

Iconic Flint DJ ready to go for an anniversary spin

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CourtesyDJ Michael Absher

ED DAVIS | FOR THE FLINT JOURNAL

FLINT — Michael Absher has spent the better part of his life turning people on to music. First, he was the friend who was always saying, “You’ve gotta hear this.” And for the past 25 years, he has been DJ Michael A, spinning tunes in downtown Flint.

On Tuesdays, you’ll find him at The Loft, on Buckham Alley; on Saturdays, he’s at Churchill’s, on Saginaw Street. He’s been holding court as “The Duke of Downtown” (a Ben Hamper moniker) since 1986, when he started DJing at The Hot Rock Café, later known as The Metropolis.

A self-proclaimed music freak from a very early age, Absher got into his parents’ collection of 45s and began listening to The Beatles, Elvis Presley and The Big Bopper.

“Those records would probably be worth some money today if I’d handled them more carefully, but I was a kid and didn’t know any better,” Absher said.

He said he and his sister would often listen to music and get out tennis rackets to “pretend we were in a band.”

Without an older sibling to turn him on to music, Absher would stay up late, scanning stations on his transistor radio “looking for something interesting.”

Absher’s first DJ gig was at a party in the early 1980s.

“I had a dual-cassette player and a bunch of tapes,” Absher said. “This was way before I thought of it being a job.”

When he was in his early 20s, Absher hung out at the Hot Rock Café and ran lights for DJs. He often brought records for Bill White, the Saturday DJ, to play.

“I was reading a lot of music magazines and going to Rarebird Records to pick up promo 12-inchers and ask Bill if he’d play them,” Absher said. “Eventually, Bill said ‘Why don’t you play?’ He showed me how to use the mixing board and turntables. With some practice, I got pretty good at it.”

Absher always maintained his early interest in radio, to the point where he took a radio class at Mott Community College. It was there he saw a job listing for a board operator position at WFBE when it was still a public radio station.

“I read about the opening at WFBE and applied,” Absher said. “The reason I got the job was probably because the chief engineer knew my dad.”

His duties as a board operator gradually expanded during his time at WFBE. He worked his way up from running the board for programs to engineering the influential “Take No Prisoners” for Jerry Humphrey and Ben Hamper. “Take No Prisoners” provided him his first on-air opportunity.

“I knew the break was coming up and I couldn’t find the DJ,” Absher said. “So, when the last song finished, I back-announced the set list. The next time I was on-air was to announce a tornado warning.

“I pulled it off pretty well and the program director liked what he heard, so I became more involved and got my own time slots doing classical in the afternoon, a new age program called Nightscape that I made more eclectic by adding jazz and space music, and Kaleidoscope, which featured local bands performing live in the studio as often as possible.”

Rummage through punk world Saturday

• FLINT — The Punk Rock Rummage Sale returns Saturday, April 30 — but this time at two venues and with daytime offerings, too. A mix of punk rock music and garage sale; this annual event is the place to find art, crafts, clothing and castaway coolness while unwinding with music. New this year, though, the Punk Rock Rummage Sale will take place at two locations. From noon to 4 p.m., it will be at 625 S. Saginaw St., a former medical supply store, and will be joined by musician Ryan Gregory. In the evening, it will be at Churchill’s Food and Spirits, 340 S. Saginaw St., featuring DJ Michael A spinning punk tunes. For more information, contact Chris Ringler at grimringler@gmail.com.

Absher maintained a strong presence as a club DJ while maintaining his day job in radio. He DJed at the Hot Rock until it closed, then at Network for a time, after which he had a brief stint as a DJ in an adult club.

In the early 1990s, which Absher refers to as his “golden age of DJing,” Metropolis opened in the former Hot Rock and he became an immediate presence, DJing three nights a week. He also got involved at The Back Room, now The Loft, early on, where his Groovy Tuesday is still a mainstay.

“There was a lot of good music going on downtown that continues today,” Absher said. “The scene was different here than it was in other places. There was a cross-pollination of styles of live bands, plus other DJs started playing downtown, so there was a real family vibe.”

Even after all this time, Absher said, he still doesn’t necessarily know what to expect when he sets up his two CD players and starts picking tracks from his collection of “conservatively a thousand CDs” that he keeps filed “in a way that only I understand.”

Unlike many DJs, Absher says he’s not a “proper club DJ” and prefers to let the music flow.

“I don’t practice DJing,” Absher said, “although many, like DJ Psycho, do and they have a really polished style. I like to think of it as collaboration between the audience and me. Energy that’s going back and forth.”

And it’s a formula that works. Kirsti Baker of Flint is a longtime fan and friend of Absher.

“He knows what I like to hear without having to ask,” Baker said. “And he’s got a collection of music for just about everyone. Going to see him is a happy treat.”

As for his choice of music, Absher said, “I play everything except what’s popular.”

His eclectic groove is what keeps regulars like Heidi Schmitz of Flint coming back for more.

“Very few DJs have such an eclectic choice of music,” Schmitz said. “It’s anything from pop, rock, country, experimental, and I enjoy listening to it all. He’s a wonderful friend, a talented DJ and a rare rock in the Flint DJ scene.”

This time spent listening to and sharing music has given Absher an encyclopedic knowledge of nearly every genre of music.

Jodi Hemingway of Flint appreciates Absher’s depth of musical knowledge.

“More than one person has said that Michael can read minds,” Hemingway said. “He has a sensational connection with people. If you suggest something, he not only plays it, but he plays songs like it that you’ve never heard before and it’s always perfect.”

For Absher, it's been 25 years of making people happy and bringing them together by sharing his love of music. It's his milestone, but the celebration is for everyone.

"It's going to be an all '80s-themed show," Absher said, "And we were lucky to hook up with the Fischer Bodies, a Flint-based burlesque troupe. They'll be performing their comedy and I'll be DJing. Good music, good-looking women and comedy; now that's a great night."