

Great Divide tries to span traditional music genres

BY SARAH BAKER
Senior staff writer

Whatever you do, don't call them country.

J.J. Lester, drummer for The Great Divide, an Oklahoma-based rock-country outfit, doesn't want to be categorized.

Especially not categorized with the Billy Rays and the Brooks and Dunns who have dominated the so-called "country music scene" of the past few years.

For lack of a better term, according to Lester, the band calls its sound "American music."

"Our motto is 'If it's good, like it,'" Lester said. "When we first started, we didn't like

" We write what we know, with honesty, about college days and going to the bar."

J.J. LESTER
The Great Divide drummer

what was going on with country radio. We all grew up listening to a lot of different kinds of music, from Springsteen to Van Halen to Merle Haggard."

Lester said the band ran into problems with the industry trying to categorize it.

"It's sad because a lot of people don't like it just because it's called 'country.' We didn't want that," he said.

Although the band members are adamantly opposed to the industry's staunch categories, Lester said they do have a country sound more than anything else, but try to mix things up.

Obscure, older music, as well as a lot of original music, is a big part of their style, he said.

He attributed those unique qualities as the reason that the band "bombed" on its first visit to Lincoln.

"We didn't play any music the crowd knew," he said. "So you can imagine our disbelief when (Lincoln) picked up the single and called us to play up there again. We thought 'Are you sure you got the right band?'"

Christi Green, a disc jockey at KFGE-FM (98.1) "Froggy," said the station was the first one to play the band's single "Never Could." She said the response, both to the song and to local record sales, was incredible.

"It's popular because it's crossover country," Green said. "You can tell in the music that the members of the band themselves listen to a huge variety of music."

The on-air promotion helped the band, Green said, but she didn't attribute all of its success to that alone.

"These are our guys," she said. "The popularity came from a huge combination of both the promotion and the listener's response. You can bet that we'll keep bringing them back."

Lester said the band's second show in Lincoln gave it a taste of what it's like to be a national act.

He said the second successful show was, ironically enough, almost one year to the day after their original Lincoln show.

"It was the first time in our career that we had ever played in front of an audience who had never seen us before, yet they knew every word to every song," he said. "It's hard to put into words how exciting it was."

He said Lincoln was unique to the band because when they came here, there already

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Last dance

Financial woes, lack of vision are blamed for demise of Ballet Omaha

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Staff writer

As the largest city in Nebraska and Iowa, Omaha has assumed the role of a mini-cultural epicenter—boasting an opera, a playhouse and a symphony.

And until Aug. 31, it supported the most delicate of the performing arts—ballet.

But after two years of financial struggles, Ballet Omaha, a significant cultural presence in the Midwest since 1965, officially ceased to exist on Aug. 31.

Leasing two studios and frequently performing at Omaha's Orpheum Theater, 409 S. 16th St., Ballet Omaha was recognized as a primal force in the metropolitan performing arts community.

The company's demise leaves Nebraska without the presence of a professional dance company.

"Given the size of the city ... it only makes sense that there was a ballet company," said Derrick Wilder, former managing director of Ballet Omaha. "In theory, it should have done and thrived well."

But a series of financial gaffes and a lack of a coherent vision led Ballet Omaha down a path of



MATT HANEY/DN

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DERRICK WILDER
former Ballet Omaha official

self-destruction.

One of the company's most devastating acts was its decision to change the 1994-1995 season after season tickets had already been sold.

"It was the beginning of the end," said Valerie Roche, who founded the original company in 1965 and served as artistic director until 1974. "The season-ticket holders bought their tickets based on a balanced season with traditional works. The change was a financial blow—the season-ticket holders demanded their money back."

With low box-office sales and a mounting debt, Ballet Omaha disbanded its troupe of professional dancers at the end of the 1994-1995 season.

The organization managed to keep its school open, though, and brought in the Dayton Ballet from Ohio to present a professional ballet season.

But Wilder said factions within the organization kept Ballet Omaha from finding ways to repair itself. Wilder said personal agendas prevented the board of directors from seeing the bigger picture.

The bigger picture, Wilder explained, was Ballet Omaha's role as a community organization.

