tart listing Western Pennsylvania's contribution to rock and roll and lots of groups come to mind: The Vogues, Jimmy Beaumont and the Skyliners, Lou Christie, Rusted Root. If you overlooked Jefferson Airplane, don't feel bad. The San Francisco-based group with the psychedelic sound would seem about as much of a 'burgh thing as Birkenstocks and microbuses.

So you may be surprised to learn that two Western Pennsylvania musicians helped fuel the Airplane during its final years. On drums, Johnstown native Joey Covington kept the Airplane's pounding beat from 1970 through 1972. And on electric violin, Beaver Falls native John Creach added a dose of soul and cultural diversity to the group's already eclectic, acid-influenced repertoire.

The story begins inauspiciously enough in East Conemaugh, Pa., a town that merits a historical footnote for bearing the brunt of the 1889 Johnstown flood. In the early 1960s, it was just another gray mill town, and Joey Michna was just another blue-collar kid from the neighborhood: the kind who spent his summers setting pins at the bowling alley, or hopping ore cars into Johnstown.

At age 10, Michna bought his first set of drums and became smitten with jazz and R&B. He worshiped drummer Cozy Cole. But in Johnstown, Dave Brubeck and Bix Biederbeke took a back seat to Frankie Yankovic, so Michna settled for a polka band. “We must have played half the VFWs in Western Pennsylvania,” he told this author from his home in Los Angeles.

Then, in 1964, Michna saw the Beatles — and his destiny — flicker across his television set on the Ed Sullivan Show. “I knew from that point that I wanted to be a rock and roll star.” Seizing the moment, he formed his own band, the Vibronastics, and let his blond hair breach his collar line.
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Papa John Creach
back left and Joey Covington far right

Creach, left, and Covington, right,
as members
of Hot Tuna,
Airplane's instrumental subgroup
And then one day, Michna saw the future. The Fenways had just finished their opening act at a Greensburg bar when the headliners walked on stage — in blue jeans. “We opened the show with red blazers, and we thought we were pretty hot. And then these guys came on in Levi’s. Really cool. I asked them where they were from, and they said ‘California.’ I asked them, ‘Hey, is this what they’re wearing in California?’ And they said ‘Yeah, you gotta come out.’”

That chance meeting with Simon and Garfunkel convinced Michna to “go where the new sound. People were always telling the rock and roll was.” The following summer, he and a buddy hitched up a U-Haul and headed west. Just before setting out, he smoked his first marijuana cigarette. “Back in school, Michna was issued an ultimatum by his father: get serious about a music career, or get a real job. "Basically he kicked me out of the nest." By 21, Michna was in Pittsburgh, drumming with a cover band called the Fenways.

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t 18, Creach and his family moved to Chicago, in part so he could pursue his musical studies. There weren't many opportunities back in Beaver Falls for an African American with an interest in classical violin. In Chicago, he studied with the Illinois Symphony Orchestra and started dipping into the local jazz and R&B. In the early 1940s, he played with a cabaret band called the Chocolate Music Bars.

Life was good, but like Covington, Creach sensed that there was something going on somewhere else. In 1945, he left for Southern California.

Over the next two decades, Creach kept busy on the nightclub circuit around Los Angeles and Palm Springs. He even had his own trio for a time. ("We were a tuxedo type thing. Wardrobes were important." But by the 1960s, jazz was losing ground to rock and roll, and even with a steady gig at the Parisian Room in downtown L.A., Creach was getting restless. That's what drove him to the Musicians Local that summer day in '67, and the chance meeting with the young rock and roll drummer from Western Pennsylvania.

The two seemed unlikely allies. Covington was a skinny, 22-year-old long-haired kid who cut his teeth on polka and dreamed of rock and roll stardom. Creach was an African American jazz violinist who, at 50, was old enough to be Covington's father.

"That day we made a deal: if something comes your way, give me a call. If something comes my way, I'll give you a call. So we called it a pact. I still call it 'the Pennsylvania Pact.'"

Before they parted, Covington asked Creach if he could call him Papa. Creach thought that was just fine. Covington found a father figure. Creach found a stage name.

Over the next few years, the two Western Pennsylvanians stayed in touch. Covington found a place in the Valley and by 1969 was playing in his own surf band, Tsong. Creach continued on at the Parisian Room.

And then in 1969, a friend of a friend told Covington about a fellow who was looking for a drummer. His name was Marty Balin, founder of Jefferson Airplane. Covington was only vaguely aware of their sound — he was still into surf music — but he prided himself on being able to pick up anything that needed drums.

"Balin shows up at the house, gives me a big joint and says 'I hear you play drums.' ... I did 'Wipe Out,' 'Topsy Part Two' by Cozy Cool, 45 minutes of playing. I guess he liked what he heard, and the fact that I got high with him. I think that was half the battle there. They were looking for someone to replace Spencer [Airplane’s drummer from 1966 to 1970] and being open to evolving, that was all part of it.”

