

RODNEY BINGENHEIMER *A Child of the Myth*

by Lisa Jane Persky

Keeping my fingers on the minimal pulse of the musical movement in L.A. which, gratefully, is growing, I cannot ignore one of its prime gardeners. Rodney Bingenheimer is, of late, the diminutive giant of the New Wave. A plant man, assailing the ears with all the ammunition of the new movement.

Every Sunday on KROQ FM from eight to midnight, Rodney hosts "Rodney on the Roqs." Much fun is poked at the little prince, who is often depicted as jester, but he is undeniably an integral part of the pimping of paupers soon to be Hit Paraders. His listenership is immense. He is without the usual storebought dee jay voice that makes so many others indistinguishable. His is a fluted and whispery mid-puberty sound.

Will you tell me how old you are?

"No. It's my well kept secret. I'm really getting a joy out of hearing all the rumors. Some people think that I'm 50, some 40 and some people think that I'm 22, which is interesting. I understand that I'm gay every now and then and that I'm black, a cripple in a wheelchair, fat, an amputee and four feet tall."

For the record, Rodney is very much a white boy. He loves beach movies, Mamie Van Doren, Annette Funicello, Elvis, Connie Stevens and, of course, The Beach Boys. He hails from somewhere north of San Jose where his mother was a cocktail waitress. As a child Rodney spent winters reading fan-mags and summers cutting apricots. "We called it cutting cots. That's what the term was."

With an able, if short, set of skinny whiteboy legs and his green thumb planted on the freeway, Rodney, number one teen dreamer, made it to Hollywood, land of teen dreams.

He began his affiliation with the rock world as a writer for a local magazine called *GO*, and he has gone from one glorious affair after another as a mini-afficionado. Gopher for Sonny and Cher. Stand in for Monkee Davy Jones. Being flown to Las Vegas by and partying with Elvis. He worked for Mercury Records, Capitol Records, once promoted Linda Ronstadt, and wrote for *Phonograph Record* magazine.

But his greatest fame came when he opened the legendary but late Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco. Rodney singlehandedly introduced the white-trash music of the early '70s to L.A. youth. It became a "Roseland" for the Hollywood teen, a place where every contemporary glitter kid could go to dance and to gape at the visiting luminaries. In 1967, Sal Mineo crowned Rodney with his most coveted title, "The Mayor of Sunset Strip," and where once Rodney had a name for himself, he now had two.

When for a moment Frank Zappa turned Talent Scout and signed the GTOs and Wildman Fisher, he had to include Rodney — and this little prince's praises were sung in loftier places, ever more loudly. Famed entrepreneur Kim Fowley gifted Rodney with his own track on Fowley's album, *Good Clean Fun*.



Photo by Bruce Osborn

Rodney is the hero of his own fairy tale on the album: "From Cutting Cots to Cutting Records."

So then this guy goes and gets his own radio show. It's just like he says: "There are millionaires who can't do what I do." Rodney the effervescing fan, the kind that keeps people making movies and records and magazines, becomes a perpetuator of the pulp. His admiration of the famous and not so famous had produced in him the inspiration to promote, and in so doing he had become an odd idol himself. Girls run to Rodney like rivers into the oceans, even though Rodney is not your typical love god. He generates a sympathetic aura and provides a refuge under his bird-like arm for young fans. He has a particular penchant for very young ladies, and the largest looming rumor about him is that he tends toward 13-year-olds.

"The only one I know is Brooke Shields. I just like girls in general. I have a girlfriend now who is 17. She'll be 18 in August. If people changed the age law to 20 and she were 19, people would still look down on me."

What about "older women" though? Does he like Jeanne Moreau? No. He doesn't know who she is but he says, "Anne Bancroft is pretty interesting and Deborah Harry is amazing." He once had a beautiful girl-friend who was 24. Research leads me to speculate that Rodney himself is 32... but he is a sort of ugly-duckling Dorian Grey: unsophisticated, pleasure seeking, innocent.

"I don't want to live to be 40. If I die, I really won't mind. If I do, I hope I go peacefully. I don't want to live past 40 because I've done everything. I see what's coming in the world with all this nuclear stuff. I predict that people will be rioting at gas stations. People will be shooting each other at Ralph's supermarket just to get something to eat. I see that coming and I don't want to be a part

of it."

