

ON THE TOWN

Going with the flow

Musical versatility and willingness to change have kept the Middle Spunk Creek Boys in tune for four decades



The Middle Spunk Creek Boys will play host to their fourth annual Laughing Waters Bluegrass Festival on Labor Day, Monday, September 2, in Minnehaha Park. Pictured from left are Chuck Kreitzer on bass, Bruce Jaeger on mandolin, Mark Kreitzer on banjo and Alan Jespersen on guitar. Photo by Brad Stauffer.

by Larry Englund

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys know about tradition. The award-winning band has been playing bluegrass music for 34 years—more than half as long as bluegrass has been around.

Lead guitarist Alan Jespersen, a resident of Minneapolis' Nokomis East neighborhood, is the only original member still with the band. But Bruce Jaeger, who plays the mandolin and fiddle, has been with the group for more than 20 years. Banjo player Mark Kreitzer of Minneapolis' Longfellow neighborhood joined the group in 1995. His brother Chuck Kreitzer, a bass fiddle player and Macalester-Groveland resident, signed on a year ago.

Bluegrass music, created in the late 1930s by Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys, is marked by instrumental virtuosity and three-part harmonies. Though it's often played at a fast tempo with a bright sound, its subjects are often drawn from the downside of human experience.

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys are comfortable enough with the bluegrass tradition to occasionally stretch it by using off tempos or nontraditional chord progressions, drawing on folk rock or western swing influences and even singing

songs with a happy ending. That in itself is in keeping with tradition, according to Mark Kreitzer. "The reason Bill Monroe was so earth-shaking was that he took disparate forms and influences and made something new out of them," he said.

Kreitzer describes the group's repertoire in terms that illustrate its open approach. "We're hard to pigeon-hole," he said. "We do traditional numbers as well as originals. We do old-timey things and instrumentals that use the chord changes from Pachelbel's 'Canon in D.'"

Another tradition that the Middle Spunk Creek Boys will be keeping this summer is the Laughing Waters Bluegrass Festival, a free concert that will be presented from 3:00 to 7:30 p.m. on Labor Day, September 2, in Minnehaha Park.

The fourth annual festival is a family-friendly event that attracts bluegrass fans as well as picnickers from the park. "You can bring grandma and the baby," Kreitzer said. "Well-behaved dogs are also welcome."

In addition to the Middle Spunk Creek Boys, the festival line-up includes the Platte

Valley Boys, Tangled Roots, Becky Schlegel and her band and the Buffalo Gals. "We pick performers for the festival who we like to hang out with," Kreitzer said. "All of the bands are friends of each other, and it comes off that way. It's a big party."

Three years ago, Jespersen had booked the Minnehaha bandshell for an appearance by his band when he realized the site's potential

for a musical festival. Though the event is free, sponsorships are needed to cover the costs of park rental, printed programs, a sound system and fees for the bands. Jespersen decided to approach neighborhood merchants.

As Jespersen recalled, "I'd go into someplace like the Riverview Theater or the Dairy Queen right by the park and say, 'Hey, I'm a customer, would you give us some money for this event?'"

That approach worked. This year the festival has about 40 sponsors who, in return for their support, will be listed in the 12-page program and thanked from the stage. Many of the sponsors also attend the event.

"In some ways it's like a barn-raising,"

Jespersen said. "Everyone pitches in."

The Laughing Waters Festival drew about 1,200 people the first year. This year 2,000 are expected.

Though the festival is billed as a bluegrass festival, the lineup includes a variety of styles. The Platte Valley Boys are traditionalists, Kreitzer said. They're fans of the Stanley Brothers and Flatt and Scruggs, so the bulk of their songs are 30 years old. Tangled Roots is a bit more progressive. Though they play traditional bluegrass, they also draw on the contemporary music of such artists as Ricky Scaggs. Schlegel is a highly regarded singer and songwriter whose ballads often have a contemporary country feel. The Buffalo Gals are "primarily a dance band, although they do a lot of fun vocal things—cowboy songs and Cajun songs," Kreitzer said.

The Buffalo Gals will perform last at the festival and when they do, many in the audience are likely to get up and dance, according to Jespersen.

"The audience will have been sitting for a couple of hours, listening to lively music and dying to do something," he said. "By the time the Gals start playing waltzes and two-steps, the people will be ready to participate."

"I can't think of a more perfect place for a festival," Jespersen said. "We've got the Minnehaha Park bandshell booked each Labor Day for the future. It's terrific fun."

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