

The Secret History of a Sitcom Weirdo

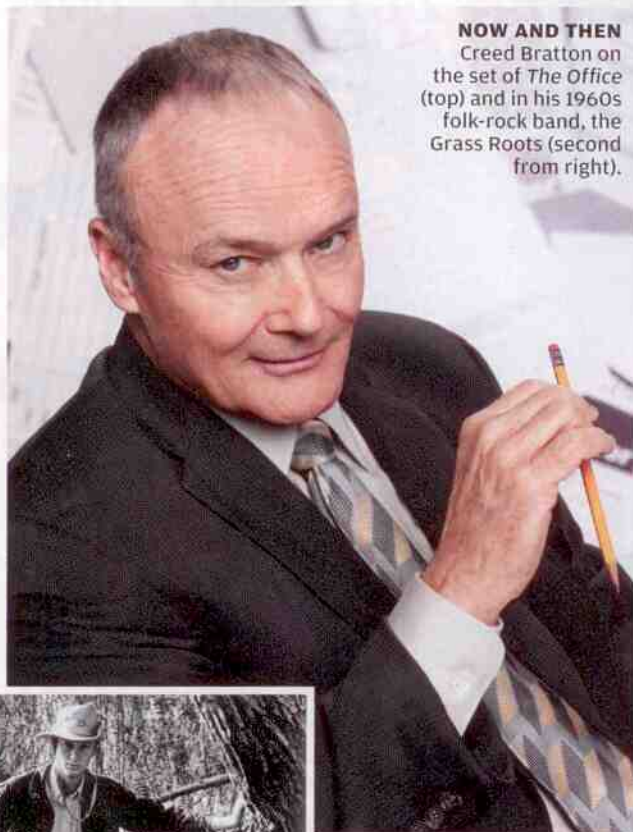
How the Grass Roots guitarist Creed Bratton ended up on 'The Office'
By Andy Greene

CREED BRATTON IS looking at a 1982 issue of *ROLLING STONE*, with a "Whatever Happened To..." item about the Grass Roots, a mid-1960s band created by record executives to cash in on the folk-rock craze. "Drummer

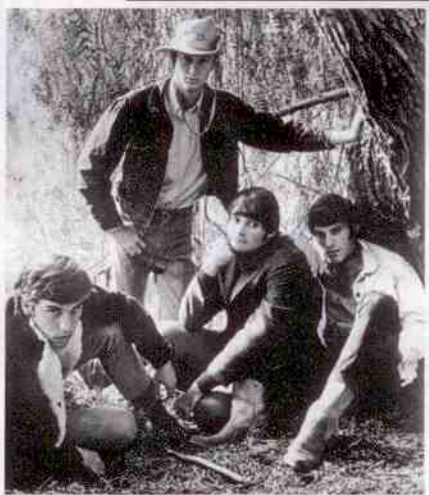
CHECKING IN

Rick Coonce moved to British Columbia to raise chickens," he reads aloud. "Guitarist Creed Bratton apparently opted for similar obscurity." Bratton - now best known for his role as a creepy old guy also named Creed Bratton on *The Office* - bursts into uncontrollable laughter. "Opted for obscurity! Like it was my choice! Before I got cast on *The Office*, I went through 30 years of living hand-to-mouth. All of a sudden, I was given a second chance. What happened to me was a million to one."

Over lobster rolls at New York's Pearl Oyster Bar, Bratton - who just released a new album, *Bounce Back* - explains how the *Office* gig came to be. Ten years ago, he was eking out a living as a caterer on B movies. In 2005, after being spotted on the set of *The Bernie Mac Show*, where he was an extra, he was cast in a nonspeaking background role in the American version of *The Office*. "I barely say a word the entire first season," Bratton recalls. "I knew I had to get myself noticed somehow, so I devised a character based loosely on my rock & roll past, with the drugs and all the crazy shit I used to do. I imagine that Creed crawled out of a bus somewhere in Scranton, and they found him in a dumpster, and they took pity on him and gave him the job."



NOW AND THEN
Creed Bratton on the set of *The Office* (top) and in his 1960s folk-rock band, the Grass Roots (second from right).



"My character is based loosely on my past - the drugs and all the crazy stuff."

At the peak of the mid-Sixties folk-rock craze, Bratton's band, the Grass Roots, scored a string of hits, including 1967's "Let's Live for Today" and 1968's "Midnight Confessions." But Bratton - who played lead guitar and sang backing vocals in the group, which toured the world and played alongside Buffalo Springfield, the Doors and Janis Joplin - was often mis-

erable. "It wasn't all blow jobs and sunglasses," he says, adding that he was frustrated that the band was told what to record. "I remember crying in the back of a limo after a show at the Fillmore East," he says. "I said, 'You guys, we're better than the Monkees! We can really write this stuff. If we don't, we'll fall by the wayside.'" The others disagreed, and, in 1969, Bratton quit the band after a show at the Hollywood Bowl.


The next three decades were rough. Bratton, working as a waiter, began going on auditions, occasionally scoring bit roles in plays and TV shows like *Eight Is Enough*. At some point in the 1980s - he can't remember exactly when - he hit bottom when a friend he was crashing with kicked him out. "It started pouring rain," he says. "I had a breakdown. Here I was, a 40-year-old man sleeping in the rain. I decided that this hand-to-mouth thing was getting old."

On *The Office*, Bratton got his break in Season Two when the script called for Steve Carell's character, Michael

Scott, to fire Creed, who then had to lobby for another character to get the ax. "I knew it was my one shot," Bratton says, tearing up at the memory. "I was fighting for my job. It was the fucking Rubicon, man, and I had to cross it." He nailed the scene, cracking everybody up. "It was the defining moment in my life," he says.

Since then, Creed has been a regular on the show - and a fan favorite. In an office full of schemers and weirdos, Creed is the craziest and most nefarious - whether he's preaching the virtues of life in a cult, implying he's a serial killer or scaring children with his four-toed foot. "We'll just grab anything from his life," says *Office* co-creator and executive producer Greg Daniels. "He has a way of saying things with this intensity and certainty, and it doesn't matter if the things are real or insane or whatever." *Office* fans often ask his co-stars how similar Bratton is to his character. "Creed on *The Office* is insidious and a little bit threatening," says Ed Helms. "What you don't see on the show is how quickly he smiles. He has a lot of positive energy that he has to dial back to play the character."

Because of *The Office*, Bratton is making real money for the first time in his life. "I went to buy a sports car recently and just for a second, I went, 'What am I doing?'" he says. "Then I realized it would be great fun to drive, and I could actually afford it. I also bought back all my old guitars I had to sell over the years."

He has delved back into music, recording two albums in the past two years and playing club gigs around L.A. "We're always in each other's trailers, hanging out and teaching each other songs," says Helms, who plays on Bratton's new album. "There's so many jaded people in Hollywood who let frustrating career histories sour their outlook on life. Then you've got a guy like Creed who's had remarkable ups and downs but still takes so much joy in what he does. A lot of us forget to be grateful sometimes." 

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