"In order to continue to grow in the community, Ballet Omaha had to be a part of the community. It forgot that," Wilder said.

An important part of community involvement,

Wilder said, is generating interest and knowledge about your work. Arts organizations generally accomplish this through outreach programs.

During his time with the company, Wilder said, Ballet Omaha only participated in two outreach programs—both with the same school. In comparison, Dayton Ballet's outreach program includes 165 different workshops and 19 performances.

Wilder added that the company isolated itself from the rest of the dance community, saying a great deal of animosity existed between local dance studios and Ballet Omaha.

"Ballet Omaha had not demanded to be a part of the community," Wilder said. "It seemed we were competing for the same students, when we really weren't. We'd never said, 'Look! We're on the same side!'"

All these problems contributed to an unhealthy environment of which corporate sponsors did not want to be a part.

In April of this year, with no money left to continue, Ballet Omaha's Board of Directors resigned and hired an attorney to handle the self-liquidation process. In June, the organization's school instructed its last classes and the offices were closed. A week before the official dissolution, Ballet Omaha held a public auction at its downtown studio space in order to sell its assets and pay off its remaining \$137,000 debt.

The 89 students who trained with Ballet Omaha suffered the most immediate effect of the organization's collapse as they rushed to find alternative dance programs.

Please see **BALLET** on 13

2 Skinnee Js seek shtick rock fans

BY PATRICK MINER
Staff writer

Music

Some bands desire world domination. Others have different goals.

"We're looking to move up to the middle class," said vocalist Special J of the New York City band 2 Skinnee Js.

Fans should have higher hopes when the 2SJs finally make their way to Knickerbockers, 901 O St., for an all-ages show tonight. 2SJs was scheduled to play the venue March 8, but the show was canceled because of an unseasonable snowstorm.

Since then, the 2SJs have released their major label debut, "Supermercado," a 12-track effort featuring the band's style of good-times rock 'n' roll with rap vocals. Following the album, the band hit the road hard last summer, playing three shows in fewer than three weeks at Omaha's Ranch Bowl as only one demonstration of their dedication.

This grass-roots effort has been necessary for the band because its songs have received little radio play.

MTV showed the video for "Riot Nrrrd" a grand total of once, and KRNU-FM (90.3) is the only radio station in the area that even plays the band's style of music. Because of this, the band has decided to hit Lincoln's market hard with touring.

"We make most of our fans at shows," Special J said. "We're coming back to try and keep our momentum up."

The 2SJs shows are lively, to say the least. Visually representing the wacky lyrics of frontmen Special J and J Guevara, the shows are notorious for being intense from start to finish. Songs such as the "Star Wars"-inspired "Mindtrick," the funky and hilarious "The Good, the Bad and the Skinnee" and the loud anthem and latest single "(718)" will be a few of the more excitable numbers performed.

Those in attendance should also notice a bored-faced man with his arms crossed standing in the corner of the stage. While some bands have

a manager to help them in the music business, the 2SJs have an owner. A.J. "Stumpy" Johnson won the band in a poker match in Las Vegas and has since toured with the group in hopes of making more money.

"Stumpy is our Billy Martin meets Don King meets Mahatma Gandhi," Special J said. "We write the music, and he yells at us."

Because of Johnson's manipulative ways, the audience probably won't be hearing one of the better songs off "Supermercado" tonight.

"Stumpy doesn't think A. Mays is good enough to play guitar on 'Ball Point Man,' Special J said. "We also don't seem to get the same crowd reaction with the song."

Nevertheless, the 2SJs will play



COURTESY PHOTO

NEW YORK SHTICK ROCK act 2 Skinnee Js hope tonight's show at Knickerbockers will make enough money to appease its owner, "Stumpy."

most of "Supermercado" tonight, as well as a few older favorites. Songs from the EP "Sing, Earthboy, Sing!" including "Irresistible Force," "BBQ" and "Meadow Blaster," will more than likely round out the show.

Knickerbockers is opening its doors a half-hour early for the 6 p.m. show. Tickets are \$8 and include opening acts Six Percent and Beyond.