

Alternative music

Polka, cha cha infiltration crosses stale genres, styles

band

PROFILE

By Matthew Grant
Staff Reporter

According to Jeffrey Barnes of the polka-infested, unhip hipsters Brave Combo, there is a certain point during polka when the person dancing becomes weightless.

Anyone who has ever seen or heard Brave Combo play knows gravity is not the only thing they defy.

Founded in 1979 by Carl Finch as a reaction to "the stupidity of pop music," the band aimed to make use of discarded forms of music.

To begin with, the harbingers of real alternative music tried to discover what pop fans considered to be the most unhip type of music: The general consensus was polka. So Finch formed Brave Combo in the conception of a "nuclear polka" group, and the group got under way — playing their first gigs in state mental hospitals.

Brave Combo will play at Howard Street Tavern in Omaha Wednesday and at the Zoo Bar in Lincoln, May 4.

Brave Combo takes influences from all over the world and reworks them into diverse songs held together by a rock focus.

"We reach out and take what we need from a whole bunch of different styles of music," said Barnes, who plays saxophone and woodwinds for the band.

After the success of their previous album ("It's Christmas, Man!"), Brave Combo chose to delve into the varied sounds and rhythms of Latin America on their new release, "No, No, No, Cha Cha Cha."

The title song on this album — a perfect example of the band's bizarre mixture of musical genius, irreverence and sheer zaniness — throws together cha cha and The Rolling Stone's "I Can't Get No Satisfaction."

"No, No" was recorded after percussionist Bubba Hernandez, who had done two tours of Japan with Brave Combo, joined the group as a permanent member, Barnes said. Because the band's origins are in Texas, he said, its members have always been interested in Hispanic music.

"No, No," features charanga, salsa, tango

and bossa nova amongst other Latin styles, sung in a mixture of Spanish and English. Hernandez learned Spanish originally to speak to his grandmother, Barnes said. Barnes and Finch also sing the language fluently, but speak it less well.

In the past, Brave Combo has also recorded an album entirely in Japanese and other songs in Polish and Persian. The band learned those languages through phonetics, Barnes said.

As well as being a multilingual singer, Barnes also plays the clarinet, guitar, harmonica, flute, baritone and saxophone. At Brave Combo concerts, both Barnes and the other members of the band constantly switch instruments as they jump over genres, nations and styles.

— **“We reach out and take what we need from a whole bunch of different styles of music.”**

—Barnes
band member

The root of it all, however, remains polka: Finch has said polka is capable of bringing about world peace.

"He's saying, I think, that there is an incredible infectious happiness that comes with polka music," Barnes said.

Brave Combo's "world music" is a step in bringing the world toward peace through knowledge, Barnes said.

"A little bit more information on our rapidly shrinking planet," he said.

For the same reason, Barnes said he listened to a lot of hip-hop music and is interested in the concept of sampling.

"I have this idea that we're getting all these pieces of information all the time; it comes in fragments and we piece it all together."

But Brave Combo probably won't be recording a hip-hop album, Barnes said.

Next for Brave Combo is a joint venture with Japanese artist Kikusui, who came to Texas recently and recorded the basis of some tracks while the band was out of the state playing concerts. By the time they returned, Barnes said, Kikusui was gone but had left behind his guitar, producer and drum kit for Brave Combo to complete the recording.



Courtesy of Rounder Records

Brave Combo will play at Howard Street Tavern in Omaha Wednesday.

Gin Blossoms hit touring circuit with typical, laid-back demeanor



Courtesy of A&M Records

Robin Wilson

band

PROFILE

By Jill O'Brien
Senior Reporter

The Gin Blossoms have been compared to The Byrds, Tom Petty and R.E.M.

"Good comparisons," said Bill Leen, bass player for the Gin Blossoms.

They've opened for the Neville Brothers, Del Amitri and Wet Toad, and now the group headlines its own shows — Thursday night, the Gin Blossoms will play at the Ranch Bowl in Omaha.

Currently, the band is touring to promote its recently released album, "New Miserable Experience." No fancy limos, jets or 16-wheelers for the group yet.

Phillip Rhodes, Robin Wilson, Jesse Valenzuela, Scott Johnson and Leen are still toughing out touring van-style, a van Leen said he hoped to run into the ground.

"But I'm not complaining," he said — and he's not.

