

# DIGNEY FIGNUS



A third generation Lexingtonian, Digney Fignus proves that you can live the creative life on your own terms. From punk to Americana, Fignus has successfully reinvented himself several times. On the eve of his next CD release, Fignus takes us back through his Lexington roots and on the journey that led him to produce his new CD *Talk of the TOWN*.

“I’ve been very lucky to have an alternative lifestyle. I can create my life every day and I love that!” D. Fignus

*Digney Fignus is a storyteller. In the time that we spend together, he sits still long enough to get through the interview, but he really wants to move. Lean and sinewy, he has come in his signature performing gear...red sunglasses from the early days, a dapper and more recently acquired top hat and a shirt featuring a repetitive skull and crossbones print. During the interview he uses his hands and his expressive voice to help tell his story which we will begin where it began, in Lexington, Massachusetts.*

## CHAPTER ONE

**In which Bob Brown grows up in Lexington and begins singing into a paper towel tube**

Digney Fignus was originally a Lexington kid named Bobby Brown.

“On my Dad’s side of the family we’re “train people.” Dad’s father came over from England where he worked for the railroad as a conductor or something. He got a job with what was then called The Boston Elevated Railway (The BER became the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority). The reason they settled here was because the tracks came out to Lexington.”

Naturally Fignus’ dad James Brown carried on the family tradition and went to work for the MBTA as a bus driver. He worked on the side as a TV repairman and was known as the “good Sam” of the neighborhood. For awhile the Browns lived on Waltham Street in “Grampa Brown’s house,” but they eventually moved to Middleby Road where Fignus had a pretty idyl-

lic childhood. fall when the trees were giving ‘em up we’d go gather huge bags of these horse chestnuts and bring them up to my grandmother and she’d make wreaths out of them.”

“It was all about hide and seek and 52 scatter and we’d go out frog gigging and catch toads...little boy stuff. I got my first dog Teddy from the Carroll boys up on the farm (off Waltham Street). My Uncle Morris use to own the gas station on the corner on Waltham Street. We use to go out to the Reservoir tire swinging and jumping in the water.”

It’s hard to imagine the time when Lexington was all field and woods for the kids to explore – before video games and TV – when moms opened the door in the morning and didn’t see the kids ‘till supper or when they got hungry in between. “It was different in Lexington back then,” he says. “It certainly wasn’t as gentrified as it is now.”

Toward the end of high school Fignus wound up in a band with his friend Leo (the son of his dad’s good friend) who also lived on Middleby Road.

“Leo wanted to be a drummer,” Fignus says. “First he had these sticks and a little pad that he practiced with. “He calls me up one day and says ‘IIII got a

drum set and I’m going to start a band!”

Digney jumps up his arms flailing wildly as he imitates Leo’s stammering excitement. “I thought ‘great, I’ll be the manager, I’ll book the band,’” he laughs. But Leo had other plans. “You’re the bass player, and I thought ‘okay, but I don’t have a bass!”

Somehow Digney convinced his father that he had to have a bass guitar and his Dad actually came up with something through one of his fellow bus driver friends whose son had abandoned the idea. “It was a Silvertone amp that people got through the Sears catalog,” he says. “And a Howard bass I think – a very cheap bass. It just sounded like crap. I remember we didn’t have any microphones or anything – but we wanted to sing – so Leo found this old like paper towel tube and we taped this little round microphone from an ancient old tape recorder to the bottom of the tube and sang through it! It kind of made a weird sound.”

The band was ready to rock and they kept at it accumulating a set of rock songs. They actually had a gig according to



**Above: Fignus’ punk band from the 80s the SPIKES. From left to right Dan Foley, Digney Fignus and Johnny Z. Dan Foley and Johnny Z.**



Above: The two “Johnnie Boudreaux” CDs. *Trouble on the Levee* released in 2006 and *Talk of the Town* to be released in September. Cover art for *Talk of the town* by Frank Federico.

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Fignus. One.

“We were a heavy duty garage band by then and we agreed to play a wedding for crying out loud! Well, We weren’t exactly right for the gig. We didn’t want to play no Hava Nagila! We were kind of anti-establishment kids.”

After high school Fignus attended one year of college and decided he really wanted to give music a try. He headed for California for a couple of years but eventually returned to Boston. “In the seventies there was all that disco stuff and at the time I was performing in a disco band. “I had this powder blue jumpsuit,” he laughs. “I was hating it, and all the free time I had I spent writing songs that had nothing to do with disco! I had to wash that disco junk out of my system and I just had to get as far away from it as I could.”

