

# Was Roger Daltrey Your Camp Counselor?

By Joanne Kaufman

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**T**hirty guitarists, 18 drummers, 10 bass players, seven keyboardists, seven vocalists, one saxophonist, one flutist, one harmonica player, a triangle player, a kazoo player and a woman defining herself as "a back, up, way, way back up singer" came here to Rock 'n Roll Fantasy Camp last week. No bunks, just bands; no singing around the campfire, just around the microphone; no color war; instead a battle of the bands on closing night. And no jokes, please, about name tapes sewn on instruments.

For \$6,000 (excluding airfare, lodgings and groupies), 80 campers had a chance to prove their mettle—in some cases their heavy metal. They had endless opportunities to get down while getting guidance from supremely good-natured, surprisingly available counselors like The Who's Roger Daltrey; drummer Liberty DeVitto and sax player Mark Rivera, both longtime Billy Joel sidemen; Night Ranger front man Jack Blades; Free drummer Simon Kirke; Frampton keyboardist Bobby Mayo; former Ted Nugent stalwart Derek St. Holmes; and Mountain main man Leslie West. "This," proclaimed Mr. Daltrey at one point, "is an antidote to 'American Idol.'" (Comparisons, of course, are odious, but let the record show that when Homer went to a similar camp on an episode of "The Simpsons," his mentors included Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Tom Petty and Elvis Costello.)

"There are baseball and basketball fantasy camps," says Harry Javer, who ran the 4½-day program, the third so far, in concert with rock promoter David Fishof. "And we thought someone should produce something that would let people know what it was like to be a rock star for a week."

Perhaps because time was at a premium, campers—among them financial planners, brokers, CEOs, contractors (who solicited business during their down time), a dentist and a trauma surgeon—had their first moment in the sun within hours of registration: They got to strut their stuff for head counselor Mark Rivera, whose task it was to assess their ability (no musical background, skill, or awareness of that most basic G-C-D chord progression was required) and assign them to one of nine bands. "We try to put people of similar ability together," he explained. "If they're with far better players, they're going to be frustrated. If they're with players who are worse, they're going to be angry."

Mr. Rivera appeared to have the milk of human kindness by the gallon in every vein; at least 10 times in the space of four hours he heard "Can't Get Enough of Your Love," executed—in both senses of the word—by folks who would be well advised to cling ardently to their day jobs. At least eight times he got a serenade of



William Brannan

"Mississippi Queen." To the amiable Mr. Rivera, each time was the first time. "Hold on, I've got the president of RCA on the phone," he charmingly told Alice Young, 43, a vice president of finance at a mental health center in Philadelphia and one of the 12 women campers, after her cover of Fleetwood Mac's "Rhiannon."

Ms. Young attended courtesy of her husband, who paid the fee as a 20th anniversary present. For Richard Reiss, a financial adviser and drummer, camp was a 50th birthday present from his girlfriend. "I'm going to be homesick when camp is over," he announced. For John

*A fantasy camp that lets people know what it's like to be a rock star for a week.*

Sullivan, managing director of institutional sales at Kudlow & Co., and a bass player, it was a 40th birthday gift from his wife. "Some guys play golf for five days. For me it'll be five days in a rehearsal studio. I'm putting out my fourth CD this week," he added. "I'm going to send it to you FedEx."

OK, so here was the drill. Breakfast; practice with your group (band names included High Anxiety, Jerry's Kids, Black Slate and World Vibe). Lunch; practice with your band. Dinner; camper-counselor jam sessions. Meals featured chalk talks by guest artists like Marky Ramone, The Band founder Levon Helm and Grand Funk Railroad engineer Mark Farnier. The only no-show was Kiss guitarist Ace Frehley, reportedly injured in a fall. "Glad it didn't happen here," mut-

tered a counselor, "or we'd have to deal with the liability."

On a rainy Thursday morning, in a rehearsal room just off the lobby at SIR Studio, a band soon dubbed Captain Jack and the Blades—in tribute to Jack Blades, who stepped in when the group's bass player went AWOL—was struggling to find its rhythm.

"It's all about raising it up a notch. Don't lose the tempo," Mr. Blades admonished musicians who had unwittingly turned Billy Joel's "You May Be Right" into a dirge. "Singers, I don't want any hesitation. Even if you're doing it wrong, don't show fear."

"This is just foreplay," said a band member.

"Bad foreplay," countered one of the guitarists.

The acid (rock) test came Sunday night at The Bottom Line, the lower Manhattan club where campers' spouses, children and friends, hereafter known as their entourages, cheered and operated camcorders while the bands vied for awards like best costume, coolest band, best cover song, best original song, best cover of a song by The Who, best band vocals, best individual vocal, best camper.

"We sounded horrible the first day. Now we sound—good," said Mr. Reiss.

"It was a wonderful experience. I learned to jam more and not to be stuck reading music. And the stars were so personable. They went out of their way to teach us," said Ms. Young, who was named best keyboardist and whose band, Jerry's Kids, nabbed the prize for best attitude.

For many participants, particularly those who were members of rock groups in high school and college, camp provided a chance to answer that nagging question: Could they have been contenders? "I always wonder how far I could have gotten," said harmonica player-vocalist Craig Langweiler, vice president of a financial services firm in Yardley, Pa.

Don't call us, we'll call you, is what Derek St. Holmes would tell the majority. "But you know what," he adds. "God bless 'em. Hence, the word 'fantasy.'"

Ms. Kaufman last wrote for the Journal on the Broadway Show League's softball teams.