A few months after the impromptu audition, Balin called Covington to San Francisco. By the end of the year, he was drumming with Hot Tuna,
Airplane's instrumental subgroup, and winning over audiences and critics alike. "Joey Covington is a no nonsense drummer," Ralph Gleason, music critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, effused. "He plays 64 bar open stroke rolls like he’s spitting watermelon seeds."

Fueled by the sustained appeal of singles like “White Rabbit” and its own mystique as the house band of the counterculture, Airplane was still packing arenas and selling albums. But by 1970 — the year that Covington took over full time as Airplane’s new drummer — there was an abiding sense that the Sixties were in a tailspin. The hopeful Summer of Love had given way to hedonism, political incoherence, and at Altamont, violence. The contradictions embedded in the counterculture were starting to show up in the Airplane itself. The band that had once inveighed against the commercialism of the music industry cut an ill-advised television commercial for Levi’s. Lead vocalist Grace Slick drove an $18,000 Aston Martin and spent thousands on lavish appointments at the group's posh digs in Haight Ashbury: a lifestyle that was hardly a repudiation of the Establishment.

Musically, the group was fraying into subgroups, factions, and solo careers. Along with Hot Tuna, songwriter and singer Slick and boyfriend Paul Kantner were retreating to the recording studio and contemplating a split from the rest of the group. In early 1970, dismayed with the sex, drugs, and general hedonism, Balin quit the group he’d founded in 1965. Everybody was “doing their own thing,” and it was leading to a messy divorce.

Covington’s entrance added to the social dysfunction. A reporter who visited the Airplane House on the edge of Haight Ashbury noted the discord: “Covington, as the newest member, seems to have injected a note of disharmony.”

Covington, though, was flying high, both figuratively and literally: “I was an R&B drummer coming from a cover band. The Airplane was a whole departure from anything I ever heard. I never heard anything that complex. They were an acid band. They were doing acid. An amazing chemistry of people, I mean literally chemistry. The music came before the acid, but you took acid so that you could evolve into these places you couldn’t do if you were straight.”

He was a long way from the local VFW, but he hadn’t forgotten where he came from, or the pledge he made to his fellow Western Pennsylvanian. In Jamaica, while on tour with Hot Tuna, Covington called Creach to let him know he had found work with the Airplane. When he got back to California, he convinced his fellow band members to drop in on Papa John at the Parisian Room. “They heard him play, and they had these big s__t eating grins. He was like this wise old pipe-smoking fiddler.”

With Covington behind the drums, Creach made his debut with the group in October 1970. “We’re playing at the Filmore West, 3,000 hippies stoned on the floor. After five Airplane songs, people were feeling comfortably numb. So finally, I turn to him and say, ‘You’re on, the time has come.’ He was rosin his bow. Well, [after Creach takes the stage] these kids got off from the floor, because they thought that God had arrived.” Creach’s first official accompaniment is on “Pretty As You Feel,” a Covington piece that turned out to be the Airplane’s last hit. He got a standing ovation.
With his white hair and rail thin physique, Papa John Creach was one of the most unlikely looking rock and roll stars. When he took the stage at a concert in Boston, a music critic wrote that he looked "old enough to be Muddy Waters Grandpappy." But fans of Airplane adored Creach, believing that in the wise old fiddler they had found a folk forbear. Creach took it all in stride. "He knew it was a chance to make some money. And besides, he was very very hip ... He kind of got a kick out of watching all the antics. He'd just shake his head and say, 'Them Jeffersons, I never seen anything like that.'"

With his long blond hair and openness to "evolving," Covington looked and acted more like a rock star, and played like one too. On Grunt, the band's seventh album and one of its best sellers, he wrote and sang several songs, including "As Pretty As You Feel" — the only Airplane song, Covington claims, that earned a favorable review from The New York Times. But he never quite conformed to the privileged background of the official Sixties youth culture. Slick thought he was "young [and] strong" but "hopelessly naïve," an "Oshkosh b'Gosh farm boy from Pennsylvania," according to her 1999 memoir. Back home in East Conemaugh, there was little if any press about the local boy who made good. Maybe they couldn't understand the music; maybe they were embarrassed that he had found fame with a group that was so, well, out there.

By the time Airplane formally disbanded in 1973, Covington had already left to make a go of a solo career. He produced an album that year, but commercial success eluded him. Creach had better luck staying in the spotlight and remained close enough to various players to appear on various post-Airplane incarnations: Jefferson Starship, Starship, and the like. But he remained closest to Covington.

When Creach died in 1994 at the age of 76, he bequeathed his estate, including his amplified violin, to Covington. "That was the whole thing about Airplane, you never met anyone's family." Except for Creach and Covington. "He was like my father, man."