

What they're saying about The Middle Spunk Creek Boys:

"A Tantalizing presentation of imaginative bluegrass..." Bluegrass Unlimited, 2000

"Great listening..."

Bluegrass Unlimited, 1999

"Very smooth and professional, good listening!" Bluegrass World

"This Minneapolis-area band has been playing bluegrass since 1968—and it shows."

Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

"Great album, boys." *Inside Bluegrass*

Just what is "Bluegrass Music" anyway?

Bluegrass music is named after Grand Ol' Opry star Bill Monroe's band The Blue Grass Boys. That band and the "blue grass sound" really took off in the mid-forties when Monroe added Earl Scruggs—with his startling new style of playing the 5-string banjo—and Lester Flatt on guitar and lead vocals. That driving 5-string banjo sound still defines Bluegrass today, along with sweet three-part harmonies that disguise the often wrenchingly lonesome lyrics. ("Bluegrass reminds me of memories I wish I had," said one listener.)

The most familiar Bluegrass songs include *The Orange Blossom Special*, *Dueling Banjos*, *Rocky Top*, *Foggy Mountain Breakdown* ("that there song they played in Bonnie and Clyde"), *Fox on the Run*, and Bill Monroe's *Blue Moon of Kentucky* (made even more popular by an obscure rock 'n' roll singer from down Memphis way named Presley or something).

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys

he Middle Spunk Creek Boys have been entertaining upper Midwest audiences with their special form of Bluegrass music since 1968.* Twice winners of the Minnesota Music Awards "Best Bluegrass Band" category, the "Boys" are regular performers at bluegrass festivals and concerts, and have appeared on nearly every area radio or television show that has featured live music. (Cable TV recordings of their park concerts seem to be re-broadcast as often as Andy Griffith re-runs!) They also appear regularly at trade shows, colleges and civic celebrations.

Besides being able to "pick" traditional bluegrass songs with the best of 'em, the Middle Spunk Creek Boys are increasingly performing their own material. (Member Mark Kreitzer was recently awarded the Minnesota Bluegrass and Old Time Music Association's "Most Popular Songwriter" award at their 25th anniversary



awards banquet.) Their last two critically-acclaimed albums feature their original material, with a few carefully-picked favorites from the Bluegrass tradition included. (Their fourth recording, "Table for One," is getting great reviews from both the local and national press. Their previous release "No One Else" got no less than a rave review from Bluegrass Unlimited, the leading Bluegrass magazine.)

^{* 1968:} Lyndon Johnson president, North Korea captures the USS Pueblo, Tet Offensive in Vietnam, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy killed, Soviets invade Czechoslovakia, Middle Spunk Creek Boys form, Jacqueline Kennedy marries Aristotle Onassis, Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In top TV show.

Other Middle Spunk Creek Boys albums include the 1993 "I'm With the Band" that was recorded to help celebrate their 25th anniversary, and their very first LP record from 1976, the self-titled "The Middle Spunk Creek Boys."



rom their early days on the Prairie Home Companion radio show to their recent recording successes, the "philosophy" of the Middle Spunk Creek Boys has always been to perform the songs and styles that the current members are interested in, and not worry about what other bands are doing or what the MSCB did in the past. This ensures that the material is always fresh, and that the band actually likes performing the songs. (And you know, audiences can really tell the difference!)

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys have an interesting and genuinely useful internet web site at www.mscb.com. Besides the band's performance schedule, you can download publicity photos and other promotional material, purchase albums online through CDBaby.com and others, and also read some really dumb jokes! Their music can also be heard for free over the internet via their MP3.com page at http://www.mp3.com/middlespunkcreek.

Thanks for your interest in The Middle Spunk Creek Boys.





The Middle Spunk Creek Boys opening for the main national act at the 2002 Minnesota Bluegrass and Old Time Music Association's famous "Winter Weekend" bluegrass festival.





The Middle Spunk Creek Boys' first performance, 1968 at the Scholar coffeehouse

Album Reviews

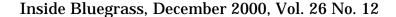


"Table for One"

Released September. 2000

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys: "Table for One"

by Adam Granger





In the early Seventies, when I lived in Arkansas and Nashville, I used to read in Bluegrass Unlimited about this joint called Dulono's and a band that played there called The Middle Spunk Creek Boys. When I moved up here in 1974, they were the first band I found (I went to hear them play at Hamline University). In short, The Middle Spunk Creek Boys have been around since Demosthenes was gargling rocks. Well, okay, not all of them, but I defy you to guess which ones are the originals.

