

Local bands play for time in music scene

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If getting started is half the battle, Billy Warden has the ultimate plan for amateur bands.

To him, getting started is a simple matter of sending balloons, flowers and candies to all the right places, with a note introducing his Floating Children and describing the planet they are from. Such a ploy may work for Warden, but, for most young bands, gaining identity is a struggle requiring determination, luck and skill.

For Chapel Hill's Pressure Boys, the road to recognition is a familiar one. Its six members—John Plymale (lead), Jack Campbell (bass), Greg Stafford (saxophone), Bryon Settle (guitar), Robb Ladd (drums) and Stacey Guess (trumpet)—are each uniquely talented, yet together the band constitutes the harmony of a perfectly blended Bloody Mary mixed with a bottle of tobacco.

Since its formation in 1981, the band's symphonic cacophony and hyperactive stage presence has attracted considerable attention. They've gained so much attention, in fact, that the group was invited to Milwaukee, Wis. by the Miller Brewing Company, where a tentative contract was discussed.

After playing in clubs across the country, guitar-player Settle's advice to young bands reflects the Pressure Boys' determination, and a bit of their past. "If you want a gig, you have to go after it," he says. Along the same lines, Settle stresses delivering demo tapes in person because, "half the time you send a tape to a club, (it) will be thrown in the toilet."

Settle recalls past U.S. tours where the band would beg to play in clubs, though the rewards were minimal. "They'd give us a dollar and a half or something and we'd eat peanut butter that day."

The advice of experienced bands often benefits newcomers, such as Chapel Hill's Teasing The Korean. TTK's musicians—John Ensslin (lead singer), Tom Maxwell (drums), Will Sexton (bass), Tom Wiley (guitar) and Jeff Thompson (guitar, vocals)—are all relatively new to the industry, yet their lack of experience and equipment has yet to stop them. "We recorded our first song on a really good Walkman," Ensslin says.

The band's first move was to create a demo tape and send it to UNC student radio station, WXYC. The station's predilection for progressive music has gained them a notable reputation in college radio circles and makes them an obvious target for young hopefuls. Drummer Tom Maxwell, describing the band as "total green horns," hopes that the tape will help legitimize the band while creating outside interest.

Demo tapes sent to WXYC are scrutinized by the station's music director, sophomore Steve Balcom. Outstanding tracks, such as Teasing The Korean's song "Diamond," are carted (a single song recorded on a cassette), and placed on rotation in the local cart rack. Balcom admits being somewhat biased toward a band if he knows it or has seen its members.

For new bands on the rise, area clubs provide a necessary arena. Ed Morgan, founder of the independent label Black Park Records, which produced the Connell's Darker Days EP, says bands in North Carolina have an

advantage due to the abundance of clubs in nearby cities such as Charlotte, Raleigh and Greensboro. TTK, The Pressure Boys and Billy Warden and the Floating Children, for example, all started at Cat's Cradle in Chapel Hill.

Warden's band formed when Andy McMillan of Snatches of Pink asked him to do balloon art during the band's intermission at the Cradle. Warden agreed, but the act which emerged was a far cry from making animals out of balloons. Warden gathered several friends, including his brother Ramone Warden, and started the new group.

"Chip Cheek tried to make us these platform shoes about eight feet tall and people would think we were like floating," Warden says. "So he made these platform shoes for us and they like fell apart, and my brother sprained his ankle because of those stupid shoes, so we kept the name and ditched the shoes."

Billy's group—Sammy Doddy, Alan Heller (drums), Ramone Warden (guitar), Richard Geirsch, Phil Aragatta and Chip Cheek—were later joined by two dancers, Tracey Brown and Ooshi.

"I didn't exactly know what was going on," Tracey recalls. "I was sort of conned into this whole act thing. We (Billy and she) used to get together and do weird things and so when he asked me to come and dance for the band I thought, 'oh well, sure.'"

The group noted a change in music direction earlier this month, after concluding a tour of typical rock stops, including Purdy's, and the Fall Out Shelter and The Brewery in Raleigh. "We're going like really cosmic dust funk—really weird stuff we're playing."

Warden explains, "Rock and roll is an industry. Like any industry it's really easy to get lost in the machine. There are so many bands out there that are just like aimlessly wandering around gig to gig. We won't play a gig unless it's really special... unless somethings going to happen that's going to be interesting."

Upcoming gigs include three retirement home visits. "Old people love to rock," Brown says.

Billy and the Floating Children are concentrating on their upcoming New Rock and Roll Circus Tour, where they will be on the road with a juggler, two ringmasters, a costumed dog named Josh and a midget. Meanwhile, the Pressure Boys are focusing their attention on their upcoming album, to be released "as soon as possible," according to Settle.

Despite their individual achievements, all three bands have yet to be signed by a major recording studio. The Pressure Boys first two EPs, Jump! Jump! Jump! and Rangledoon, were produced on the the groups own label AR-3D. A Root Da Doot Do. Their forthcoming album, tentatively entitled "Plaid Cat," will also be produced on this label, according to Settle.

In response to rumors that record producers had been frequenting the Pressure Boys' performances, Settle says, "If a band has half a reputation, there're going to be gigs that will have record people there. If they're good then people know about them."

Morgan says music producers are looking for a "uniqueness, exciting live performance, stage presence and powerful live sound." Morgan

advises new bands to look for a good manager. He also says "new bands should not be discouraged by playing original music and not making much money." "Success," Morgan believes, "is not determined by financial rewards."

Settle agrees, and says "I think I've made less than a hundred dollars in the Pressure Boys." Travel expenses and the costs of producing records on an independent label can be enormous, Settle says. After six years, money is obviously not the band's main objective.

TTK's attitude toward financial success is also realistic. "Any question of being rich and famous is ludicrous," Maxwell says. You don't

go into it thinking you're going to be rich." Lead singer Ensslin agrees and says that free beer and "loads of babes" have made the group's endeavor worth it thus far.

For a band just starting out, other bands in the Chapel Hill network provide key support. Ensslin's friendship with members of Other Bright Colors got him started before TTK had formed. Warden notes the danger, however, in watching already-established bands too closely, and says, "Never, ever, ever pay any attention to what other bands are doing. It creates a need to imitate."

Instead, Warden advises, "follow your creative hunches to the limit, because that that's the only way

you're ever going to succeed." John Maxwell concludes, "If people know you're that eager, you'll at least get an A for effort."

All three bands share similar philosophies. The rewards offered from playing in a band, they say, are often determined not by financial success but by the satisfaction performing brings. Settle sums it up: "When I first started the music business, I said if by the time I'm twenty-five and I'm not famous... I'm quitting."

Settle then adds with a laugh, "I'm now 28. I don't really want to do anything else. If it comes down to me being some old fart blues player in a club, I'll do that...and eat dirt for the rest of my life. You don't have to retire to play the guitar."

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