After a short stint in New York, he settled down in Cambridge. He needed a fresh start.

## CHAPTER TWO In Which our hero becomes Digney Fignus

“It was the end of the seventies and I was looking for a change I was finished up a divorce, I had changed my location, I’d come back to Cambridge to reestablish myself and regroup. I was on my own for the first time in five or six years so it felt like a good time to cut the past and create some sort of a future that would be interesting.

I was performing as Bobby Brown as a soloist at the Plough and Stars. I was living just outside of Harvard Square. One night I was walking down Brattle Street and I saw a sign – *Bobby Bobby Brown Performing Here,*

and I looked up at it and it was clearly *not my picture*. I figured then, it was time for a big change.”

“I was hanging out with a group of conceptual artists at the time – some musicians, some visual artists – we were all dirt poor. One night we were sitting around I said, ‘I’ve got to change my name guys!’”

“I figured what the heck. I was working on some weird songs like *Disconnection Notice* – the lyrics were all of the words on my electrical notice...and another song about Dig the Fig vs. Rock Lobster (Rock Lobster was a B52s song that was out at the time, Dig the Fig was the name he made up for the character on the Fig Newton package) and I just came up with the name Digney Fignus and threw it out there.” Everyone went crazy, Fignus says as he jumps up and pumps his fist. “They were like ‘Yeah, that’s it – Digney Fignus -- ! Yeah! Yeah! Whoo hoo!’”

“I was pretty sure nobody else had that name,” he says (laughing hilariously). “Which was kind of what I was going for.”

He rang up all his friends and told them he had changed his name. Fignus holds up his hand to his ear and mimics, “I said, ‘like I’m not Bob any more. So, don’t call me Bob any more, because I won’t answer to that.’ You can imagine the reaction, when I told them that I was taking the name Digney Fignus!”

When I ask Fignus why he wanted to *legally* change his name and completely assume the Fignus persona, rather than use it as a stage name, he seems incredulous at the question. “Why not? You want to go all the way with things!” Of course.

His mom and dad weren’t that crazy about the idea, “But, my sister started to have kids at the time, so the kids called me Uncle Digney and Bob just kind of disappeared.”

## CHAPTER THREE In Which Digney Fignus goes punk

Fignus formed the SPIKES with Dan Foley and Johnny Z. the band was popular on Boston local radio with songs like *Air Raid* and *Summer Vacation*. The SPIKES performed around Boston for underground loft shows and became quite popular in Boston’s art-rock scene of the late-1970s.

At the time Jonathan Richman, a Natick native was Fignus’ biggest musical influence. Richman’s band *The Modern Lovers* was leading the way toward punk and new wave. Fignus followed.

“Punk sort of erased the rules for writing. You could write about anything...and you didn’t have to be a great player, you just had to play with a real, authentic feeling. People were so sick of the false contrived music of the 70s



Above: Fignus on the set of *The Girl with the Curious Hand*.

and they were thirsty for something that was genuine,” he explains.

“It was very liberating. The music was very primitive in a lot of ways,” Fignus says. “We went through that whole thing and we had a

called *Streets*. (*Streets* was voted Boston’s #1 nightclub 1981 by the Boston Phoenix ).

“I was getting a little more accomplished on the guitar and had started doing a different type of writing. He formed his own group in

1983 after he hooked up with Danny McGrath (Danny was one of the original cast members of the PBS show ZOOM) who became his musical partner. They ended up shooting a video for Fignus’ song *The Girl With the Curious Hand* (Google it an you can watch it on a MySpace site). In October of 1983, the video won first prize in MTV’s Basement Tapes competition.

The music video is a stylish piece of storytelling that revolves around an exotic red-headed femme fatale figure appearing alternately in a black bikini and a red dress with a wide brimmed hat wrapped in red chiffon. It’s shades of Barbara Hershey, another vixen with her wide brimmed hat and angelic face in *The Natural*. Off in the background of the video is a very punky-blond Fignus with his signature red sunglasses, singing about this girl who’s



Above: Fignus performs at the Plymouth Folk Festival and is joined on stage by Lexington residents Hebrom, Dawit, Semhal and Yordanos Katz.



couple of singles and did pretty well locally,” he says. “But I sort of shed that band and went off and did my own thing for awhile.” In fact Fignus started a very popular Boston club

Continued on next page

“everything a boy would need.”

