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# Take 5 with Jim Newsom

By Jeff Maisey

Award-winning Norfolk-based singer/songwriter Jim Newsom has eight albums to his credit as a solo act, a member of Mountaintide, and as a jazz artist. These recordings include “New Set of Dreams” (2018), “Coffee & Fried Steak,” (2017) and “Jazz on the James” (2004) featuring his uncle Tommy Newsom on sax.

Newsom recently took a few minutes to answer a few questions about his headlining concert at Suffolk Center.

**You’re performing at the Suffolk Center, which was your former high school, 50 years after graduating. How ironic is this for you?**

I wouldn’t use the word “ironic.” It’s pretty cool, actually. The Suffolk High School building holds many wonderful memories of my teenage years. I admit to wearing rose colored glasses when looking back at my life, but it really was a joyous time to be young and optimistic. As I sing in my song, “A Mighty Cry,” I looked ahead to a “future as unbounded as the sky.”

My graduating class had 125 people in it; the entire school, grades 8-12, had around 650 or so total. It was a great setting, not exactly “Leave It to Beaver,” but a safe and empowering space in which to come of age. I was voted “craziest” of my senior class, so I guess I must’ve made the most of every moment.

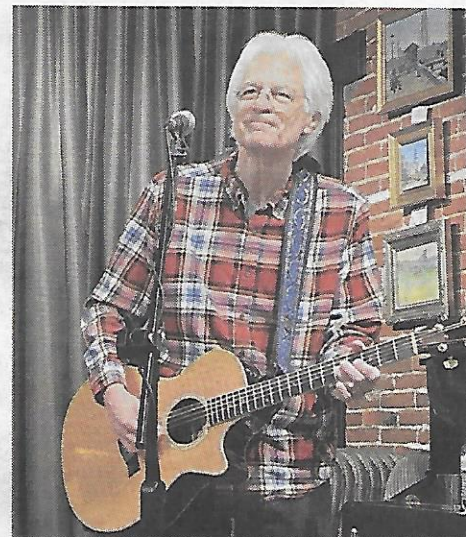
**Did you play music in bands or as a solo folk singer during your high school years?**

I was mostly playing sports, to tell you the truth, while being constantly plugged into rock and roll music, banging it out on the family piano in our living room. I was the guy who knew about the latest music before it got to our area because I read *Rolling Stone*, *Creem* and other alternative magazines, and listened late into the night to WABC in New York, WBZ in Boston, and other 50,000 watt stations from afar.

I bought a flute from a girlfriend in the SHS marching band for \$25 during my senior year. My career as a performing musician subsequently took off during my college years, in bands, primarily as lead singer and flute player. I became a solo singer-songwriter-guitarist upon graduation from Virginia Tech.

**What music influenced you during your senior year and why?**

The most influential at that point was music that was commenting on the state of the world, protest music, but particularly that which offered hopefulness: Felix Cavaliere’s songs with The Rascals, especially “People Got to Be Free” and “Ray of Hope,” and the album *Freedom Suite*;



Steppenwolf’s *Monster*; the first Crosby Stills & Nash album and *Chicago Transit Authority*. The Beatles, Stones, Hendrix, Motown, Dylan, Johnny Cash, Iron Butterfly, The Association.

Jethro Tull and Herbie Mann entered my life (thus the flute purchase). I discovered Frank Zappa, Ten Years After, Moody Blues, MC5, Steve Miller. There was Tommy James’ “Crystal Blue Persuasion,” Edwin Starr’s “War” and the happy sounds of the Friends of Distinction’s “Grazing in the Grass,” as well as the music from *Hair*.

I worked for the Recreation Department as a junior league referee and managed the tennis courts in summer ’69 between my last two years of high school. I spent all my earnings at the Band Box, buying stuff I’d read about or taking a chance on albums with interesting covers.

**What material will you be performing in March at Suffolk Center?**

We do mostly original songs in concert, from my most recent albums plus a few new things I’ve written since *New Set of Dreams* came out in October 2018. Several of my songs draw from experiences growing up there.

**What’s on your performance and recording agenda for the rest of 2020?**

I have a batch of new songs, as well as some original holiday material, so we are planning to record in the not-too-distant future.

As for live performance, I have no idea what tomorrow may bring. I’m mighty happy to still get to do the thing I love the most—making music—and bringing smiles to the faces of those who are listening. It’s a blast playing with Gail Keller Smith on keyboards and Rick Jebavy on drums, so we plan to keep going as long as folks will have us.

Jim Newsom  
& The Cloudless Sky  
March 13  
Suffolk Center  
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