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Grrl Geeks Rock Out

Heather McCabe [✉](#) 02.09.09 | 3:00 AM

They sing doo-wop, croon about antimatter, and they were the first band on the Web. Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for the [Cernettes](#). The group, with its unusual blend of high tech and '60s rock 'n' roll, hails from CERN, the European Laboratory for Particle Physics -- the birthplace of the Web -- near Geneva, Switzerland.

Britons Michele de Gennaro, a 3-D graphic artist at CERN; Colette Reilly, a secretary at the International Air Transport Association; and Louise Richmond, a secretary at the United Nations, don their satin gloves and sequined dresses to play for Nobel Prize celebrations. They've taken their act to physics and computer conferences in France, Seville, Spain, Brussels, Belgium, and San Francisco. And they're regulars at the [Hardronic Festival](#), the particle physicists' version of Lollapalooza.

Their numbers include "Surfing on the Web" (Surf me on the Web/ My page is all for you/ Call me on the Web/ I'll open my windows to you), "Strong Interaction" (You quark me up/ You quark me down/ You quark me top/ You quark me bottom), and "Computer Games" (Since you've gone away/ I've got a million games to play/ I've got your 80 megabytes full of computer games).

The group -- which bills itself as "the one and only High Energy Rock Band" -- formed in 1990 when a secretary at CERN complained that her physicist boyfriend spent his nights and weekends smashing protons in an underground collider. She confessed her woes to friend and computer scientist at the laboratory, Silvano de Gennaro, who wrote a song about her plight.

From that episode, "Collider" was born:

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I gave you a golden ring to show you my love
You went to stick it in a printed circuit
To fix a voltage leak in your collector
You plug my feelings into your detector
You never spend your nights with me
You don't go out with other girls either
You prefer your collider
You only love your collider
Your collider.

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Three other CERN secretaries joined the group, and they gave their first gig under the moniker Les Horribles Cernettes. The name is a takeoff of the acronym for CERN's future accelerator, the Large Hadron Collider.

The band is hardly burning up the pop charts. But Silvano de Gennaro, who still writes songs and plays keyboard for the group, says the Cernettes make physicists swoon. From their first performance, "they were a terrific success. They got all physicists really wild, so they decided to go on."

Like the action inside a particle collider, a Cernettes concert is hard to imagine.

"They always enter the stage like real '60s stars: on a forklift, on a bridge crane, in a convertible car, or play on top of buildings," Silvano de Gennaro said.

"The look and feel is very important," he explains. They have the hair, clothes, and dance style down, and the stage is littered with heart-shaped balloons, confetti, snow spray, electronic boards, junk cables -- all to act out their songs.

Michele de Gennaro, a founding member of the group who sings in a couple of other Geneva bands, says the Cernettes really connect with their brainy audience.

"We give them a chance to let their hair down. Music breaks through all barriers. There have been many memorable occasions when we've witnessed this. For example, jumping offstage and dancing with a Nobel Prize winner and singing 'Happy Birthday' to the director general. They are a great, fun-loving audience."

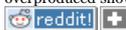
The Cernettes even occupy their own space in Web lore.

When Tim Berners-Lee was writing the software to serve GIF files, he asked co-worker Silvano de Gennaro for a few pictures of the singers. One of the band photos was among the first five pictures published on the Web.

Silvano de Gennaro thinks the band is here to stay, if only to cultivate that narrow niche that includes high-power computer scientists, Nobel Prize-winning physicists, and the people who can appreciate the Cernettes' arcane lyrics.

"They make a high-energy explosive cocktail. And for once, we found a way to be sexy and charming without falling in the usual overexploited cheap cliché," Silvano de Gennaro said. "The Cernettes are not the Spice Girls. Thank God.

"They were there before and will stay after. They are excellent singers and they give all that an audience wants: a true, lively, funny, and not overproduced show."



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