Bands as venerable as the Spunks carry a huge potential for crustiness. I mean, these guys could just as easily be doing "Fox on the Run" on the Old Goat circuit; believe me, it's a constant temptation for all of us older musicians. It's particularly gratifying, then, to find that they've created an album as fine as "Table for One."

Guitarist Alan Jesperson, mandolinist Bruce Jaeger, and bassist Jerry Flynn have been Spunks forever. The addition a couple of years ago of Madison transplant Mark Kreitzer gave these three stalwarts a shot in the collective arm. Kreitzer gives The Middle Spunk Boys a new sound and feel and heralds their fourth or fifth major incarnation. That his entry into Spunkdom would shake the clubhouse rafters is inevitable, since he's a prolific songwriter and plays about three thousand instruments. As for the other three, it's as though they said, "Oh, you're gonna be that good, eh? Well, four can play this game." The result is that I've never heard any of these guys play or sing better.

The fourteen cuts on "Table for One" reflect the current Spunk's depth and breadth. Nine of the songs are Kreitzer compositions (told you he was prolific), and run the range from "He Died Alone," about his dad, to "Little Willie's Return": imagine a Child Ballad about Columbine. Be not misled, however: This album is not The Mark Kreitzer Story.

Jesperson's vocals are topnotch and his rhythm guitar playing, always great, is super this time out; Jaeger contributes a spiffy instrumental, "Spirit Island," which is the dynamic highlight of the album, and does yeoman duty on his tenor, low tenor and baritone vocal work; and Jerry Flynn surprises and inspires with his rendition of "Roll On John," which tips its hat to The Greenbriar Boys' arrangement of forty years ago before cruising gamely into Spunkland. The Spunks' vocal abilities shine and dominate throughout, in combinations from solo to four-part; standouts are He Died Alone and Over in the Glory Land.

"Table for One' has its fair share of little surprises, like the bodhran on "The Erlking," played by engineer Leo Whitebird's wife Robin, and the swell 45-second fade at the end of Kreitzer's "Luther and Angie" (Oops. Now they're not surprises anymore)

Finally, let's talk about "Table for One's" cover: the image of the four Spunks sitting, each alone, at tables in a restaurant seems at first parodic and invites a response of laughter, but as the irony in the image emerges, more challenging emotions are ordered up. And, the fact that the restaurant is Dulono's is just plain fun.

Congratulations, Middle Spunk Creek Boys. Your bullet-dodging and rock-gargling have paid off. You've done some serious hard work, and it shows. Great album, boys.

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys. Table For One Okay-Dokey Records MSCB004



By Les McIntyre

Bluegrass Unlimited December 2000

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Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Middle Spunk Creek Boys is that they have been an active band for more than thirty years. In that time, the band has endured numerous personnel changes. The current group lineup consists of Mark Kreitzer (banjo, guitar, fiddle, and vocals), Alan Jesperson (guitar and vocals), Bruce Jaeger (mandolin and vocals) and Jerry Flynn (bass and vocals). "Table For One" is the band's latest recording endeavor and consists mostly of band originals set in a contemporary motif. The 14 selections include "Over In The Glory Land," the James Monroe/ Jake Landers collaboration "Girl In My Dreams," and Steve Gillette's "The Erlking." Mark Kreitzer's "Little Willie's Return" and "He Died Alone" are topical compositions that could have been snatched right from the headlines of today's newspapers. Other prominent entries include Bruce Jaeger's instrumental "Spirit Island," along with "Luther And Angie," "Picture On The Wall," and "Right Way To Say Goodbye."

"Table For One" is a tantalizing presentation of imaginative bluegrass from a musical entourage who knows what survival is all about. Okey-Dokey Records, 5721 39th Ave S Minneapolis MN 55417, Web < www mscb com>

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys set a "Table For One"



By Keith Lawrence

Copyright 2000 Messenger-Inquirer

This Minneapolis-area band has been playing bluegrass since 1968—and it shows.

"Table For One" features good picking, good harmonies and good song selection—with a lot of original material.

Bruce Jaeger, Alan Jesperson, Mark Kreitzer and Jerry Flynn lean toward the folk side of the music. But a lot of fans today were introduced to bluegrass through the folk boom of the 1960s. And they'll feel right at home.

