

Inaugural invite hits right notes for local band

by Sharon Woulfe
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It began with a question between bites of pancakes and ham at an Optimists Club breakfast at a fair over the Labor Day weekend.

Somebody asked if they knew of any REALLY good bands they'd recommend for a pretty special gig. The result? Hip Pocket - widely considered Central Illinois' premier rhythm and blues band - will play at one of the celebrity-studded soiree during the January inauguration of President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore.

"Eleven guys I've got to take out there and 4,000 pounds of equipment," said Marc Boon, not to mention a dozen-plus musical instruments and luggage.

"The process is nerve-wracking right now," said Boon, who heads Hip Pocket, the band he formed a decade ago.

Boon said he was "dumbstruck" when he got the invitation, but nothing was made public until the contracts were signed.

And a heck of a lot has to happen between now and mid-January. The band has chartered a 46-passenger bus and hired two bus drivers to take turns on their way to D.C.

Hip Pocket was invited by the Illinois State Society of Washington D.C. and the National Conference of State Societies to play at the Illinois Inaugural Gala Jan. 19 at the Grant Hyatt Hotel.

The guest list includes Hillary Rodham Clinton, Jesse Jackson Jr., Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Broder, Gov. Jim Edgar, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, Olympic gold medalist Bonnie Blair and Jackie Joyner Kersee, Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun, and U.S. Reps. Dick Durbin, Ray LaHood and Thomas Ewing.

The Gala will feature bands from three towns in Illinois with Hip Pocket representing Bloomington-Normal and Central Illinois.

Band member Jim Kozak said they would be playing two 90-minute sets and there is a possibility of a couple of other gigs while there.

They don't plan to do any sightseeing, Kozak said he has been told by people who are familiar with D.C. traffic during inaugurations that a "10-minute trip will be two hours."

Ever mindful of finances, (the potential restaurant tab for 13 people on the bus comes readily to mind) they hope to break even between what they get paid and what the trip will cost.

"We'll pack coolers with bread and bologna," Boon said.

Boon has what he calls this "pie in the sky" picture in his head - just what if the president himself and his saxophone showed up to play with them?

"Things keep popping up that amaze us," said Boon.

The band is "more or less a glorified hobby," he said.

Speaking of the band members' families, Julie Payne, wife of band member J.T. Payne, said, "They each are strong musicians and all have other lives, something they try to balance. It's great to see them get an opportunity like this to represent their community. We're extremely proud of them."

The band was hired sight-unseen after a recommendation from a Normal man whose business is music.

Because of family ties, Randy Wood, owner of The Music Shoppe and Pro-Sound Center, both in Normal, has a tradition of attending the fair in Mendota. There he was asking if he could recommend any bands to play at the inaugural ceremonies.

He was having breakfast with Jerry Frank and Jeannie Jacobs, who live in the D.C. area and were in Mendota visiting family, they were on an entertainment committee to find "bands with an Illinois flavor," Wood said.

Wood said he recommended Hip Pocket and a demo was sent along with promotional literature.

Because of the January jaunt, work has slowed on finished their second CD, "Twice in a Blue Moon," so named because they'd never thought they'd make a CD once in a blue moon.

In 1995, Hip Pocket released its first CD - "This Ain't Normal," which a Pantagraph review describes as "lots of blues incorporated into plentiful amount of spicy overtones of funk and mild portions of underlying reggae grooves - only to make you hungry for more...and never enters into the whining stage of the blues."

July and December are their busiest months; the rest of the year the band plays two or three times a month. And until now, the farthest they have ever traveled is St. Louis.

But after this national exposure and their 180 minutes of fame, what then?

"This is a band of guys who are 40-something with families and full-time jobs," said Boon, who is music director at WGLT, Illinois State University's radio station. "None have aspirations of quitting their day jobs."

"We all like it the way it is."