

Arts & Entertainment

Accordion energizes Bon-Ton's KC blues

By Donna Sisson and Tish Mockler

A "fun type of blues" may sound like a contradiction, but that's exactly what the Bon-Ton Band is.

"Bon-ton originally meant 'fun' or 'party', and that's what we try to do," said Butch Smith, saxophone player for the band.

The Bon-Ton Band, based in Kansas City, consists of Richard Lucente, accordionist and lead vocalist; Billy Dye on guitar and lap steel guitar; Mike Harvey on drums; Blue "Shoe" Shoemaker on trombone and harmonica; Butch Smith on saxophone, and Ed Toler on bass.

The name comes from the restaurant and bar, Kiki's Bon-Ton Maison, where the band first started playing on Saturday afternoons with Lucente and a bass player and drummer. Lucente then added new professional musicians until they wound up with the group they have now, Lucente said.

The Bon-Tons, who played last weekend at the Zoo Bar, sound like a musical Mardi Gras. Their music has a blues background but is played a lot faster and with more energy than blues normally is experienced.

The Bon-Tons have been labeled as "zydeco" blues, which is basically Louisiana-style style rhythm and blues with an accordion, but Lucente says their only connection with zydeco is the accordion. The roots are the same but the Bon-Tons' instrumentation and rhythmic patterns are different, he said.

The accordion certainly adds a lot to their music. It modernizes the blues format the band uses by, at times, sounding like a raw version of a synthesizer. It gives a roller-coaster edge to their sound, making it cheerful and easy to dance to.

Lucente started in music by playing the piano when he was young and switched to the accordion about one and a half years ago. One of the band members suggested that it was Lucente's aggressive accordion playing that won him the nickname, "Squeegee La Juice," which is a play on the name Luigi from his Italian heritage.

The accordion was fairly easy to learn but is hard on the left arm where all the pumping strength comes from, Lucente said. Another adjustment in the accordion is that the keyboard is upside down, he said.

Just as the accordion allows their music a happy edge, the horn section provides tart dashes of sensibility. The horns also delve deeply into the mournful, as the trombone can go low into



Donna Sisson/Daily Nebraskan

Richard Lucente of the Bon-Ton Band.

the audience's emotional pits.

This is Lucente's first band, while the other members have played in many capacities and have a wide range of influences. Smith said he played in at least 150 bands and has played all types of music.

"I followed my heroes around and bugged them until they let me play," Toler said. Eventually he had the opportunity to play with blues artists including Johnnie Taylor, Earl Hooker and Albert Collins, he said.

Much of the band's uniqueness comes from its material, which is written by Lucente. Their performance contains

about 70 to 80 percent original material, Lucente said.

"We hear consistently that people don't hear what we do any place else — we play in a pretty familiar format, but it still has a different sound," Lucente said.

The different sound comes not only from their music, but from their explicit lyrics. The lyrics, which you'll have to hear for yourself, are definitely "ornery," Toler said. People appreciate such songs more when they have had a little to drink, he said, sarcastically labeling them, "tender love ballads."

Particularly spectacular about the

Bon-Tons are their solos. When the accordion or trombone breaks into a frantic solo it invariably sets the audience into an uproar.

Some of the best solos, agreed the band, are played by Billy Dye on guitar. "Dye is an incredible guitarist," said Lucente. He has toured and recorded with such notable blues musicians as Luther Allison.

"When Billy does a solo, the crowd just gets hysterically applauding," Toler said.

"It's a pretty nice ensemble sort of deal," Lucente said. "People pretty much pick their parts based on kind of a loose suggestion of what it ought to be — it makes it a little bit spontaneous that way," he said.

"Everybody can sign their name to what they play, everybody has their own personality in the band, their own character," said Harvey. "They're not being dictated by an outside force other than the fact that it started off with this R&B from Louisiana kind of style and everybody can take that and go where they want to," he said.

They are working on a full-length album of all original material to be released this summer, Lucente said. They plan to produce the record themselves and have unlimited studio time, he said. "We're gonna fool around with it and see what works best," he said.

