

Keeping the beat

By Jeff McDanald
Contributing writer

A Saturday night spent with the Metrognomes is like a kind of time travel. Close your eyes and it's 1940-something, and you're listening to Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Jimmy Dorsey, or Les Brown. It's as if someone forgot to tell the Metrognomes that the swinging tempos and punchy horns of the big band era went the way of the oversized tube radio and the 78 rpm record.



"I grew up with big band music and I love to jitterbug" says Nicholasville resident Betty Lou Thornton. "When I was a teenager, I danced at places like Joyland in Lexington. When the Metrognomes play, it's that same feeling. It's good wholesome music, a different beat from what you hear now."

The group has scarcely been together two years, but is already developing a following.

"They are as fine a big band as you will hear anywhere," says local musician and fan Joe Gierlach. "You can see their zeal and passion for the music when they play."

So how did a tight and talented 17-piece big band emerge from the seemingly unlikely environs of Wilmore?

"First off, I give credit to Teg Evans and the Jessamine Jazz Ensemble with keeping jazz alive in the county," explains Metrognomes publicist and band member Dr. Milton Lowe. "That experience got me to dust off my trumpet and got me out and playing again. Even though that group mainly targeted young musicians in the area, Teg let some of us older players join in."

But as Lowe tells it, the real genesis of the Metrognomes was during Asbury College's 2003 Alumni Week, when former members of the college Stage Band got together for a performance.

"It was a reunion of those of us that had played over the last 30 years," said Lowe who currently works as Assistant Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program for Asbury Theological Seminary. "Looking at that group of musicians, I realized that there were some accomplished jazz players living in this area."

Responding to an e-mail campaign by Lowe, several of those musicians, along with other musicians from Wilmore and Nicholasville, including some seminary students with undergraduate music performance degrees, got together with the idea of starting a community jazz band for adult musicians. Original Metrognomes director, Ken Snow (who has since relocated to Texas) drew on his University of Kentucky connections to find additional talent.

The Metrognomes got a big boost when Doug Oatley heard about the band and invited them to record a CD of his compositions and arrangements. Oatley has an impressive resume that includes backing up Bob Hope and a stint with jazz legend Stan Kenton. Today Oatley has made his personal music library available to the group and shares responsibility for directing the Metrognomes along with saxman Chris Barbee.

The members of the Metrognomes are a diverse group that is hard to categorize other than to say that they are all accomplished musicians. There are both music hobbyists and music professionals. Lawyers and ministers. A high school student and some retirees. Not to mention a church choir director, college professors and students, and a couple of high school band directors.

The group fell into their dance band role somewhat by accident. "When we started the group, we weren't thinking about being a dance band," says Lowe. "The idea was to be a community jazz band. However, when an event organizer asked if we were a dance band, we rose to the occasion and hurriedly put together a selection of dance tunes. Now we're getting a following based on our dance catalogue."

To accommodate those people that "gotta dance," a Metrognomes performance is often preceded by an hour of free swing dance instruction. The group also frequently teams up with the University of Kentucky 'Hepcats' Swing Dance Club for special events.

But to call the group simply a big band or a dance band is really an injustice. The group tackles jazz, Latin, rock and swing. "We have a repertoire of more challenging performance concert music that we perform when the opportunity affords itself," says Lowe.

Adding another dimension to the group is jazz vocalist Gretchen Palmer. She is featured on several songs including, "Do Nothin' Til You Hear From Me" and "Don't Get Around Much Anymore." "Gretchen draws you right in," says Gierlach. "Her phrasing is wonderful. She just melts your heart."

In some respects, the Metrognomes are riding a national wave of popularity and renewed interest in swing dancing. Shows like ABC's "Dancing With The Stars," have probably

helped the band along by putting big band music and dancing into millions of homes across the country.

For Dee Sidebotham of Lexington, the band brought back memories of being voted best dancer of her high school class of 1953. But like many from her generation, her Metrognomes experience bares a cautionary tale. "I think they are excellent, and I really enjoy them. The problem was that their wonderful beat put my mind in the dancing mood, and my body wasn't quite cooperating. On top of that, I didn't have the right shoes and my feet were sticking."

In the upcoming year, look for the band to appear at the Miss Kentucky Gala, a dinner and dance for contestants and their guests. You also might catch the band during their busy schedule of wedding receptions, dances, parties, fund-raisers and community events. Not bad for a group that plays music that peaked in popularity 60 years ago.

And if you come, remember to bring the right shoes.

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