Kreitzer wrote nine cuts including the title song. And how much more lonesome can you get than a table for one?

His "Little Willie's Return," which tackles the issue of guns in school, warns, "If we keep teaching hate and fear, Willie's (the kid with the gun) gonna keep comin' round here."

Kreitzer's "He Died Alone" deals with coming to grips with the death of a parent. "Luther and Angie" is about a marriage coming apart because "fairy tales don't come true." And his "Picture on the Wall" uses the imagery of an empty hook on a wall to symbolize a failed love.

Also featured are James Monroe's "Girl In My Dreams" and Ralph Stanley's spirited "Over In The Glory Land."

None of the band members will ever be nominated for male vocalist of the year. But together, they produce good music—and good albums.

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys "Table For One"



By N. J.B. (Neal J. Backues)

Bluegrass World Nov. 2000

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Minnesota based, The Middle Spunk Creek Boys release, "Table For One" is an easy listening album of songs, mostly written by band members, with some more familiar tunes included. Somewhat folksey, but still Bluegrass, this album is well produced with clean vocals and instrumental work. Liner notes include the words to all of the songs written by the band members but not much about the band members, modest fellows I suppose. Since 1968, The Middle Spunk Creek Boys have done their part in popularizing Bluegrass music in the upper Midwest. Very smooth and professional, good listening!



"No One Else" Released March, 1999

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys "No One Else"

Reviewer: BW

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Bluegrass Unlimited July 1999

When You Look At Me That Way / Time And Time Again / Seeking A Far Off Home / Cutting Edge To Nowhere/Red Dancing Shoes/Dark Day/A Long Time To Love / Coming Home To You / Gardenia/A Lifetime Shared / My Luck Has Changed / Don't Laugh / There's No One Else.

Over the 30 years the Middle Spunk Creek Boys have worked the performing circuit in and around Minneapolis-St. Paul, they've incorporated generous amounts of outside influences into their own brand of bluegrass. Bluegrass is merely their jumping-off point To that, they add smooth, Peter-Paul-without-Mary vocals and, since they write most of their own material, modern folk and folk-rock progressions and melodies, and nice rhythmic touches. The resulting sound, as this 13 song album shows, is one that makes for some great listening.

Mark Kreitzer wrote eight of the album's nine original tunes, and it is his "When You Look At Me That Way" that starts things off at a quick pace, with the band roaring in after he shouts "You've been reading my mind" in what sounds like the Sun Studio. This is followed by "Time And Time Again," also by Mr. Kreitzer and also up tempo. Probably the best way to describe it is to have you think of Michael Nesmith's "What Am I Doin' Hanging 'Round" but with more of a quirky rhythm to the words. The third cut is a terrific gospel number called "Seeking A Far Off Home." A cover tune, it fits the band's approach perfectly. A bit later, they do a couple of other covers from two Minnesota residents, former band member Peter Ostroushko's lilting "Red Dancing Shoes" and Claudia Schmidt's fiddle-tune-like "coming Home To You." After a few more originals, including "My Luck Has Changed" with its intriguing 5/4 bridge, the album closes with what has quickly become a favorite of mine; "There's No One Else," a slow, pensive number that sounds like the kind of work done by the rock group the Jayhawks. If it were possible to wear out a CD from repeated play, that cut would be in danger.

Tasteful and varied song selection, sharp vocals and solid instrumental work earns this recording a strong recommendation.



This article originally appeared in Inside Bluegrass, the magazine of the Minnesota Bluegrass and Old Time Music Association (February 1999 issue).

An Interview with

THE MIDDLE SPUNK CREEK BOYS

Today's society is obsessed by milestones. Birth-days, anniversaries, dates of Presidential impeachment votes.... But while a lot of our milestones are silly, others are quite amazing. Consider the fact that the Middle Spunk Creek Boys are thirty years old this year. *Inside Bluegrass* caught up with Alan Jesperson (the Original Spunk), Jerry Flynn, and Bruce Jaeger, and found out some of the things that have been going on with Minnesota's longest-lasting bluegrass band. (Mark Kreitzer was vacationing near San Andreas, but the band wants it known that it's not his fault.)

Inside Bluegrass: How does it feel to be part of a band that was around when "CD" still meant "Certificate of Deposit" and some people actually bought black and white television sets?

Jerry: There's some other kind than black and white?

