

I hear the name NRBQ, and I can't help but remember eating one of those old, soggy, school lunch meat planks on a bun: the Rib-a-Q, or as my senior year anthropology teacher affectionately referred to it – the Rib-a-Junk. Fortunately for me, and the rest of the audience, the Rams Head On Stage was serving up only the best, hot country-rock funk on Tuesday night, and not the dreaded pork meat substitute from my high school nightmares past.

NRBQ, which, for the unacquainted, stands for New Rhythm and Blues Quintet (and later Quartet), has been around since the late 60s, churning out an eclectic selection of music, and pulling from influences as wide-ranging as jazz, country, funk, R & B, soul, and classic rock – all with a little bit of playful and often zany keyboard experimentation by band leader, and only remaining original member, Terry Adams.

Adams' personal website features a quote from All Music Guide, calling Adams "one of music's true originals," and the nomination is spot on. A wildly enthusiastic 65-year old, he spent most of the show dancing around and slamming away on his dual keyboards with open handed glee and full forearm shivers.

Adams' high-energy attitude and improvisational talent is equally matched by that of his younger counterparts – Scott Ligon, Pete Donnelly, and Conrad Choucroun. Everyone in the band got a chance to sing and solo, and the results were exhilarating. The foursome jumped right into their first song the second their feet touched the stage, and the rest of the set list (or lack thereof, considering Adams never uses a set list) was just as unrelenting, diverse and enjoyable. This was party music from beginning to start and Adams tried to get everyone in on the action.

Halfway through the show, an older, white-haired gentleman sat down right next to me near the entrance for a few moments, before suddenly standing up and making his way towards stage, where he proceeded to mosey on up behind a secondary drum set. I looked around, confused, waiting for security to stop this suspected senile audience member from reliving his glory days and ruining the show. Just then, a trombone blast from the other side of the room diverted my attention and as my neck snapped back to the older man, I saw him and other newcomers gathering around the stage, picking up instruments and playing along. In a matter of seconds, the band had doubled in size, adding complementary percussion (Bobby Lloyd Hicks), a second guitarist (Casey McDonough), a saxophone, and trombone.

I never knew what to expect next from this band. They played a mellow "Cold, Cold Heart" Hank Williams cover right after a rousing rendition of "We Travel the Spaceways," an NRBQ classic packed with instrumental jams and Zappa-like psychedelic freak outs abound. A particularly surprising moment for the audience came when the band started into a cover of "Turn, Turn, Turn" by the Byrds: a song clearly not found in their usual repertoire, as band members shared and squinted at lyrics sheets passed around only moments before the song began. The crowd loved it. One audience member said immediately after, "See that's what I love about these guys! That was totally out of leftfield...but it was great!"

NRBQ's versatility knows no bounds, and they sure know how to string a series of completely unrelated songs together into one epic bar band party playlist. After Adams announced the end of the show, his band laughed, and Adams asked, "When have I ever announced when the show is going to end?" Ligon replied, "Never in forty years..." The band stepped off stage only briefly, before returning for a six song encore, complete with 70s radio hit "Me and the Boys," one song sung partly in French, and two solo songs from guitarist Pete Donnelly (of the Figgs).

Just like Adams, this show was truly original. If you were in the audience, consider yourself one of the lucky ones, because there aren't many other bands like that out there right now. For the interested and adventurous, check out NRBQ's Ludlow Garage 1970 album – a sprawling live album from the band's beginnings that showcases their unique blend of countrified boogie rock and progressive experimentation. It sounds way ahead of its time. If you want to learn more about NRBQ or band members' side projects, check out NRBQ.com or terryadams.net.

-Matt Ellis

Matt Ellis graduated from the University of Maryland last year, where he majored in journalism with a minor in Geographic Information Systems. He grew up in Western Howard County, Maryland and currently works in Edgewater, Md. His father indoctrinated him on classic rock vinyl and old 80s cassette tapes, leading to a lifelong obsession with the music of that bygone era. He has written for a number of different publications including National Geographic, Spinner.com, the Montgomery County Sentinel, and other local papers and websites.