Recently Fignus had a chance to revisit that video experience. “I got this called in to be a judge on this Community Audition Show,” he says. “And who is sitting next to me on the panel but Gail Huff!” He laughs. Gail Huff is now a reporter on the Channel 5 *Eye Opener* Team, but in a strange twist of fate it turns out that Gail Huff played the mysterious girl in the red dress from the *Curious Hand* video! Her daughter Ayla (American Idol finalist) is also a judge on the show Community Audition Show. “So, Gail tells me that Ayla has never seen the video and doesn’t really believe that she ever did it, so I sent one off to Ayla,” Fignus says mischievously. She’s a believer now! It seems Huff’s husband finally had to hide the video because it was getting far too much play!

After the MTV win, the group received five thousand dollars worth of audio equipment from MTV and caught the eye of Columbia Records, who signed them to a recording deal. They released a self-titled debut album in 1985.

Over the years, Fignus continued to be one of New England’s top performers, but his writing was always changing. In 1996 he won WZLX’s Anthem Song contest with *Boston Town* and the album of the same name was nominated as “CD of the year” by the Massachusetts Country Music Awards Association.

Fignus has moved more and more towards country and roots music. These days, he still sports the signature red sunglasses, but his love for musical storytelling has become even stronger and his music has taken a curious turn.

## CHAPTER FOUR Wherein an ex-punk rocker from Boston turns on to roots music

For the past ten years or so, Fignus has been contracting out to do technical production work for folk festivals around the region. In 2002 he traveled to Bangor, Maine which was the host city for the American Folk Festival from 2002-2004. He loved it.

“The festival has a huge dance stage called the Penobscot Stage where many of the bigger acts perform,” he says. “It’s wonderful, I remember just looking out on this dance floor and I would see these moms with 2 or 3 year-old kids on their shoulders or holding them and dancing with them along with these older couples that had to be in their eighties and nineties all together out on the dance floor and dancing at the same time and having the greatest time. I could see that this was music that was inclusive and had genuine American roots. It turned me on and that inspired me.”

“I loved the Cajun beats and the instrumentation and I’d written a song maybe three or four years before, and it was kind of a concept song – *Gone Little Sister* – about this guy Johnnie who hooked up with a woman named Sally, married her and ran off with her little sister.

“A lot of my songs are story songs,” Digney says. I’ve always loved writing and words. In high school I would write poetry. I liked the way you could play with the words. I also love short stories and I think we’ve kind of lost that tradition,” he says. He is a fan of O’Henry who is known for his surprise endings.

I’d written another song and it was the first song that was really Cajun with a New Orleans beat, but I couldn’t figure out where the song was going...I had the music and I loved the music, but I was having trouble with the lyric. Then I remembered this old joke about a guy named Boudreaux. Boudreaux is kind of this iconic New Orleans name that everybody knows...he’s kind of a dimwit, but somehow things go right for him”

That song became *Old Boudreaux* after he worked it through with his partner Chris Leadbetter and came up with the hook, “Everybody know, know ‘bout about ol’ Boudreaux.” At the time Fignus wasn’t really thinking of tying his songs together

with a theme, but eventually the Johnnie from one song and Boudreaux from the other evolved into Johnnie Boudreaux, “a man too good-looking for his own good,” and the central character of his tale.

“Now there’s a story,” Fignus says, “and I got a lot of the names right out of the old country song *Jambalaya*.” (Hank Williams). All of a sudden the characters in the songs started to take on a life of their own and Fignus began applying his storytelling skills to tying things together with a gothic tale of old New Orleans.

The story is set in New Orleans of 1927 and spans two generations. Songs ranging from ballads to real foot stompin’ dance beats each one advancing the story of the man who attends his own funeral and ends up in exile. There’s mystery and intrigue throughout this tale with its twists and turns and colorful characters.

For a year he had a Tuesday night music “club” as he calls it with his partner Chris Leadbetter and vocalist Katrin Roush. They had about six songs together and were talking about going into the studio with it when they decided to go up to Bangor for the festival in 2004.

“They have these jam sessions on Saturday nights at the folk festival like old times you read about where the musicians stay up until four o’clock in the morning and play. I told Chris Leadbetter my mandolin player, ‘You’ve got to come up – they’re the best jam sessions that I’ve ever been in with some of the best players in the world.’ So, we’d just about finished the record and it was going into production in 2005 and we went up to Bangor.”

