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Lightning and Thunder were a popular and unusual husband-wife team who captivated the Chicago rock community during the 1990s. Mike Sardina, a.k.a. "Lightning," portrayed Neil Diamond. His wife Claire, a.k.a. "Thunder," took the role of Patsy Cline. Or sometimes ABBA.

Mr. Sardina died on August 3. He was 55.

The duo's roots were in Milwaukee, but they had their biggest breakthroughs in Chicago. They got their start at Danny's in Bucktown, where Mr. Sardina would dance across the downstairs bar singing Diamond's "America." In 1993, they opened an Urge Overkill record-release party at Metro, and in 1995, they sang Diamond's "Forever in Blue Jeans" with Eddie Vedder at Milwaukee's Summerfest.

In mid-July, Mr. Sardina fell at his home and hurt his head. He declined to see a doctor. On July 22, Lightning and Thunder performed at a Madison Mallards baseball game in Wisconsin. He became ill on the drive home to Milwaukee. Mr. Sardina was taken to the hospital, where doctors discovered bleeding on the brain. He slipped into a coma. Surgery was performed, but he never regained consciousness.

Mr. Sardina and his wife grew up in working-class Milwaukee. His father poured molten metal for a living, but he was also a jazz guitarist. His mother made car seats and automotive products. In 1970, Mr. Sardina enlisted in the Marines and began a tour of

Vietnam.

Mr. Sardina earned his nickname "Lightning" in 1972, when he briefly played lead guitar with the Milwaukee soul group the Esquires. They had scored top-40 hits such as "And Get Away" and "Get On Up." The Esquires were among hundreds of friends and fans who attended Mr. Sardina's funeral on Sunday.

Mr. Sardina studied shoe repair at Milwaukee Area Technical College in the early 1980s at the same time his future wife was studying cosmetology. But they didn't meet until 1987, when she auditioned for his band, Positive Traction, a hybrid of Jimi Hendrix and Elvis Presley.

Apart from that, he had developed a knack for imitating the Big Bopper and George Michael. Claire had been singing Linda Ronstadt and Belinda Carlisle at karaoke clubs in Milwaukee. But when they began performing together, audiences always responded best to his Neil Diamond and her Patsy Cline.

Lightning and Thunder were married in the summer of 1994 before 1,000 friends and fans under a tent at the Wisconsin State Fair Park. A golf cart took them to their reception at Mother's Cajun Cafe, a fairgrounds eatery. In 1996, they released a CD, "Hold On (Clean Songs Thru the School of Hard Knocks)," on their own Recovering Artist Records. At the time, they billed themselves as "America's Singing Sweethearts."

But after the wedding, their life was plagued by bad luck. In May 1999, Claire was hit by a car while planting mums in the front yard of their bungalow in South Milwaukee. She endured five operations, but doctors were not able to save the lower half of her left leg. They continued to perform, but Lightning and Thunder claimed they lost gigs because Thunder was an amputee. She was later fitted with a prosthesis.

Philadelphia filmmaker Greg Kohs has spent the last six years working on a documentary about Lightning and Thunder. The 10-time Emmy Award-winning filmmaker met them in the early 1990s when he was directing a documentary on the 90th anniversary of Harley Davidson. Lightning and Thunder were performing at Hog Fest in Milwaukee.

"Some people may have looked at them as 'just' a tribute act," Kohs said. "But Mike's roots were as a musician. Their story was interesting because of their passion and persistence. They allowed themselves to be vulnerable. They were the exact same people off the stage." And they were recognized by everyone from Urge Overkill to Garbage, who hired Lightning and Thunder to play a record-release party in Madison, Wis. Kohs had hoped to have the documentary completed for the 2007 festival circuit,

but now plans are on hold.

Mr. Sardina's dream was to meet Neil Diamond. "His camp is probably aware of this," Mr. Sardina told me in 1999 before a show with a standing-room-only crowd at McGee's in Lincoln Park. "That is a goal. To meet the man -- before one of us cooks." Mr. Sardina had suffered a heart attack in 1998 and underwent quintuple bypass surgery.

In 1996 Mr. Sardina sent a copy of Lightning and Thunder's CD "Hold On (Clean Songs Thru The School of Hard Knocks)" to Diamond's management team. Released on their own Recovering Artist Records, the nine tracks mixed originals like "War Blues Boogie" with Patsy Cline's "Crazy" and Diamond's "Brother Loves Traveling Salvation Show." They never heard back from the Diamond group.

The last tunes Lightning and Thunder sang together were "You Don't Bring Me Flowers" and "Wonderful, Beautiful (An American Love Song), " a doo-wop influenced ballad Mr. Sardina wrote when he was 13 years old, before life's songs were sung blue.