

Pocket full of memories

by Dan Craft
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Fifteen years ago this week, Twin Cities musical history was about to be made - unwittingly.

Or atleast unwittingly for those patrons who might have wandered into the lower level of The Gallery in downtown Normal for some happy hour pizza and beer.

Crammed together in the tiny space were seven guys who were not downing some happy hour pizza or beer.

Instead, each of the seven was wielding an instrument, from guitars, to drums, to keyboards to something slightly exotic for what appeared to be just another rock band: a horn section.

The local bar scene had rarely seen such an accumulation of instruments and manpower gathered in one spot, let alone one this tight.

The manpower cut loose. Happy hour turned giddy. And a band was born. Certainly, no one in December 1986 could have remotely dreamed that 15 years later - several generations in a local bar band terms - the men and the power would still be alive and kicking.

No, make that, alive and wailing. They called themselves then and call themselves now...Hip Pocket.

And if Bloomington-Normal's live music scene has its deans, Hip Pocket are the figurative graybeards - a senior status that will be celebrated with a special 15th anniversary performance Friday night at Daddio's in downtown Bloomington (9:30 p.m. with a \$3 cover).

For the records, the band's name hails from a CD of "generic background music" that band founder Marc Boon stumbled across during his day job playing the blues on Illinois State University's WGLT-FM, which hired Boon the same year (and where he remains today, as its music director).

The confluence of day job and night job was no coincidence.

It was because of those WGLT blues that Boon was inspired to translate them into the forum of a local band, something that nobody else in town was doing at the time.

A battle-scarred veteran of around 10 Twin Cities garage bands, Boon had also learned that audiences always seemed to perk up and get into the groove when one of his groups would break into a stray blues song or some "Jimi Hendrix kind of stuff."

Boon also decided he was a better blues singer than rock singer. So, the blues, he decided, it would be.

"Fifteen years ago my mindset on the blues was of an old black guy on a porch with his acoustic guitar," Boon says.

"Acoustic, soulful stuff from Memphis. That was really the direction I wanted to go and I didn't really care whether it was marketable or not. I knew what I wanted to do musically."

Only one other local band at the time - Mojo Stew - which came along shortly after Hip Pocket, was doing anything remotely similar, recalls Boon. "But they were a lot more funk than soul."

To fill his new Pocket, Boon posted fliers around ISU, got around 12 responses, winnowed the number down to six, which, plus Boon, made seven.

From the beginning, Boon made it clear to all comers that the band was his baby.

"I wanted to hold the reins and be responsible. I tried to find people who wanted to come and do their part and didn't want to have to be responsible for getting us jobs or setting up rehearsals and handling all the rest."

Boon was willing to handle those chores, which made the band more attractive in terms of fewer pressured and worries.

He also realized that "we had some really good musicians but nobody had played this kind of music before. The horn guys had played some jazz; some of the guys had played Jimi Hendrix and Allman Brothers. But we didn't have that guy from Chicago who was blessed to have been born with the music."

On the plus side, says Boon, "I had a little head start because of GLT. And I was also working in the audio-visual area at ISU and was able to sit down and make some tapes of tunes I wanted to work on."

After a six-to-eight-week rehearsal period, Gallery owner Kup Tchong offered the untested band a slot during his first-floor happy hour (the main musical events reserved for the somewhat more spacious second floor).

"We hit the ground running, and we made it through, and nobody got hurt," Boon recalls almost 15 years later to the gig.

In terms of a splashy coming-out performance in a more prominent showcase, Hip Pocket's big break-through came several months later via a St. Patrick's Day performance at the Gallery, where they were movin' on up...to the second floor.

From there, it was onward to the key B-N performance venues of the mid-80s: the Tree House Lounge (still here, of course, but with live comedy now its forte), the defunct Scotty's and the defunct Mosey's.

Suddenly, says Boon, it was "yeah, this is going to be all right."

In particular, it was the Scotty's gigs "that raised us to a different echelon" and sent the band packing on the road, most notably to Peoria's Duffy's Roof Top, which regularly booked name blues talent like Stevie Ray Vaughan and Albert King.

Opening for acts of that caliber put Hip Pocket on yet another level of high visibility.

"Once we started playing for guys like that, they started going 'Hey, you guys've got a good band!' That reaffirmed that we were on the right track. And we were the only game in town with that kind of music."

A la Vaughan, Hip Pocket began refining its blues sound, energizing its R&B riffs with a heavy dose of rock voltage.

"What we were doing (locally) was really different, and it shocked people," Boon says.

As the years began to roll by, so did the high-profile Hip Pocket opening sets for R&B icons like B.B. King, Buggy Guy, Etta James, Lonnie Brooks, Delbert McClinton and others.

Around the Twin Cities the band became a dance-triggering fixture at the big outdoor festivals and events, as well as inside the major clubs.

The release of two CDs and several trips to Washington, D.C. to play presidential inaugural balls became major highlights of the band's career.

For the future, Boon sees an ongoing evolving of the band's sound into something more eclectic and less bound by blues tradition. He also is plotting an expansion into Central Illinois markets (like the notoriously insular Champaign-Urbana) that have yet to be conquered.

How have Boon and his fellow boys in the band managed to eke it out over a time period that has witnessed the births and deaths of a hundred other local bands?

"Luck," he says without a second's pause.

"That's probably over 50 percent of it. We've been very lucky to have good friends in this town and we've been lucky to have had very good musicians who wanted to come and play and have fun."

Of the current roster, keyboardist Tom "Roomer" Weidrich is the only other member still on board who can recall that December night on the Gallery's first floor 15 years ago. Boon says about 31 members have passed through and/or remained in the Hip Pocket ranks during that time. Other long-term members include saxophonists J.T. Payne and Jim Kozak, bass player Chris Briggs and trombonist John Filkins.

More recent additions to the fold are lead guitarist John Kerner and - the relative new kid on the block - drummer Gary Erwin.

"It does get to be infectious to see people having a good time," says Boon on the eve of the band's big anniversary. "It makes you want to be a part of that good time."