and she always has

hungered for any connections to her sister. There's a website about her:
donnawilling.webs.com.

The song made Virginia cry. "It's like somebody else, out of the blue, out of 6 billion people in the world, cares about her," she said. "It feels like I know exactly what he's meaning, like I know a piece of what he's feeling and what he's thinking. He's almost talking about me, too. My feelings.

"It's like a dream to hear something like that. It's a gift, pretty much, I felt."

Kurt said he hoped to lift at least some of the sorrow Virginia still feels.

"Donna's death was tragic, but maybe it moved people in a way that had some good purpose. It wasn't meaningless, is what I wanted her to know," he said.