It doesn't seem that long. Perhaps that is because being in the band has become such a natural part of life that it's not something you think about. It's sort of like "I have blue eyes, I'm male, I'm in the Middle Spunk Creek Boys...."

IB: I don't doubt that one of the aggravations of having been around for a long time is that you've been asked "How did you get together" more often than you can remember. But we have to ask: "How did you get together?" And, while we're at it, "Why 'Middle Spunk Creek Boys'?"

Bruce: The "Creek Boys" were formed when Alan Jesperson and Ron Colby invaded C. J. (Craig) Anderson's living room one day in

1968. I wasn't born yet, of course. Al had a guitar and mandolin, Ron and C. J. both had banjos. After a round of scissors, paper, and stone, Al got to play guitar, and Ron got to play the banjo. The loser had to play the mandolin. I don't know why, but they make me play the mandolin, too.

Alan: Ron used to pass the Middle Spunk Creek sign near Avon and Collegeville a lot, and thought that would be a good band name.

Bruce: Lucky for us he didn't commute by the Pig's Eye Sewage Treatment Plant.

Alan: Go lay by your dish.

Jerry: Anyway, once we had a name, it wasn't too big a step to starting to play gigs.

Alan: Our first Dulono's gig was in 1971. It turned out to be a long-term relationship....

IB: I know you have several recordings available. Tell us about them.

Alan: Our first album was recorded in 1976, and was recorded live at the Walker Art Center. It was out of print for twenty-plus years, until Bruce put it on CD for us.

IB: How did that work?

Bruce: I took the least worn-out tracks from the three vinyl copies of the album I have, and brought it into my computer through a 24-bit analog-to-digital converter. I burn the CDs one at a time, which gives us enough to sell off the stage.

Alan: Our second album, "I'm With the Band," was made for our twenty-fifth anniversary. We got nearly every member of the MSCB over the years to play on it, and pretty much kept the different groupings of musicians together for each song. One interesting thing was that the 1976 band got to redo "Yankee Lady," which was supposed to be on the first album, but was ruined by five seconds of "tape bounce."

IB: And I see a gleam in your eye that tells us there are more records in the works. Go ahead, enlighten us.

Bruce: We're just finishing up our third album, which we've recorded at Leo Whitebird's P. O. D. studio, appropriately within pick-flinging distance of Dulono's Pizza. We're taking advantage of having Mark Kreitzer in the band and recording mostly original material this time. The tentative title today presently right now as of this moment is "There's No One Else," the same as one of Mark's songs.

Leo's got a great ear, and is really patient with those of us (I shall remain nameless) who aren't exactly "First Take Freddies." He did finally have to take away and hide his pager-sized digital cussing machine, a marvelous toy which Mark kept playing with while us lesser mortals struggled with our parts.

The new album should be ready for our February 19 and 20 appearance at Dulono's. It had better be, since we're billing it as the Album Release Party!

IB: One of the amazing things about the Spunks is how well you hold together. Mark Kreitzer is fairly new, but the rest of you guys have been around since, oh, the Carter Administration. Who are these guys, and how have you managed to stick together so long?

Alan: Jerry came in with the second Nixon administration.

Jerry: Having the right mix of people is the most important thing in keeping a band together. Compatible temperaments is as important if not more so than musical issues. It really does not work so well to go looking for a new member to fit a slot in the band. Happening upon someone who just fits in and then asking them to join

permanently seems to work best. Mark is a case in point.

Bruce: How do you explain me?

Alan: Go lay by your dish.

IB: For our readers who don't know you, what sort of bluegrass do you play? What are your influences?

Jerry: Most of us came to bluegrass from the "folk boom" of the 1960s. In that movement there was a pretty eclectic feel. The Greenbriar Boys, a kind of cross between bluegrass and old-timey, were a first step that led to straight bluegrass. While we probably all heard Flatt and Scruggs first, then Bill Monroe, Jim and Jesse and others later, there was already a movement headed by the Country Gentlemen to open up the genre to wider musical sources.

Not being southern boys steeped in bluegrass, we were probably open to broader possibilities. We actually made a conscious decision not to worry about being strictly traditional. (There were a number of bands on the national level that seemed to come to the same conclusion at about the same time. e.g. The Newgrass Revival, New South, David Grisman, Peter Rowan, etc.) We felt that any material that we felt strongly about would come across as more convincing than simply trying to mimic something we heard on a record. So while we've always retained the traditional bluegrass instruments and styles, we have ranged over a wide variety of music that has mirrored the particular musical interests of the whoever was in the band at the time.

