



JEAN SHIFRIN / Staff
Photos of Free and Bad Company fill a wall in Lucy Piller's office. A dedicated rock fan, she also finds space on her walls and Web site to promote the careers of several local musicians.

Fan: Bond with band ripens into friendship

Continued from F1

past few decades, and Kirke rewarded her devotion with a special treat for her 50th birthday last year. He came down and played a solo acoustic set in her house and jammed with some local musicians.

"She called me, and I didn't hesitate," Kirke says. "She's been so valuable to us. She's more a friend now. I thought it was just a small way to pay her back."

When she talks about the band, you can still see the smitten London teenager that spent three hours in a record store listening to the band's first album, "Tons of Sobs," before taking it home. Her eyes light up, and the enthusiasm transports you back to the end of the '60s.

"I had a Saturday job at a card shop in Central London," she begins. "I went out for lunch, and I passed a store that had 'Tons of Sobs' plastered all over the window."

The bleak cover image of Free's bluesy debut album piqued her curiosity. "I walked in and there was this music playing — I think it was 'I'm a Mover.' After it finished, I said to them, 'Can I hear that song again?' And they gave me a booth where I could go in and listen. I must have been in there two, three hours. I went right through my lunch. Of course, I bought the album. Went home and played it, played it, played it."

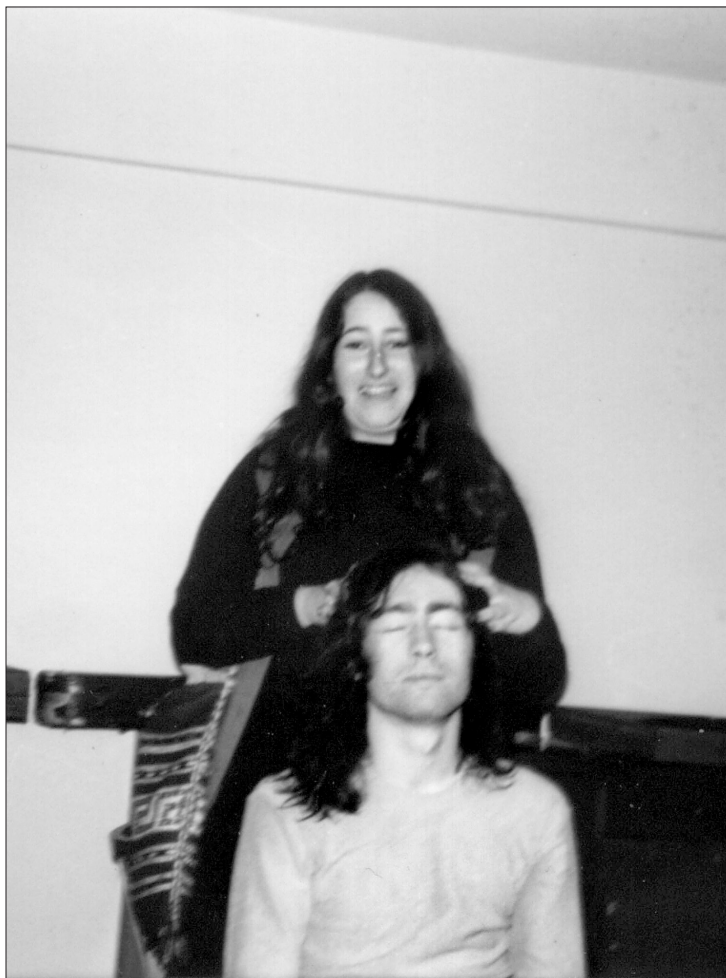
Soon after that, she went to see Free at a club she frequented to hear reggae and one of its popular sub-genres, bluebeat. Observing the "hippie-ish" crowd, the young woman in mod clothes felt she had "arrived on a different planet."

