

Dixie takes a detour

Varied musicians in Dixie Doodlers bring songs of the South north

By John Schultz

Staff Writer

What could a retired waterworks manager, a former grain elevator supervisor and a machinist have in common?

All are members of the New Berlin-based Dixie Doodlers, an up-and-coming Dixieland band formed in 2001.

Mark Kranz, 49, of New Berlin formed the group, which practices weekly at his home. Kranz plays tuba in the seven-, or so, piece band.

Some 20 years ago, Kranz, who has an extensive collection of old phonographs, was at an antique show in Iola, Wis., and saw a horn sticking up in a pile of old junk. He thought it was a phonograph horn, but it was a sousaphone. He picked it up, and his musical career blossomed when he took some lessons.

Later he traded the sousaphone for a tuba. He eventually joined the Brookfield Civic Band and formed his own band, the Dixie Doodlers, about seven years ago. Its members constantly argued and dropped in and out.

In 2001 he ended up reforming the current Dixie Doodlers. Their latest project is a 12-tune CD he hopes to have ready to sell at Doodlers performances next year. "There is a good sound there," Kranz said.

Professional, ragtag at the same time

At 74, Jack Clark of Franklin is the group's oldest member. The former drummer now plays washboard.

At his age; he does not have the energy to move his drum set -- now permanently settled in his basement -- back and forth to jobs.

"I'd be tired out before the gig started," he said.

He has found it much easier to transport a washboard, complete with a horn, cowbell and woodblock. That was fine with Kranz, who had come to the same conclusion about transporting drums.

Clark assembled his instrument himself. Though he discovered horns, bells and wood blocks were hard to find, he was able to buy a new washboard at a hardware store and put it all together.

The Columbus Washboard Co. of Logan, Ohio, still makes them. They come in a variety of finishes and the washboard musician can buy the family size or smaller pail size. Clark opted for the family size.

"Yeah, I take in laundry," he said, laughing.

Clark called the Doodler music quite unique. While the group plays traditional Dixieland, it also performs a lot of music that was popular in the 1920s.

Improv playing is a draw

Clarinet player Richard Regent of Greenfield said the group uses a two-volume book with 546 tunes. About 150 are Doodlers regulars.

"Dixieland is an art form in America that is probably fading away," Regent said. "It is fortunate I found a group that can play it."

Regent, 63, a former manager of the Milwaukee Waterworks, has played clarinet since he was 13. Classical music has always been his forte and he had played in orchestras and ensembles until another musician told him about the Doodlers.

Regent has always liked Dixieland tunes and has found he likes playing them, especially the improvisational part.

I like the fact I can drift away from looking at the music," he said. "As we get older our eyes aren't so good."

Regent also enjoys the more informal atmosphere around Dixieland jazz. He finds during shows he can play his clarinet and walk into the audience. He'll even sit down with the audience and play.

"I always find an empty seat in the front row," he said. "It's kind of like at Church."

Getting better all the time

The group is improving its stage presence, he said.

"Dixieland is such an energetic music, full of energy," he said. "There's a lot of rhythm to it."

Regent also has broadened his musical horizons by playing at the Round Barn Acoustic Jams at Grace Church on Calhoun Road in New Berlin. His clarinet adds a new perspective to the country, blues, folk and gospel music played monthly there on Saturday nights.

Regent said the Doodlers perform in front of audiences whenever they can. They often play for senior citizen groups.

Last summer they played on the town square in East Troy and at State Fair Park in West Allis to entertain evacuees from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

"That's a real test," he said. "Those people get to hear authentic Dixieland all the time."

"They kept telling us to play louder. Apparently they really wail away down there."

The Doodlers also played from an open trailer during the Brookfield Fourth of July parade. It rained and was windy, making Regent glad Dixieland jazz features improvisation; the sheet music would have blown away.

Other members of the group are Gary Lavann of Mukwonago, who plays trumpet; David Bock, Mukwonago, trombone; John Knurr, Delavan, piano; Jason Schreiber, Burlington, banjo; Andy Schumm, who goes to college in Illinois and sometimes plays trumpet, piano or banjo.

Bock, who is just 17, is a crowd favorite, Regent said.

"The audience really loves him because he is young" he said.

Schreiber plans to add some vocals to the group's performances. He will sing through a megaphone, 1920s style.

"He Sounds just like an old 78 rpm record," Regent said.

The Dixie Doodlers have had 17 jobs in the past year, Regent said.

"That's more than the last couple of years put together," he said, "We're on the way up."

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