This approach has often led people to assume that were influenced greatly by the Seldom Scene. This was not really the case since we had already embarked upon our rambling musical journey before the Seldom Scene was formed. And anyway, they were just an extension of what The Country Gentlemen had started.

IB: In addition to your concert work, you and the Spunks are actively involved in promoting bluegrass around the area. Tell us about your jam sessions, your work with Dulono's, and your other activities.

Bruce: The jam sessions — which have been on hold since we've been recording every Wednesday night for the last few months — were part conscious decision and part people just showing up when we practiced at Dulono's on the first and third Wednesday nights. It's deliberately not structured. If someone shows up, fine. If not, we just practice some more and learn new tunes; Mark writes five or six a week, and I write five or six a year. This is our chance to trot 'em out and see if the rest of the Boys' collective eyes glaze over.

Alan: That's one of the ways we reach out to new audiences. We also try to do special events. The "Bluegrass in November" show last year was an example of that. We're thinking about taking that on the road — doing joint tours with The Platte Valley Boys and True Blue around the state as well as here in the Twin Cities. We're trying to make bluegrass available to more people in more places.

IB: What do you regard as the best moment in your thirty years of Spunkdom?

Sort-of-in-unison: The twenty-fifth reunion concert, where former Spunkers came in from Greece, Alaska, California, New Jersey, North Carolina, Brooklyn Park....

Alan: And, of course, there is always something special about putting out a new album. That's why we're so glad to be able to celebrate our thirtieth anniversary with a new recording.

IB: It's not really fair to ask what your worst moment was (unless you want to answer), but what was the strangest? The funniest?

Alan: I think my worst moment was the Fourth of July at the Winona band shell, where on a near 100 degree day the band shell, which faced the sun, acted like a giant white concrete convection oven. I almost passed out from heat prostitution.

Bruce: I liked the time we were playing in one of these idiotic "Let's extend the Tourist Season as Far as We Can" outdoor festivals in late fall up in Brainerd. We opened up the Sunday Gospel morning, and when we left it was thirty-two degrees and snowing. The neat thing was listening to — and adding to — the misery of the Bluegrass Cardinals, who followed us. I'm sure those

southern boys, who had never previously been any place colder than the vegetable crisper in their refrigerator, really appreciated our comments about how "Nice out it was for this time of year," and "You wanna go for a swim after the gig?" They're probably still talking about it, if they've regained voluntary control of their jaw muscles.

The funniest moment is something you as Editor have to decide if you want to print or not. We were in costume, playing a big Halloween party in a lodge up north somewhere (see photo), and were watching the audience in their costumes dance and mill around. Suddenly, in the middle of one of those slow, heart-throbbing, and deadserious songs that Jerry is wont to sing, he realized that the costume we thought was a guy in a purplish Darth Vader helmet was actually, well, something more fitting for today's Oval Office. I've read about apoplectic fits in novels, but I'd never experienced one as Jerry struggled manfully to sing his Sensitive Number while the rest of us were suppressing pig snorts and playing never-before-heard "R" chords on our instruments because we couldn't see through the tears....

IB (carefully looking at script to avoid responding): This wouldn't be a fair question for most bands, but I think I can make an exception in your case. Where do you see the Spunks five years from now? Ten years from now?

(Approximately unanimous again): With luck, playing with the same group of guys — or close to it — and playing whatever the group's members are interested in at the time.

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys will be holding their Album Release Party at Dulono's on February 19 and 20, 1999. If you have an interest in the history of Minnesota Bluegrass, you won't want to miss it.

Thirty-Something Years of the Middle Spunk Creek Boys

The Middle Spunk Creek Boys bluegrass band and Big Macs are both 34+ years old this year (2002). Somehow, that seems more than appropriate.

The band was formed in 1968 when Alan Jesperson and Ron Colby invaded C. J. (Craig) Anderson's living room one day. Al had a guitar and mandolin, Ron and C. J. both had banjos. After a round of scissors, paper and stone, Al got to play guitar, and Ron the banjo. The loser, Craig, had to play the mandolin. (That tradition still holds true!)

