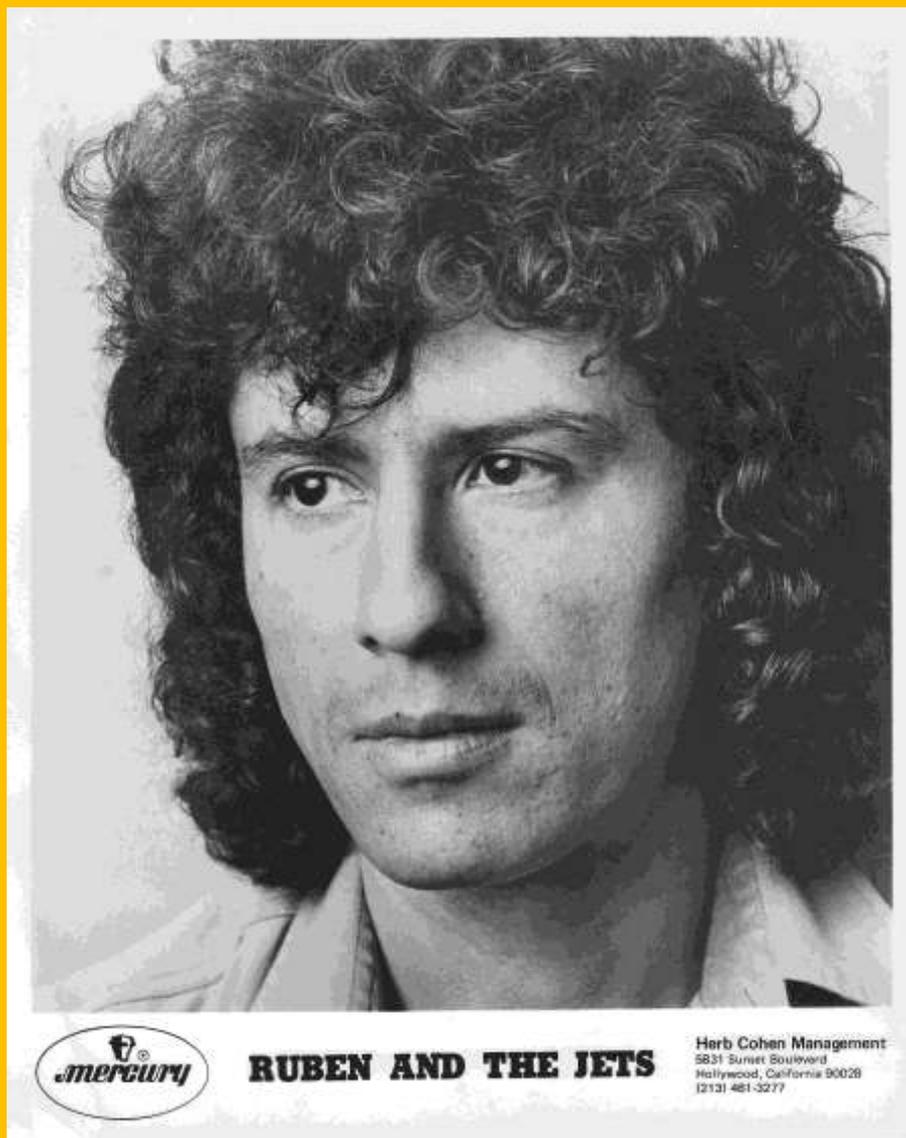


# For Those Of You Who Might Not Know

To celebrate 20 years of bringing you Zappa and related news via my Idiot Bastard website, I am writing an essay each month that provides answers to some of those questions no one asks. Yes, I am giving you 12 FUQs (Frequently Unasked Questions) in 2020!

## #6: The Real Ruben



*Cruising With Ruben & The Jets* (1968) is the fourth studio album by the Mothers, and the first to contain tracks not written (or co-written) by Frank "Zipper" Zappa: Ray Collins wrote *Anything* and *Deseri* – the latter, together with Paul Buff. The album is

supposedly performed by a fictitious Chicano doo-wop band. In his liner notes, FZ writes that, "*Ruben Sano was 19 when he quit the group to work on his car,*" and the band decided to keep the name when it hit the big time. He ends the story saying, "*Soon! Chapter Two...*" In a subsequent interview, he claimed he'd "*always thought it would be nice to have a real Ruben & The Jets group so that we could tour with them.*"

Enter the real Ruben.

Rubén Ladrón de Guevara was born in East LA on October 17, 1942. Of Mexican descent, his father a musician, he very quickly found he could sing and learned to play the trumpet before he was a teenager. Rubén's maternal Aunt Anita gave him the nickname 'Sluggo', after the character in Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy* comic strip. (Mike Keneally coincidentally named his 1997 album with Beer For Dolphins after the self-same "pugnacious little punk".)

As with FZ, the 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle* had an epiphanous effect on Rubén. In the early 60s, he formed a vocal trio called the Van Teers, whose repertoire included *Justine!* – a song co-written by Don "Sugarcane" Harris (with Dewey Terry) and also covered by Mark Volman and Howard Kaylan (né Kaplan) with prototype Turtles, The Crossfires (see also *Road Tapes, Venue #3*). Rubén's trio evolved into the Apollo Brothers, who got a recording contract and played El Monte Legion Stadium alongside the likes of Richard Berry And The Pharaohs and The Olympics. Now married with a child, the gigs unfortunately dried up and Rubén had to resort to cleaning houses.