## CHAPTER FIVE Wherein our hero has an unlikely meeting

It was during one of these sessions that the band performed *Trouble on the Levee* for the first time. “I had written this whole story,” Fignus says, “and when I started to write I thought ‘nobody’s going to believe this about the levee breaking’ and all that. Nobody’s going to believe it.

And then, right after the first time we performed this song in front of an audience, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. It was spooky.”

He met drummer, Dave Mattacks in Bangor that year.

“We really hit it off. Of course, I didn’t know who he was and I loved the way he played drums and he is the sweetest, most wonderful guy – funny, considerate of everybody and great to be around. No attitude at all. I asked him, ‘Do you ever go into the studio?’ and he said ‘every once in awhile mate,’” Fignus laughs, imitating Mattack’s British accent.

“When I got home I looked him up and figured out who he was, and thought ‘no way!’”

Mattacks is internationally renowned. He played longest with the British folk rock band *Fairport Convention* in the late 70s and 80s before moving to the US. He had also played with Jethro Tull, Jimmy Paige, Clapton, Paul McCartney and many others. Fignus was stunned. “I thought, ‘This guy will never come into the studio with us, what am I insane! But I thought ‘what the hell, I’ll send it to him anyway’...and he liked it!”

Mattacks, who lives in Swampscott, agreed to come into the studio play drums on the album. It was a huge coup for Fignus.

As a roots musician, Fignus throws a little bit of everything into the pot creating a musical stew of Cajun beats, rock hooks, honky-tonk blues and smooth harmonies. It’s an eclectic mix that’s tied together with an exciting story. *Guar-on-teed* to set your toes to tapping.

The first installment of the Boudreaux saga, *Trouble on the Levee* was released in 2006 and spent 22 weeks atop the Americana Roots Top 10. Fignus’ latest release follows the sons of

Johnnie Boudreaux some twenty years later and it’s called *Talk of the Town*. The official release party is being held at Scullers in Cambridge in September.

Both CDs include a short story in the liner notes that takes you through the complicated Cajun tale involving an outlaw moonshine operation, plenty of lovin’ and cheatin’, a little voodoo and mysterious disappearances.

Fignus loves to unwind the tale of Johnnie and his sons and it is obvious that the storytelling process has become a huge part of his process. He’s written extensive back stories for each of his characters. “It’s a pretty exciting story, lot’s of murder and mayhem.” There’s one more CD that will involve the story of Johnnie. “I really like the way the plot twists and turns,” Fignus says. Digney refers to this recording as a “Cajun Opera.”

Fignus also marvels at the “many happy coincidences” associated with making these CDs. The first was the chance meeting with Dave Mattacks in Bangor. The second was happened when I talked to Frank Federico the artist who did the cover for *Talk of the Town*.

“I’d known of his work for a number of years,” Fignus says, “Ever since I started going to the jazz festival in Litchfield Connecticut. I approached him and told him I loved his jazz paintings and asked if he’d be interested in doing the cover for the CD. It was a longshot, but when I explained that it was a story set in New Orleans, all of a sudden his eyes lit up and got all crazy and he said ‘Did you know I went to art school in New Orleans and all my family is Cajun influenced!’”

It turns out Frank Federico began his career as a street artist in New Orleans and is now an established painter and teacher living in Goshen, Connecticut.

Federico also has a good memory. A couple years before a microburst, almost a tornado, came through the artists’ tent and started blowing all the paintings around. “I stayed in the tent and helped to hold up the paintings,” Fignus laughs. “Like an idiot. But Federico remembered that! He agreed to do the artwork for the CD and he also did all of the little drawings on the liner notes!”

## CHAPTER SIX Our hero looks forward

“Everything about this has been a little magical,” Fignus says. He credits his mandolin player Chris Leadbetter who also performs vocals on the albums with really helping to develop the sound. In another happy coincidence Dave Mattocks recommended that he call Wolf Ginandes, a well-known Boston session player to come in on bass. “It just came full-circle,” Fignus says. “Wolf was the original bass player in my band before Danny McGrath.”

This musical evolution has been creatively energizing for Fignus who has grown up in the business and could be cynical. But he remains open and enthusiastic about the music scene. “The last time I was this excited was in the 80s when there was a really wonderful and vibrant art scene. That was all renegade back then. I think this Americana movement is just as exciting.”

Fignus says he’s happy with the life that he’s created. “I’ve been very lucky to have an alternative lifestyle. I can create my life every day and I love that! To be able to explore my artistic side – especially with the writing – I love my lyric writing. I been fortunate to have some success and meet so many other great artists along the way.”