After a few minutes of the relentlessly dedicated rehearsals that are still a hallmark of the band thirty-odd years later, the Boys got a gig at the famous 10 O'Clock Scholar Coffeehouse. You know, where Leo Kottke got *his* start. Actually, the gig was an open stage. But the band *did* play, and was even entertaining enough that the Boys were invited back again and again for real *paying* gigs.



1971 logo



Rudy Darling was the first newcomer to join the Iron Three, adding the sound of a fiddle to the group. Craig left to be a private detective, and was replaced on mandolin by the young John Bellville, who had to get permission from his home-room teacher. Steve Block joined on bass. John got caught skipping classes, and had to go back to school. Ron Colby departed, to be replaced by the famous Al "Lightning Fingers" Struthers. (His fingers never touched the same place twice....)

Steve Block moved on and Jerry Flynn took his place on the bass, learning (as Steve had) that, while a bass is easy to hide behind, you can't run with it very fast. Then Peter Ostroushko joined so he could learn to play bluegrass mandolin, which took him roughly two weeks. After a spell, Peter quit for the glitzy life on the road with Dakota Dave Hull and others, and the remaining Boys recorded their first album before anyone else could quit. (This was in 1976.)



John Niemann joined, initially to play mandolin, although he is about one of the best fiddle players ever anywhere. Rudy moved to the California mountains to study wood ticks up close, and had to quit as the commuting back to Minnesota wasn't too practical. Mark Briere joined to play mandolin so that John wouldn't have to. Then Al Struthers left and was replaced on the banjo by Pete Anderson.

John moved (temporarily) to Alaska. Mark and Pete also quit, to be replaced by John Bellville (who

hadn't learned his lesson the first time) on mandolin and fiddle, and Jim Tordoff on banjo. Andy Kozak bolted the Pocono Mountain String Band to bring his Dobro collection to the MSCB. John Bellville quit (for what he swears is the last time) to be replaced on mandolin and fiddle by Bruce Jaeger, who was still playing in the fading Buckacre. Jim Tordoff quit. Buckacre was raided for a final time for Barry St. Mane's banjo; we had to take Barry with it. Then Barry briefly moved to Colorado. Tom Nechville filled in for a year or so until Barry decided he liked it here better and moved back. This was in 1993, when we recorded "I'm With the Band."



Andy left, and the multi-way-too-talented Mark Kreitzer joined, initially on fiddle. When Barry left, Mark switched to banjo, and the band has been happily four-piece ever since, although with the "Instrument-Henge" array of instruments that Mark stacks up on stage, it's like having a six-piece band.



In 1998-1999 we recorded our third album, "No One Else," that features the current MSCB Four. Of the 13 songs, nine are originals (eight by Mark); we refer to this as "Mark's Demo Album" when he's not around. When he *is* around, we refer to it as "Mark's Demo Album," just to show that we don't sneak around behind anyone's back. The national magazine "Bluegrass Unlimited" praised it highly.

In 2000 we recorded our fourth album "Table for One." Like its predecessor, it's largely original material, with some selected songs by from the outside world. For this album, we played around with styles a bit more, using old-timey "frailed" banjo on two cuts, and a bodhran (Irish drum) on one cut.



In 2001, Jerry Flynn decided that 27 years was enough, and retired from the band. Mark drafted his classically-trained brother Chuck to play the bass; he's more used to wearing tuxedos to his performances, but the Boys quickly got him straightened out on that issue!

Of late, the Middle Spunk Creek Boys have been having modest success on the international scene with their songs on the musician's internet site MP3.com (www.mp3.com/middlespunkcreek), with a significant number of plays coming from Europe and Asia. Several "compilation" albums have been

created there, each of which has sample songs from their four albums, plus a couple of "archive" hits from the Middle Spunk Creek Boys tape archives, and some new stuff not on regular albums yet.







Thank you for your kind attention.



ONTHETOWN

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 Jesperson on guitar. *Photo by Brad Stauffer*.

by Larry Englund

he 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 Jesperson, 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 familyfriendly 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, Jesperson had booked the Minnehaha bandshell for an appearance by his band when he realized the site's potential

"We're hard to

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'Canon in D.'"

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. Jesperson decided to approach neighborhood merchants.

As Jesperson 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,"

Jesperson 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 Jesperson.

"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," Jesperson said. "We've got the Minnehaha Park bandshell booked each Labor Day for the future. It's terrific fun."





