



says. “My philosophy was, if they didn’t like the music, they might like the beat, and if they liked the beat, they might come around to liking the music.”

“The Mexican,” he says, was not constructed democratically but rather dictated to the members: “I told the drummer, ‘Don’t do any fills, just keep the groove constant like in the soul days, and we’re gonna lay this crazy stuff over the top.’ Our bassist came from a blues background, so he got it, [but] it was difficult for me to tell our drummer not to play fills, because that’s what he got off on. I loved the massive orchestral arrangements in the spaghetti, Clint Eastwood westerns. I thought Morricone’s orchestration was pure genius. So I got this crazy idea to put “[For] a Few Dollars More” over the same drumbeat. Really, they were two different pieces—we segued it in and tagged that on at the end. I thought it was a nice instrumental break. As they say in [*This Is*] *Spinal Tap*, it was something between stupid and clever.”

Shacklock, who was also the band’s lead singer in its earliest stages, also wrote the song’s lyrics. “I’m someone who’s always been in favor of the underdog,” he says. “I wanted to [reflect] what it would be like on the other side, in Santa Anna’s army. Chico Fernandez was a fictional character that I made up. I figured there had to be one of those in the army.”

After A&R man Nick Mobbs caught a performance at London’s Marquee club, EMI/Harvest agreed to sign the band, under the condition they find a permanent lead singer, and a new name. “EMI wasn’t disrespectful to Alan’s singing,” recalls bassist Dave Hewitt. “They were saying, ‘You’re doing all these harmonic runs and intricate guitar playing, why sing lead too? It’s too much.’” During a round of tryouts, Janita “Jenny” Haan, an attractive, eighteen-year-old jolt of energy, instantly stood out. “Jenny was totally different: one, because she was female, but [also] because she was so athletic,” Hewitt recalls. “She was doing cartwheels and splits. We never thought of a female until she appeared, but when she did, it seemed really exciting.”

Though she was British, Haan had spent her adolescent years just outside of San Francisco, and, despite her youth, her powerful voice already evoked hippie heroes Janis Joplin and Grace Slick. “I was a free-spirited, San Franciscan type, so I’d put every ounce of energy and emotion into the songs and interpret them the way I felt,” Haan recalls. “I’d listen carefully to how the music was structured and match the intensities of the sounds with my voice.”

The quintet cut *First Base* at Abbey Road Studios with Beatles engineer Tony Clark in early 1972. In addition to “The Mexican,” it included covers of Frank Zappa’s “King Kong” and Jesse Winchester’s “Black Dog,” along with originals “Joker,” “The Runaways,” and “Wells Fargo,” which reprised the Western theme of “The Mexican.”

The name Babe Ruth was proposed by the band’s first manager. “We didn’t even know who Babe Ruth was, except for Janita,” Shacklock recalls. “She’d been a cheerleader in the U.S., so it just kind of fit. People used to think she was Ruth.”

Coincidentally, Shacklock’s friend Roger Dean, whose iconic album covers for Yes would define the prog-rock aesthetic, had just created a space-age baseball scene, which would become the cover art for *First Base* and, eventually, the band’s logo.

While *First Base* fared only modestly in the U.K., the band

found that in certain North American markets, particularly Quebec and the Midwest, they were instant superstars. “When we saw our first sales-figure statement, we immediately got in touch with promoters there,” Shacklock says. “ZZ Top opened for us in Milwaukee. It was bizarre.”

Out at Second

When it came to follow up *First Base*, Shacklock found that EMI was willing to give him unbelievable latitude. “It was the progressive-rock era,” Shacklock says. “Risks were being taken by the record companies—they had almost unlimited budgets in those days. Being classically trained, I was a kid in a candy store. I said, ‘Oh, we’ll have eight cellos on this, book a horn section for this.’ We had guys from the London Symphony Orchestra come and play.”

However, for various reasons, their sophomore LP, *Amar Caballero*, would not be *Second Base*. “My publisher had said, ‘Hey, you’re a good writer. Can you get a song to Diana Ross? The Temptations?’” Shacklock recalls, proudly. “I was trying really hard, ‘cause these were my legends. It didn’t happen, so I adapted these songs for the band, and it turned into a mishmash.”

Meanwhile, the group replaced drummer Dick Powell with Ed Spevock and experienced an unfortunate series of events that drove keyboardist Dave Punshon from the band. Following a gig in Liverpool, their van flipped over, seriously injuring several members; at a show in Sunderland, they were severely beaten by bouncers. “Dave was following the Maharishi at that time, and experimenting with drugs, and he just freaked out,” Haan says. “It was a devastating blow, because we kind of lost the signature sound, the harmonic runs that Al and Dave did together.”

To a degree, their third album, 1975’s *Babe Ruth*, was closer in spirit to *First Base*, with interpretations of Morricone’s “A Fistful of Dollars,” William Bell and Judy Clay’s “Private Number,” and Curtis Mayfield’s “We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue” scattered among more straightforward rock numbers. “There was a consciousness within the band about race, which we always tried to address, lyrically, in a passive way,” says Haan, who, by this time, was taking on a greater role when it came to songwriting.

However, the edge the band sought to bring to the album was dulled somewhat by decisions beyond their control. “EMI didn’t trust me anymore,” Shacklock says, “because I went off the rails on the second one. So they gave us a producer who wasn’t really right for us. We lost the plot a little through the powers that be coming on too heavy.” As Babe Ruth headed to the studio to record its fourth LP, *Stealin’ Home*, an increasingly frustrated Shacklock left the band. “It was like somebody cut off my right arm,” Hewitt says, “because Alan’s writing was what the band was all about. From then on, it was just the dregs of fulfilling the contract. The soul was gone.”

Stealin’ Home would produce one vital song in “Elusive.” The up-tempo track ironically found the band influenced by disco, a style whose development the band may have influenced. Released as a single in 1976, it became a minor hit in New York and a northern-soul favorite. By this time, though, Haan and Hewitt had left to start the short-lived Jenny Haan’s Lion. The Babe Ruth that recorded 1976’s dismal *Kid’s Stuff* included no original members.

Hewitt blames the group’s management for its disintegration.