Hence, Rodney's philosophy: "Do it now because you cannot do it later." Rodney's predictions are not to be taken lightly. He is one of the best barometers of things to come.

"I hate to say this, (I hate this kind of music) but I see more of a rock, guitar-oriented type of disco coming. People will be getting back together and there will be a big skating thing. Skating discos. Hopefully there will be a rock 'n' roll skating disco, a new wave disco. That's what I'd like to see. I'd like to open up a Malt Shop. I'd have to take over an existing lease and the rent and get the proper licenses. I have the plan in mind."

I see it like this: Rodney, an ingenue Louie Dumbrowski, behind the counter jerkin' sodas to the mellifluous sounds of the real Bowery Boys, The Ramones. There will be live broadcasts from inside the shop every Sunday where our favorites will divulge secret cake and shake fantasies that Host Rodney is concocting, all transmitted over the new waves of KROQ.

I truly believe that Rodney rarely eats. I have, however, witnessed his addiction to Tab. These poor habits and a great deal of nervous tension contributed to a stroke he suffered several years back which caused him to practically relearn the language and certainly re-think the future.

Rodney has the highest rated radio show during those Sunday hours in all of Ellay. He was the first to play Nick Gilder, Cheap Trick, Blondie, Van Halen, The Runaways, Talking Heads, The Ramones, Patti Smith... The list goes on and, hopefully, on.

"The pay is not too good. I get by. I do it cause of my love for music. I love turning people on to the new music. It was so great to hear 'Anarchy In The U.K.' on radio. This was when KROQ was on AM.

"I'm only somewhat appreciated. There

are people playing the Forum because of me. There are people driving Rolls-Royces because of me. I don't think they know what I'm doing. Nobody realizes. The Blondies are appreciative they always come down and do the show I'm supposed to be getting a gold record from them. I've never gotten a gold record from any of the groups I've helped. Where's my gold record? I'm having a hard time getting a Cheap Trick jacket.

"I just like what I'm doing, as long as I can eat and pay the rent and stuff. I'm making an album now and there is this one certain real big guest star on it and they are on a really big label and that label won't let me put their names on my record and I was the one who broke four of this company's major acts in L.A. I'm the first to play those people but they let that same group play on this other guy's record in England."

The Eve Harringtons of the music business often leave Rodney (Margo Channing) Bingenheimer in the wind. Rodney seems above it and spends a lot of time keeping up with current events. He lends himself nightly to the news. Connie Chung, Kim Fowley, Harvey Kubernick and Phil Spector all help to keep Rodney afloat.

"I've known Phil Spector since I first got here. I remember when I was up north, he had a big article that came out in *Esquire*. He had these weird diamond shaped glasses, long hair and this suit and I said, 'Well, this guy is weird.' For a long time he has helped me out in a lot of ways and sort of looked after me.

"My favorite period in music was the girl-group '60s. The Ronettes, The Supremes. From 1969 until 1975 I can't even think of a song that was on."

Do you think we're in that kind of a slump now?

"It looks like it. I can't believe it. Here are The Kinks, The Stones, The Beach Boys, real '60s groups going disco. I never thought the Beach Boys would do a disco record. That is why I've got to keep playing what I play.

"I've been offered a TV gig. It's like a 60-minute rock show with different hosts. I'd do the new scene section. I'm assistant editor of a new magazine called *Hot Rocks*. I give them ideas on who to write about and I'm doing a monthly column. The strangest thing that ever happened to me on the air was when this nudist family came down. I was doing a commercial and this 11-year-old girl came in naked and I said, 'Do your parents know where you are?' Then they came walking in and they were naked too."

Has Hollywood lived up to his expectations?

"Somewhat. It was weird seeing Tab Hunter and Richard Chamberlain and all these idols that aren't famous anymore. It doesn't seem that glamorous now. I thought rock stars were going to take over where movie stars left off. People like Gary Valentine can walk down the streets and, well, people might say hello but back then people would jump out of cars and mob him and tear his clothes off. If you go to Ralphs supermarket you can see Aerosmith walking around shopping and no one really cares."

What should they do?

"Stay at home."

Like Garbo?

"Yeah."

Rodney Bingenheimer deserves a star on Hollywood Boulevard, even if it is simply because he understands the myth.