

The Fabulous Thunderbirds

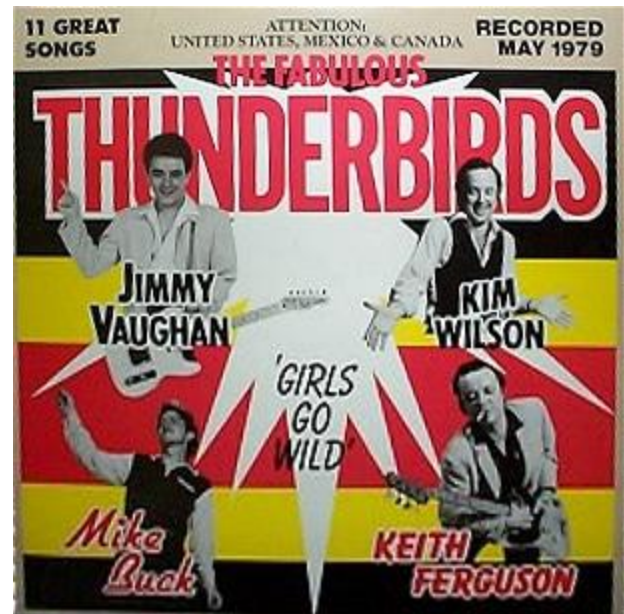
The Fabulous Thunderbirds: This Austin-based R&B group helped lead a local and national blues revival during the 1980s. With such hits as “Tuff Enuff,” the Fabulous Thunderbirds appeared on major motion picture soundtracks, toured internationally, and helped set the stage for the success of blues-rock superstar Stevie Ray Vaughan. The Fabulous Thunderbirds formed in 1974 with original members Jimmie Vaughan (guitar), Kim Wilson (harmonica and vocals), Keith Ferguson (bass), and Mike Buck (drums). Austin vocalist Lou Ann Barton also performed occasionally with the group during its early years.

Jimmie Vaughan, born March 20, 1951, in Dallas, is a former rock guitar player who had once opened for Jimi Hendrix. Despite his early rock background, Vaughan also was heavily influenced by such blues artists as Jimmy Reed, Eddie Taylor, T-Bone Walker, B.B. King, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Freddie King, and Muddy Waters. Although Vaughan played throughout the Dallas area as a teenager, he moved to Austin in 1970 in hopes of finding more opportunities to perform in the Capital City’s growing music scene. In Austin, Vaughan discovered a small but devoted group of blues fans, including Clifford Antone, Angela Strehli, Lou Ann Barton, Marcia Ball, Doyle Bramhall, and others, who were looking to build a larger blues following within the diverse and eclectic local music community. With his transplanted Dallas band, Storm, Vaughan began to book gigs around Central Texas, and he started moving away from his earlier rock guitar leanings to focus on a more traditional style of blues playing.

Jimmie Vaughan met Kim Wilson while Storm was performing at an Austin “rib joint” called Alexander’s. Vaughan agreed to let his younger brother, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Doyle Bramhall, and Kim Wilson jam on stage while Storm was on break. Jimmie Vaughan was so impressed with the sound that he joined in on the jam session. Before long, Storm would disband, and Vaughan began working regularly with Wilson.

Kim Wilson was born into a musical family in Detroit, Michigan, although his father stopped performing in order to take a job with General Motors in Goleta, California. Wilson dabbled with music as a child, but did not discover the blues until his senior year in high school, when he began playing harmonica. By 1970, Wilson had immersed himself in the blues, drawing inspiration from such blues pioneers as Little Walter, Charlie Musselwhite, and Eddie Taylor.

Soon after Jimmie Vaughan and Kim Wilson met at Alexander’s, they formed the Fabulous Thunderbirds and began playing at a new club in downtown Austin called Antone’s, which Clifford Antone had established in 1975 as the city’s “Home of the Blues.” As Antone’s



unofficial “house band,” the Thunderbirds had a home base in which they could perfect their skills, write new material, and occasionally back national touring acts, such as Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, and Sunnyland Slim. Within a few months, the band had developed a high-energy blues-rock sound that began attracting a large following throughout the area.

The group released its first album, *The Fabulous Thunderbirds*, on Tacoma records in 1979. The album was poorly promoted and did not sell very well, but it did lead to a new recording deal with Chrysalis Records, a much larger label. The band recorded three albums for Chrysalis, including its third album, *T-bird Rhythm*, which was produced by Nick Lowe from the group Rockpile. Throughout the early 1980s, the Thunderbirds made a number of personnel changes as each successive album met with only limited commercial success. Despite mediocre record sales, the group continued to tour and record until 1986, when its album *Tuff Enuff*, produced by Dave Edmunds of Rockpile, reached Number 10 on the *Billboard* charts. In that same year, the Fabulous Thunderbirds also were named Best Blues Band at the W.C. Handy Music Awards. The following album, *Powerful Stuff*, also sold well and further expanded the band’s fan base.

The 1990s would bring important changes to the Thunderbirds, as individual members began pursuing other interests. In 1990, Jimmie Vaughan recorded the album *Family Style* with his brother, Stevie Ray Vaughan, which was released after Stevie Ray’s untimely death on August 27, 1990. At the same time, Kim Wilson was moving more in the direction of a rock-oriented blues sound. With the loss of his younger brother and the success of *Family Style*, Vaughan decided to leave the Thunderbirds and pursue a solo career. Wilson returned to California, where he continues to tour and record with a variety of musicians under both his own name and the Fabulous Thunderbirds. Although several Thunderbirds albums were released during the 1990s, they consisted almost entirely of previously released tracks.

Grant Mazak