He thought his big break had come in August 1965 when, as Jay P. Mobey, he appeared on an episode of the American musical variety show *Shindig!* Also on the bill were his rock 'n' roll hero, Bo Diddley, and Tina Turner (you can check them out singing *Can Your Monkey Do The Dog* here). Rubén reckons he could have copped-off with Tina behind Ike's back, but it didn't happen; the offer of a regular spot on *Shindig!* coincided with the show being moved out of its Wednesday night-time spot and eventual cancellation, shattering his rock 'n' roll dreams. (He did sort of reunite with Tina later, as they both sing backing vocals during

the *Don't Eat The Yellow Snow* suite.)

A recording session with David Gates, shortly to form Bread, and Bruce Botnick saw another change of name – to Montezuma – but a record deal didn't ensue.

Rubén first met Zappa backstage at a concert celebrating the release of the Mothers' doo-wop pastiche album at the Shrine Auditorium.

A few years later, keyboard player Bob Harris (who passed away five months before Frank) had just come off the road with the vaudeville Mothers and bumped into his old friend Rubén. He suggested he should meet Frank properly, called him up, and they went to his house that same night. Says Guevara, *"Frank remembered our initial meeting at the Shrine, then we talked about music: Bartok and Stravinsky to Little Richard and The Penguins, as he pulled out his private 45s collection. We listened and sang along with his and my favourites until 5am. Then he asked me if I'd like to form a real Ruben And The Jets, saying 'I'll produce the album, and you can tour with the Mothers as an opening band to promote it.'"*

At first, Guevara was reluctant but recognised it was an important opportunity. He later said, *"Aside from his genius, he was a great dad. That was one of the main reasons I decided to work with him."* So with Frank's help (he was now, *"in the wheelchair and had some time to help with the project"*), Rubén pieced together an eight-piece band featuring three musicians who worked with Zappa (Jim "Motorhead" Sherwood and Tony "The Fastest Working Man In Show Business" Duran, who both passed away in 2011; and Robert "Frog" Camarena, who sadly died in 2018) and recorded four demos. Frank took the demos *"to various record companies to see if anyone was interested in financing the rest of the album. And they were turned down by every company except Mercury. The reason Mercury picked them up is because there was a man there named Denny Rosencrantz, who just loved 1950s rhythm & blues, and he thought they were great. He signed them up, and I finished off the album."*

Miss Pamela of the GTOs attended many of the band's rehearsals and described Ruben in her memoir *I'm With The Band* (1987) as, *"a hunky hot Chicano with satin-smooth olive skin and*

*coal coloured eyes...within days Ruben and I were holed up in a four dollar hotel in downtown LA on a squeaky, creaky, saggy old bed, sharing huevos rancheros and jalapeño-flavoured kisses.” But the attraction was purely physical and the relationship ended as quickly as it started: says Ruben, “Unfortunately, I was too busy with the band to take it further. Who knows what heights we could have hit.”*

The Jets’ tenor saxist, Bob “Buffalo” Roberts, also dated another GTO: Linda Sue “Sparkie” Parker (aka Miss Sparky). Duran and Ruben wrote the song *Sparkie* for her. (Sparkie Parker later provided backing vocals on Frank’s 1976 *Zoot Allures* album – as did Ruben, who sang all of the harmony parts on *Find Her Finer*. On posthumous reissues of the album, Sparkie is credited as ‘Sharkie Barker’ – “Gail’s attempt to be witty and condescending,” she told me, “Frank would never have allowed that nasty name change.”).

*For Real* was released in 1973, with the band now being managed by Herb Cohen. Two tracks feature George Duke (on piano), Aynsley Dunbar and Alex “Erroneous” Dmochowski: opener *If I Could Only Be Your Love Again*, which Frank wrote and arranged, and *Mah Man Flash*. Ruben says Frank also composed doo-wop rocker *The Weenie-Back Wino Walk*, which didn’t make it onto the album. While Frank produced the album, he only plays guitar on one track: *Dedicated To The One I Love*.

The final track on the album was *All Night Long*, R&B saxophonist Joe Houston’s 1954 hit, which Zappa would later quote in his live favourite *Advance Romance*.

The real Ruben And The Jets opened for The Mothers at several west coast concerts in December 1972 and March 1973. In addition to those already mentioned, Guevara also provided background vocals for FZ on *Roxy & Elsewhere*.

Ruben And The Jets recorded a follow-up album, which was engineered by Kerry McNabb and had its sleeve designed by Cal Schenkel utilising a photograph of the band (plus Sparkie, another girl and the band, now minus Motorhead) taken by Ed Caraeff. Frank’s main involvement was its title: *Con Safos*. Rubén had earlier explained to FZ that it was a Chicano/Mexican American

activist street term, broadly meaning ‘fuck you if you don’t like it!’

The band split-up shortly thereafter, but in 1976 (the United States Bicentennial year), Ruben released doo-wop versions of *The Star Spangled Banner* and *America The Beautiful* on seven inch red, white and blue vinyl. In his spoken intro to the latter, Ruben dedicates the song to his three dogs Benny, Martha and Baby, and on the back of the sleeve is a quote attributed to ‘FZ, June 1955’: “The present day Pachuco refuses to die!”; both are of course references to the liner notes of the Mothers’ 1968 album.

Guevara can be seen in Cheech & Chong’s 1978 film *Up In Smoke* as trumpet player Tom. Cheech Marin’s character, Pedro De Pacas, refers to Ruben And The Jets in the final scene of said film. Marin would later pen the liner notes to the posthumous *Greasy Love Songs* album, which contained the original 1968 vinyl stereo mix of *The Mothers’ Cruising With Ruben & The Jets*.

Known today as Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara, he is the producer of a number of Chicano rock compilations, a performance artist, poet, short story writer, historian, journalist and activist. His marvellous memoir, *Confessions Of A Radical Chicano Doo-Wop Singer* (University of California Press, 2018), is well worth a read.

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