Rick James

RICK JAMES:

Leader Of Subculture

When Rick James performs, the audience becomes a part of his scene. DAWN Magazine was present at one of his concerts, and left no doubt that he is indeed a leader the young crowd can relate to.

By Paula Brooks

The air around me felt charged — as if some high voltage battery was electrifying the room! The quiet buzz of ten different conversations rose another octave and took on new animation.

Vibrations too strong to ignore told me that something important was going on behind me! Turning quickly, afraid that I had missed the catalyst of this excitement, I could see some new faces in the long narrow hallway.

"There's Rick James!" It was hard to believe at first glance. This was a quiet young man, his head completely covered by a red sailor's cap. His eyes were hidden behind large red framed sunglasses.

A few minutes later Rick pulled off his hat and shook out his braids, while watching himself in a hallway mirror. It was like watching Clark Kent making that subtle, yet dynamic transformation into the awe-inspiring Superman.

"I feel great! I'll kill 'em, I'll knock 'em out," Rick shouted. He moved through the hallway outside his dressing room, joking and getting acquainted with everyone present.

We became involved and psyched up by his explosive nature. "Alright! Get it on!" was the group response. Excitement was building to a fever pitch. We knew it would be a good show.

Baltimore's Civic Center was packed, however the first seats started behind the orchestra pit. One minute Rick was on stage "Busting Out," and the next he was leaping into the orchestra pit and running up to the railing to shake hands with the audience.

Returning to the stage, Rick asked the audience to move closer, because he felt too far away from them. What followed was a classic example of crowd control.

Heedless of the frustrated security guards and the restricting ropes, the audience moved right up to the edge of the stage.

For the first time I acknowledged Rick as the subculture leader that he is. Rick was singing songs about smoking weed, loving freedom, and loving to make love. These were things that the entire audience seemed able to relate to.

Hippie Feelings

The feeling was very 1968 — It felt like the hippie era again. Woodstock, Jimi Hendrix, and pass that grass man! The crowd loved every minute of it and stayed on their feet most of the evening.

After the show, Rick invited us over to his hotel suite to conduct the interview. Rick's mother, Mrs. Betty Gladden and two of his brothers, Leroy Johnson, a lawyer in D.C. and William Johnson, head of security on Rick's tours were with him, along with some of the other group members.

We all took a minute to relax and mellow out after the tremendous "up" of the show.

Mrs. Gladden told me that she travels with her son whenever she feels like it. "If I get the urge to see him, I just go." Watching them interact, it is easy to see that they are very close.

Rick makes sure that Mom doesn't get left behind or feel out of place and he is quick to give her a hug or a kiss. The mother of four girls and four boys, Mrs. Gladden confided, "Rick was always different. He was born beating on pots with spoons. He could understand it, I couldn't."

Rick said, "Listening to people like Sonny Rollins, Coltrane, Bessie Smith and some down-home country blues singers that most people have never heard of, was a great inspiration to me."

He went so far as to teach himself to play the bass, piano and guitar. "I studied trombone and drums while I was in high school, but I never learned to read music. Music just comes to me naturally. I write the music and lyrics of all my songs."

I was impressed. I told Rick that his sound was very reminiscent of Hendrix, one of the most influential guitarists of the decade. He replied, "Really? He's one of my favorites. I joined the Navy underage and ended up going AWOL to Canada. I played with Neil Young and was with Steppenwolf for three years. That's how I got into Rock."

What kind of music are you playing now? How do you feel about disco? I asked. "We are calling our music New Wave Funk music. Our sound is like a musical ex-lax — we bring out the funk. Our symbol is a heart with wings.

"The heart means there's a lot of love in our group, and the wings stand for freedom. Music changes, like everything else. It doesn't stay the same. Two years from now, we'll be calling it something else. I have nothing against disco music as long as it's progressive. I think Donna Summers and musicians of her calibre are great."

