

THE SIEGEL-SCHWALL BAND

A Quantum Leap Beyond The Blues

By Wayne Robins
STAFF WRITER

CORKY SIEGEL and Jim Schwall were university music students when they began playing clubs together. It was the right time (the mid 1960s), and the right place (Chicago) for them to get an advanced education in the blues.

"We were playing our second real gig at a club in Chicago called Big John's," Siegel recalled a few days ago. "I remember some guy coming up and wanting to play harmonica. People said, let him sit in — it's Little Walter."

The Siegel-Schwall Band soon became a reliable attraction on the blues-and-rock circuit. Although its leaders have been pursuing separate interests since the mid-1970s, the Siegel-Schwall Band still gets together every four or five years. After a gig at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., tonight, it will appear at Tramps tomorrow night for its first New York appearance in about 20 years.

If the Siegel-Schwall Band never had the national prominence of the other groups from that era, it may be because of the group's laid-back attitude toward touring. "We toured carefully," Siegel said. "We played the places we wanted to play. We played in San Francisco a lot; Los Angeles, only once. I remember talking to Bill Graham; we had just played the Fillmore [in San Francisco] and he asked where we were going next. We said, back to Chicago. He said, 'You came here from Chicago, then you're going back? That's it?' We said, 'Well, we're gonna stop in Boulder.' But, yeah — we'd go out, play some place we like and go back home. Because our overhead was so low we did great."

While many white blues bands in the 1960s tried to achieve authenticity by copying the songs, styles and musical mannerisms of their heroes, The Siegel-Schwall Band wrote many of its own songs and sang in its own unashamedly middle-class voices.

"I had such love and respect for the blues and the blues masters that I would have loved to imitate them; essentially, our style developed from my failure at the imitation," Siegel said with a laugh. ("... Where We Walked," an anthology of The Siegel-Schwall Band's material from 1966 to 1970, when it recorded for Vanguard Records, has recently been issued on compact disc.)

But Siegel and Schwall's diverse musical backgrounds also kept them from being just another group of derivative blues wannabes. "Jim, when we started, wasn't a blues guitarist, he was mostly a bluegrass player," Siegel said. "Growing up, I had heard Gershwin, rock and roll, country music, jazz, Dixieland and pop music, and I loved it all," Siegel said. "But the blues was the foundation of all that music. So when I heard the blues, it hit home — it's the foundation of American music."



The Siegel-Schwall band will be playing 'mostly classical venues' tomorrow night at Tramps.

Blues may be the common denominator for the styles Siegel mentioned, but he has devoted himself to taking the music a quantum leap further. A chance meeting in a Chicago club with conductor Seiji Ozawa led Siegel to begin the exploration of classical music with blues.

"Seiji Ozawa would come in to see Siegel-Schwall night after night," Siegel said. "One night he came up to us and said, 'How'd you like to jam with my band?' His band, at the time, was the Chicago Symphony."

With composer William Russo, Siegel and Schwall collaborated on "Three Pieces for Blues Band and Symphony Orchestra," which was eventually released as an album by the classical label Deutsche Grammophon.

Jim Schwall now is studying for his PhD in music composition from the University of Wisconsin. Siegel has continued to pursue the blues-classical hybrid. His current concept is called Chamber Blues, which features a classical string quartet and a tabla player in addition to blues harmonica and blues piano.

"We play mostly classical venues, because the music sounds mostly classical. It's the exploration of how these two forms could blend and become another new form."

Tomorrow's show at Tramps should feature The Siegel-Schwall Band back to basics. In addition to Siegel on piano, harmonica and vocals and Schwall on guitar and vocals, the band includes S-O-S Band veteran Rollo Radford on bass, and Sam Lay, the revered Chicago blues drummer best known as the rhythmic anchor of the original Paul Butterfield Blues Band.

Siegel-Schwall Band. Tomorrow night at Tramps, 45 W. 21st St., Manhattan. Shows at 8:30 and 11:30, tickets \$15. (212) 727-7788.