During an interview, Leen comes across as quiet, unassuming and low-keyed.

Although Leen might be low-keyed, his playing isn't. But neither can Leen nor the Gin Blossom sound be pegged high-powered. Rather, the Gin Blossoms' music has been described as "Southwestern flavored rock," "classic American pop" and "folk oriented."

When Leen was asked to describe the music, it took him only an instant to respond.

"What would you call Tom Petty? — just good rock 'n' roll," he said. "We're fans of '60s-oriented-type writing, basically, and then we mix that up with a lot of energy."

Lead vocalist Wilson said the music was "like a big slice of American cheese."

"I'm still trying to figure out what Robin means by that," Leen said. "Maybe he said that because we don't take ourselves very seriously. We're kids."

The "kids" from Tempe, Ariz., played their first gig on Christmas, 1987. There's nothing spectacular about them, yet the band has a strong college following.

Practically everyone in the group had attended college and played locally, he said.

The title "New Miserable Experience" represents the band's collective

philosophy of success and touring. When the group cut the album with producer John Hampton, the experience at Ardent Studios in Memphis was incredible, according to Wilson.

Yet, during that time, the strain of recording almost broke up the band. Guitarist Doug Hopkins was replaced by Scott Johnson.

"There's always changes in a band's lineup," Leen said.

Besides the near breakup in Memphis, television appearances have proven somewhat "miserable," especially for Leen.

"The last time . . . it was cheesy," he said. "Most of the band has been on Letterman, but I haven't."

When the band was asked to play on the David Letterman show, he wasn't needed because the Letterman band had a resident bass player, he said, so he stayed behind.

He won't be staying behind June 1, when the Gin Blossoms play on the "Tonight Show" to promote "Experience."

The 12 tracks on "Experience" range from melodious ballads to the get-down "Cajun Song" complete with accordion to the country sound of "Cheatin'."

"Cheatin'" had a steel pedal," he said. "We like to do a lot of that."

"Experience" is not the first record the Gin Blossoms made, Leen said.

Prior to that was "Dusted," an independently released record, then "Up and Crumbling," their five-song debut album on A&M Records was remixed and two of the songs appear on "New Miserable."

"The label forced us to include the songs," Leen said.

You could almost hear him shrug. "But that's all right," he said, then laughed. "I just hope one doesn't become a hit. I'd hate to have to keep playing it for a year."

NEW VIDEO RELEASES

Bob Roberts
Enchanted April
School Ties
A Brief History of Time
Flirting

Scott Maurer/DN

Finally, a week worth waiting for — snappy satire, dramatic introspection and a movie with a message — not bad for dead week.

"Bob Roberts" Tim Robbins wrote, directed and starred in this smartly satirical mockumentary about politics and the campaign trail.

Robbins is the title character, a Pennsylvania senatorial candidate who would make Rush Limbaugh proud. He's an ultraconservative Yuppie, young Republican from hell — every reasonable person's nightmare.

Roberts is a media darling. His campaign perfectly embodies the American political ideal: Image, not issues, is the key.

Roberts is also a folk singer in the finest Bob Dylan tradition, except his folk songs are anti-social services, anti-minorities, anti-gay and anti-everything left-wing. But he's also a first-class hypocrite: His anti-drug organization is merely a cover-up for drug smuggling, money laundering and savings and loan rip-offs.

Framed as an "on-the-road-with-the-candidate" documentary, "Bob Roberts" is a snappy, savvy and smart look at American politics.

"Enchanted April" Showing

this weekend at the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater, this drama was nominated for numerous Academy Awards.

Oscar-nominees Miranda Richardson and Joan Plowright star as two of four women who embark on a journey to Italy. They leave not only the drabness of London, but also the mundane trappings of their everyday lives in an Italian villa-turned-paradise.

"School Ties" Brendan Fraser stars as a scholarship student at an all-boys prep school in 1955. His big-man-on-campus status plummets when students discover he is Jewish.

It is a moving portrait about one young man's struggle against bigotry and a broader look at the problems caused by prejudice.

Chris O'Donnell ("Scent of a Woman") and Amy Locane ("Melrose Place") co-star.

Also this week: "A Brief History of Time," a documentary about theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking and "Flirting," an Australian coming-of-age film about an interracial romance.

All titles available Wednesday.

— Anne Steyer