Lucente, who also is a graphic artist, plans on designing the album cover.

"It is an interesting concept if you want to look at it that way. I think of it in terms of a project. If I didn't think I had any kind of influence I wouldn't want to do it. I wouldn't want to work for anybody else's band, let's put it that way. I couldn't be a side man and that's the whole deal. I'm fortunately in a position where I don't have to be, so that gives me a little bit of freedom," Lucente said.

"(The Zoo bar) is the first place we played out of town and it's just great here. The people are real nice. This is our sixth or seventh time at the Zoo," Lucente said.

After their album is released they plan to do some limited touring. They said they want to play in Louisiana because "it would be kind of interesting to see what they think of us down there," Lucente said.

In reference to their music, Lucente said, "We'll just take it as far as it goes. Either it goes or it doesn't, and so far I haven't seen any indications that it won't get us where we want to go. We aren't gonna make millions of dollars but we still have a lot of fun," he said.

'Racing' dull, develops too quickly

By Mike Frost

The phrase the moguls use when motion pictures come out is "released." However, in the case of *Racing With the Moon*, a new film directed by Richard Benjamin, the word "thrust" may be more apropos.

Racing With the Moon, let's not mince words here, is a horrendous film. The blame can be

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placed squarely on the shoulders of director Benjamin and screenwriter Steven Kloves.

As a guest on the *Tonight Show*, Benjamin is affable enough. As a director, he is less accomplished. In fact, the title director is something of a misnomer. This film is notable mainly for its lack of direction. Benjamin's "direction" is void of any real style or substance. Rather than out of a love for film, Benjamin seems to be sitting in the director's chair merely because he's tired of acting. Or perhaps he wants to be introduced as "the multi-talented Richard Benjamin" on future talk show gigs.

Kloves' failings far outshadow Benjamin's. Ben-

jamin, after all, did successfully pull off last year's *My Favorite Year*, although the film's success was largely in spite of rather than because of him. Kloves seems genuinely afraid of allowing anything resembling a plot complication to develop.

The story itself is a rather plebeian tale of boy meets girl who live happily ever after. Unfortunately, the boy (Sean Penn) meets the girl (Elizabeth McGovern) within the first 15 minutes of the film. This leaves two tedious hours of happily living ever after.

There are some complications, but they are all quickly resolved, if they're even addressed at all. Penn's best friend, played by Nicholas Cage, is a jerk who could potentially get in the way of the couple's happiness. However, this was evidently all ironed out behind the camera, because the first time McGovern and Cage are shown together on screen, they seem like old chums. Similarly, McGovern, in one sequence, pops up at Penn's parents' house; evidently they know her, but the filmmaker doesn't share that potentially comic first meeting with us.

These quick and easy resolutions ultimately kill the film. Cage gets a woman pregnant and she gets an abortion. Penn and McGovern initially admonish him for his behavior. But after awhile all is forgiven. Heck, the film implies, it's just an everyday abortion, for gosh sakes.

This careens attitude about such a major deci-

sion is not just poor judgment. If the filmmakers want to condone abortion, that's fine; however to portray it as just one of those things teenagers go through is totally irresponsible.

Perhaps strong scenes between Cage and Penn or Penn and McGovern could have over come these lapses in common sense.

Here again, though, the film falls short. Penn and Cage's shared scenes are unconvincing. McGovern and Penn's scenes are similarly disappointing. The film's opening sequences, with Penn pursuing McGovern in an extreme fit of puppy love, are charming enough. However, they become lovers so quickly that the initial moments of shyness are soon forgotten.

At the same time, they don't seem to have any real interest in each other as individuals. Penn mistakenly believes McGovern is rich; in actuality she is the daughter of a maid. One would expect lovers as intimate as Penn and McGovern to discuss their families and background at least once. Evidently, it just never came up.

There are many other problems with the film, but discussing all of them would, as they say, give away the ending (this is not to imply that you're ever in any doubt as to what the conclusion will be). *Racing With the Moon's* main thesis seems to be everything's swell as long as you have your pal and your gal. It's a shame those involved didn't chose a vehicle with slightly more ambition.