

Houston guitarist Rocky Hill dies at 62

By **ANDREW DANSBY** Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

April 13, 2009, 4:24PM



CHRONICLE FILE

A statement claimed he died of "undisclosed complications of a medical condition."

Rocky Hill was described as "a monster on guitar," though over four decades he could be a difficult creature to find. His career dated back to the 1960s when he was a hotshot player with blue hair joined on bass by his brother Dusty in a psychedelic rock band. That a Google search on "Rocky Hill" turns out dozens of entries on a town in Connecticut and nearly nothing on the guitarist is testament to how good a musician can be without ever finding his rewards.

Hill died Friday at his Houston-area home; he was 62. A statement claimed he died of "undisclosed complications of a medical condition."

Documentation of Hill's career requires a hunt. One of the two albums he made with American Blues, a 13th Floor Elevators-inspired band he formed with Dusty in the late-'60s, can be found online for upwards of \$70 while the other is unavailable. His three solo albums can be found online, but are unlikely to be stocked at your local record shop. Still Hill was a flashy slide player with a gritty, soulful voice who always stated he was more interested in playing than making money.

John Rockford Hill was born Dec. 1, 1946. He was 10 or 11 when younger brother Dusty received a guitar for Christmas. But Hill was the child drawn to the instrument. He started out playing Jimmy Reed songs; years later Reed would have a slide piece custom made for Hill.

By 15 Hill was playing clubs in Dallas with his band the Starliners. Dusty learned to play bass guitar and also sang. They phased through a

Advertisement

Reminder: Send Flowers

Secretary's Day - April 22
Mother's Day - May 10

**Save 15%
Enter FD09**

800.216.6539
www.Boesen.com



Print Powered By  **FormatDynamics™**

series of band names before settling on American Blues, a trio featuring drummer Frank Beard. They dyed their hair blue and played psychedelic blues rock common to the era: The trippy echoed vocals on songs such as *All I Saw Was You* and Tim Hardin's *If I Were a Carpenter*; the twinge of folky pomposity that wafted through *Fugue for Lady Cherriff*.

But their 1967 debut album also showed a clear affinity for the blues evident on *Mercury Blues*.

The band split in 1969 and all three members moved to Houston. Beard was recruited by Houston guitarist Billy Gibbons of the Moving Sidewalks. They needed a bassist and Beard suggested Dusty; the new trio became ZZ Top.

"Dusty wanted to play rock 'n' roll," Hill told the Chronicle in 1979. "(Dusty) wanted to make some money. And he did. ... I wanted to play some blues. And I did."

Hill fell in with Lightnin' Hopkins, earning \$5 a night playing bass and fetching drinks for the blues legend, as well as carrying his guitar. "It was a great idea," he said, "but bad financially."

Hill's path was a bumpy one. There are stories of erratic periods with little or no performing and struggles with drugs and alcohol. Around the time of a 1972 interview with the Chronicle he was coming out of a period of inactivity and referenced trying to curb some of his chemical excesses.

Seven years later he was a fixture at Blues Wednesday at Anderson Fair, but still had no

album. Hill wouldn't cite a cause for the delay in making an album, but told the Chronicle, "I'm real hard-headed. I do things slowly. I have a certain way I go about doing things. I wanted to make sure everything was correct before I committed myself. ... I'm just real careful about what I do."

That care meant he didn't get around to making an album until 1982 when he released *Texas Shuffle*, which featured Hill singing in a gruff bluesy voice. His playing was predictably sharp. Still six more years passed before he released another album, *Rocky Hill*.

Hill should've been a sure thing in the 1980s. His brother's band was selling tens of millions of records of boogie-based mainstream rock, while Stevie Ray Vaughan, a Dallas guitarist eight years his junior, was also finally receiving his due. Hill suggested he still wasn't interested in chasing success. "My reputation is terrible for flaking out on people 'cause I always really have been true to my material and true to my art," he told the Chronicle. "I'm an artist, first and foremost."

After another lengthy break, Hill put out a lively album, *Midnight Creepers*, in 1994. We played when blues was not in vogue at all," he told the Chronicle in 1993. "Now that blues is very hip, I'm gonna do a rock 'n' roll band. My career is backwards."

Hill had played a show in Clear Lake in 2006, but according to an online comment by a family member, he'd been ill for more than the past year. He will be buried today in Como, where his mother was laid to rest. He's survived by his wife,

Advertisement



Reminder: Send Flowers

Secretary's Day - April 22
Mother's Day - May 10

**Save 15%
Enter FD09**

800.216.6539
www.Boesen.com

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

Joy Hill, his son, Christian L. Smith, brother Dusty, sister Sue Shadix and other family.

In lieu of flowers, the family has asked for donations to the Texas Liver Coalition.

andrew.dansby@chron.com

Advertisement



Reminder: Send Flowers
Secretary's Day - April 22
Mother's Day - May 10

Save 15%
Enter FD09

800.216.6539
www.Boesen.com

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™