When she recalls the show, it sounds like a life-altering experience. "That memory of that first time I saw them will never, ever leave my mind. I hear the music. As I talk to you, I can close my eyes and [I'm back] on the train when I was leaving the venue, and I remember looking out the window in the Underground — nothing out there, it's black, it's tunnel — and with the ringing of the high note, and I'm like paralysed and thinking, 'That was the most amazing thing I just experienced.' That was the beginning."

Piller had discovered the soundtrack of her life and would go on to see Free 33 times, becoming acquainted with the band's members. Camera in hand, she also amassed a treasure trove of photos that capture the youthful energy of a band that would live a short but influential life.

About 25 years passed between that first encounter and the launch of Allrightnow.com. The site's name (after Free's biggest hit) and concept was suggested by her husband, Robert, a software architect in the financial industry and a native of Switzerland. He's still the man behind the site's technological aspects. "I'm just grateful that Robert can keep me at home to do this," she says. "He got a job, and I wasn't allowed to work. I wasn't a green-card holder then. I am now, but now I'm so busy with this."

For Piller, Allrightnow.com is not just a matter of posting information and memorabilia. She's built a community. That



Courtesy of Lucy Piller
Lucy Piller playfully coaxes Free's frontman Paul Rodgers to hold his head up for a backstage photo in 1970 in England. She was a teenager in London when she first fell in love with the band's music, and she's been a loyal fan ever since.

Drummer Kirke picks up guitar

Simon Kirke has provided the beat for some great rock anthems: "All Right Now," "Feel Like Makin' Love," "Rock and Roll Fantasy," "Can't Get Enough." Each was a Top 20 hit in the '70s — the first for Free, the last three for Bad Company.

In recent years, he's scored independent films, played with Ringo Starr and started a company called Rockstarz to produce instructional DVDs. He's planning a United Nations-affiliated show that will showcase drumming from around the world.

He'll always be a drummer, and a particularly fine one, but he'll be front and center on acoustic guitar tonight in Gwinnett County. This new phase started with some club shows around the country last year.

"I did a couple of acoustic songs with Bad Company, so it's not as if I'm not used to getting out from behind the kit and strolling to the front of the stage," Kirke says. "But to be up there for an hour, 75 minutes was a little daunting."

Simon Kirke with John Waite. 7:30 tonight. \$19-\$35. Gwinnett Performing Arts Center, 6400 Sugarloaf Parkway, Duluth. 770-813-7600, www.gwinnettcenter.com.

community might span the globe, but sometimes its citizens make a pilgrimage to her office, which they call "the shrine."

It's lined with framed, signed photos and crammed with bulging books and boxes of memorabilia, including the diary of Piller the teenage fan, which she pulls out to search for the exact date of that first live brush with Free (it was Sunday, May 4, 1969).

The fellow fans she gets to know well are sometimes invited to stay in the upstairs guest room, where the walls are covered with several large images of Free and Bad Company frontman Paul Rodgers, whom she also keeps in touch with.

Fans from as far away as South Africa have drifted off to dreamland under Rodgers' smoldering gaze.

Those visitors are sure to get a dose of local musical color, too. She may have a special connection with Free and Bad Company, but she's also a champion of local talent. On many weekend nights, you might see her at local venues like Marietta blues club Darwin's or Kennesaw's Fee-Lay

Gumbo.

Free might be her shining beacon of musical brilliance, but Piller speaks with zeal about local bluesy rockers like Andrew Black and Mike Martin, and she gives them space on her site.

She's always turning more people on to the locals she champions.

"I see her at almost every show I do," says Martin. "She's very supportive. And she's almost always got somebody with her: somebody from Canada, somebody from England, somebody from out of state, and if not that, some of her family."

Her enthusiasm for the hometown talent would thrill any tourist board.

Piller, who has spent short stints in a number of North American cities because of her husband's job, seems determined to be here a while.

"He would like to move somewhere to retire," she says of Robert, but it seems she has other ideas. "If it's not broken, don't fix it. I tell people Atlanta has music here seven nights a week — and first-class music — so why would anybody want to move?"

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