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BIORHYTHM: MIDDLE SPUNK CREEK BOYS







MUSIC



Alan Jesperson

Mark Kreitzer

Bruce Jaeger

Bluegrass Band Thrives on Harmony, Fun

Group will perform Saturday at Java Joint

Who:Alan Jesperson, guitar/lead s i n g e r Jerry Flynn, upright bass/lead s i n g e r Mark Kreitzer, banjo / mandola / guitar/fiddle/mandolin/bass/vocals

By Kris Bergquist

Bruce Jaeger, mandolin/fiddle/vocals

In the beginning: The hand touts the fact that they're as old as Big Macs—30 years old this year—and joke that their waistlines reflect it

Jesperson is the only original member of the band, but Jaeger has been in for 15 years, Flynn for 24 years and Kreitzer for two. There have been 18 different members in the band's history, Jesperson said. Probably the most famous alumni is Peter Ostroushko.

The first official gig was at the Old Scholar Coffeehouse near the University of Minnesota. They shared the stage for a year with artists like Leo Kottke and Koerner, Ray and Glover. It closed, and the band just kept moving to different venues.

"We were the only band actively playing bluegrass at that time," Jesperson said. "We probably played at every college in the state."

The name came from Ron Colby, an original member, who was from Alexandria and loved the road sign he saw all the time—Middle Spunk Creek—near Avon.

The Twin Cities band specializes in acoustic bluegrass. They do their own arrangements, creating some complex harmonies, Jesperson said. They also write some of their own music They're two-time winners of the Minnesota Music Awards Best Bluegrass Band and a City Pages "Best Bluegrass Band" selection.

Playing bluegrass: The popularity of bluegrass seems to ebb and flow, Jaeger said. When "Dueling Banjos" was made popular with the movie "Deliverance" in 1972, bluegrass was hot. Ricky Skaggs did a lot to popularize it during the 1980s, and now Allison Krauss is making it popular in the 1990s.

"Basically, everybody still likes to pick it," Jaeger said.

Part of its success lies in that anyone can play, and they do

"People who go to bluegrass shows play themselves, a lot or a little bit. There are huge bluegrass jam sessions at every festival," he said.

"I don't recall seeing any country jams or jazz jams."

Jaeger will admit it's an acquired taste. It even took him—a folk music buff—about three years to admit that he liked it.

"You start when you're trying to show off on your instrument. Bluegrass is nothing but a bunch of show offs," he said, laughing.:

The music is similar to jazz improvisation sessions, with players taking turns as the lead and then the rest supporting that person. It still has that Hee-Haw element that can turn people off, but Jaeger said it has expanded its reach from being predominantly rural. A couple years ago, the group The Seldom Seen helped make Washington. D. C., the hotbed of bluegrass.

Even though the Middle Spunk Creels Boys have been around for 30 years, or maybe because of it, it's not a full-time job. All the members have their own jobs' and families that they like having the time to enjoy.

Harmony and humor: The group's gigs have had a different feel since January when they switched from individual microphones to a single microphone, a powerful AKGC3000 that picks up all four members.

They have to stand a little closer together, but Jaeger said it's helped with their harmony, and with the instrument blend. If you're playing too loud, you can tell, Jaeger said.

"The main feature of bluegrass is not the fast banjo and fancy fiddle that people think. The most important part is the harmony singing," Jaeger said.

The band prides itself on being "funny guys." At their gigs, including the one this Saturday at the Java Joint, the audience will get a souvenir program announcing that the band will be presenting the romantic drama, 'Homer and Juliet.' There may be some of the story, some of the songs list—not all—and there will be no dancing

musicians in tights on the stage.

That's a promise.

"We began (the program) as something to give people to take home. It's my chance to get my humor out, some thing I can't do as a technical writer," Jaeger said.

"That's probably been one of our trademarks. We're a little funnier and entertaining than other bands."

Jesperson added, "It's that back and forth with the audience. Besides playing the music, we like to play for people."

Recordings: "The Middle Spunk Creek Boys," 1976; "I'm With the Band," 1993. The latter includes many past band members on the 19-song album. The band is planning its next recording now, but a release date has not been set.

Gigs: 8 to 11 p.m. Saturday, Java Joint. The concert is part of the monthly Mountain Music series, sponsored by the Minnesota Bluegrass and Old-Time Music Association's Community outreach program.

7:30 p.m., first and third Wednesday of every month, Dulono's Pizza, Minneapolis. The group leads the acoustic jam sessions.