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ARIA HALL OF FAME
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Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons

By the time Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons was formed in 1975 Maltese-born Joe had already spent some ten years in the Melbourne music scene and was well-known and admired amongst his peers. From mid-sixties R&B group the King Bees he moved to blues purists the Adderly Smith Blues Band, who sacked him for sounding too much like Mick Jagger and for being too much of a showman. But Joe was just doing what came naturally. He spent the early seventies in more innovative, even eccentric bands like Lipp and the Double Dekker Brothers, the Sharks and the Pelaco Brothers.

In late 1975 Ross Wilson decided to produce a version of Chuck Berry's 'Run Rudolph Run', the kind of retro rocker Daddy Cool used to record, as a one-off Christmas single for Mushroom Records. Ross asked Joe Camilleri to sing and play on the record. In Maltese "Joe" is "Zep". The name put on the single was Jo Jo Zep and his Little Helpers. To promote the single it seemed a good idea to put together a band comprising some of the other people who had worked on the record including former Daddy Cool members Gary Young & Wayne Burt. On stage they called themselves Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons.

The single wasn't a hit, but the band stayed together. The first Falcons' single 'Beating Around The Bush' was one of the tracks on the Ross Wilson soundtrack on the Oz label for a movie called 'Oz'. Wayne Burt became the main songwriter for Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons. He wrote great songs in the R&B / soul idiom that was the Falcons' stock and trade in the beginning. Joe Camilleri didn't entertain the idea of writing songs himself until Wayne left and they had to find new songs. Written with band members Jeff Burstin and Tony Faehse, the new songs shifted the band into the 'new wave' rock which was sweeping though the world at the time - as both an answer to, and support of the punk rock's demand for change in the latter Seventies. The band was paid a great compliment in 1977 when they were asked to tour Australia opening for the King of new wave - Elvis Costello. Elvis and Joe were men of similar musical conviction and Elvis thought so much of Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons' 'So Young' single, he ended up recording a version himself which was a great compliment considering Elvis' own prodigious songwriting talents.

In 1978 the Oz label folded and Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons moved back to Mushroom, still moving between their original R&B and new contemporary sound. Mushroom was very eager to connect with the 'new wave' in England and had brought over English producer and latter day Procol Harum member Peter Solley to produce records for them. One night Solley saw Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons perform and was so blown away with them on stage and on the strength of a new song, 'Shape I'm In' requested that he produce the band.

The partnership with Peter Solley brought the group to major success. Until now they'd been a cult band, and known for their live performances particularly in Melbourne were they were turning away people from jam packed venues like The Manhattan Hotel & Martini's. On stage there was never a set list. They decided what they played on the spot. Now they had hit singles ('Hit And Run', 'Shape I'm In', 'All I Wanna Do') and albums that sold nationally ('Screaming Targets', 'Hats Off Step Lively'). They were major contenders at home and on the Next Big Thing list internationally.

Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons toured the US with great success in 1980 playing clubs and small concerts many of which were broadcast live on FM radio. The band were so well thought of in the States on that tour that the late Bill Graham asked them to play in San Francisco at the Oakland Coliseum in front of 65,000 people who had come to see a heavy rock line up including Journey, Cheap Trick, Black Sabbath and Molly Hatchet. Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons were on first and the heavy crowd did not respond well to 'Hit and Run' so much so that Falcon member Wilbur Wilde recalls a humorous incident when someone in the crowd threw an egg which landed near Joe's sax prompting a flippant remark from Joe "that was a rotten shot, no wonder you lost the Vietnam War". The crowd then threw lots of other stuff and Wilbur hid under the piano, but through sheer power of the performance they got the crowd in the end.

In June 1981 Joe Camilleri disbanded the Falcons. He was planning to record a solo album, but the record company convinced him otherwise so Joe put together a new line up and went back into the studio with Peter Solley. The new extended band was known simply as Jo Jo Zep. The resulting salsa influenced 'Cha' album explored a bold new direction, with Jane Clifton brought in to sing on the album's hit single 'Taxi Mary'.

Later together with ex-Split Enz Eddie Reynor, Joe produced 'Losing Game', the band's first single in America, where they toured to support its release. 'Losing Game' was Jo Jo Zep's last single. Since Joe finally went on to other things, happily for their many fans, Jo Jo Zep & The Falcons have reunited a number of times for some mighty performances, but essentially their story was finished. One memorable reunion happened at the Narooma Blues & Rockabilly Festival followed by a performance at The Basement in Sydney in 2004, which was released on DVD.

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