I asked what projects Rick is working on now? "I'm doing a movie, which is the biggest thing in my life right now. I believe in video as a means of getting your

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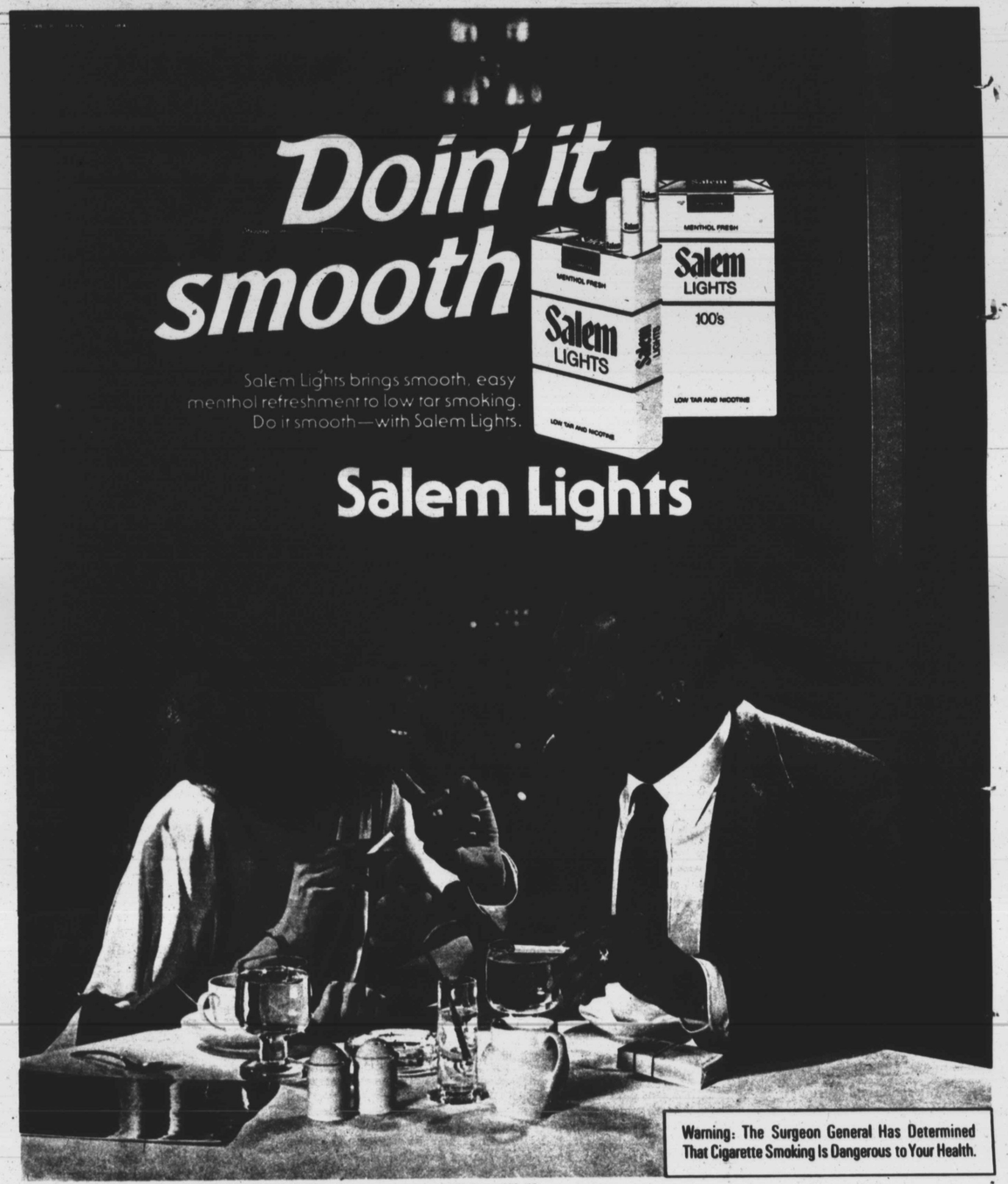

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