

LOCAL MUSIC

The Bubba Pickens Band

A collective and friendship years in the making

BY PETER ELLISON

"We sit in my living room," Carmel High teacher Marc Stafford says. "We decide what we want to practice. Oftentimes it's learning a new song or going over something we haven't quite nailed down yet. We hang out, we chat, we laugh, we play, we ask questions and really try to get into it."

Families convene, gathering together in the warm Marina house. Well-worn instruments are pulled from cases before the attentive and laborious tuning process. Throughout the house there is laughter from the band, shrieks of joy from playing children and conversation from spouses at the kitchen table. These practices are at the heart of what the Bubba Pickens Band stands for, creating joy and laughter side-by-side with lifelong friends.

"I don't even know what it is I love about it, but whatever it is I feel good about it," says Mike Deckelmann, a math teacher when he's not jamming. "Even at this age, we can sit around for four hours and work on a song, and I find that a very productive, exciting, four hours, to sit there and get it right."

This community is the latest evolution and culmination of a decade-old dream from CHS staff members and friends, Deckelmann, Stafford, Jason Maas-Baldwin, and Brian Handley, along with their friend Steve Geer, an agriculture professional in the Salinas Valley. While the band officially formed in its current lineup in August 2018, the group has ties running back over a decade years. The band plays bluegrass music for gigs and fundraisers in a variety of places like the Trailside Café in Carmel Valley village, but the band's first priority is an outlet for these teachers and professionals to pursue their musical passions in new ways amid managing their personal and public lives.

"It's just about having a good time, and being a part of something bigger than any one of us, being part of a community," Stafford says. "That's what I love as a parent. My kids get to see that this is what music can be."

The Bubba Pickens Band also acts as a learning environment for teachers that spend so much of their time regurgitating the same content year to year. Each member plays an instrument other than their original: Stafford, Deckelmann and Handley have started learning banjo, mandolin and dobro, respectively, while Maas-Baldwin, initially a trumpet player, is featured on guitar.

The band plays predominantly bluegrass music, which comes from the South with influences from jazz, blues, gospel and even old folk songs, and bands are traditionally composed of all-acoustic stringed instruments. The diverse musical back-

ground in the Bubba Pickens Band comes to light when the traditional melodies make way for open-ended solo sections before returning to three-part vocal harmonies.

The journey that brought these friends together started 10 years ago at a Carmel High talent show where the staff put together a rag-tag band for a short, four-song, set.

"That's when we first got the moniker Far Below Basic," Handley recalls. "At that time Mr. Clifford was involved, he was playing electric ukulele, Mr. Mello was onstage doing his best Will Ferrell impersonation with a cowbell and a shirt riding above his navel."

While this configuration formed on a one-night-only basis, the music-making lit a spark that would draw these musicians together again and again. Emerging from this group was the Far Below Basic band playing R&B-centered tunes with Handley on saxophone, Maas-Baldwin on trumpet and the Deckelmann/Stafford duo both on electric guitar. This group continues to play, with a little student help, and add new faces from among the staff, most recently incorporating the piano and vocal skills of school nurse Deborah Taylor.

While the Far Below Basic Band was developing during this period, part of the inspiration behind the bluegrass focus of the Bubba Pickens

here, it's struggle, it's experience. You make the same mistake over and over, and eventually you quit making that mistake. It's a process, but that process is what's fun."

The band's love for bluegrass music is a fairly new development in their musical lives, with Stafford and Deckelmann reporting that their interest flourished from listening to source material as a way of learning their new instruments. Maas-Baldwin describes his love for bluegrass emerging after going to the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in Colorado with Stafford. This interest in the traditionally homegrown, organic music naturally led the group to try their hand at making a band.

One thing led to another and the first show the band ever played, Handley says, was at a house party as the opening act for local musicians Pete and Ann Sibley. Needing a bass player, Stafford brought in an old friend from the music scene at Chico State: Steve Geer. While Geer is the only non-CUSD employee in the bunch, he's essential in maintaining the group's balance in rhythm and chord changes.

Since then, they have performed at a wide variety of venues and occasions around the Monterey Peninsula and have continued to develop a wide set of over 30 tunes, with constant additions on a gig-to-gig basis.



The Bubba Pickens Band made up of Jason Maas-Baldwin, Marc Stafford, Mike Deckelmann, Steve Geer and Brian Handley perform a gig at the Trailside Cafe in Carmel Valley.

photo by SHANNON RAINS

Band was the creation of the Singer-Songwriters' Guild in 2009. Stafford and Deckelmann acted as club leaders and mentors, but the two guitar players began to feel limited with the acoustic depth they could provide for the students and so bought or dusted off the mandolin and the banjo and set to work at becoming students all over again.

"It's like playing upside-down guitar," says Deckelmann, describing his experience learning mandolin. "But like anything else, like I say in

The Far Below Basic and Bubba Pickens bands played last at the Singer-Songwriters' Concert for Whitney show March 1, performing an R&B set and a collection of Grateful Dead tunes as an effort raise money for the Whitney Grummon scholarship.

Deckelmann succinctly describes the Bubba Pickens experience: "It's just a good excuse to get together, have a common goal and have fun together."

MUSICAL

Spring musical "Guys and Dolls" a fun-filled throwback

BY GRACE DEAN

"Guys and Dolls" is coming to the Carmel High performing arts center starting March 14, featuring drama teacher Gracie Poletti's direction, music teacher Brian Handley's pit orchestra, multiple vocal soloists and performances by CHS teachers Shelley Grahl and Mike Deckelmann.

The musical takes place in New York City, where gambler Nathan Detroit (Darian Schraud) has few options for the location of his big craps game. Needing \$1,000 to pay a garage owner to host the game, Nathan bets Sky Masterson (Harrison Herendeen-Hill) that Sky cannot get virtuous Sarah Brown (Rachel Bagby) out on a date. Despite some resistance, Sky negotiates a date with her in exchange for bringing people into her mission. Meanwhile, Nathan's longtime fiancée, Adelaide (Yvonne DiGirolamo), wants him to marry her.

To Bagby, this show holds particular weight. The CHS senior who has been in countless productions says this will likely be her last time being featured in a school play before she begins her study of musical theater in college. To make bookends, her first play was "Guys and Dolls Junior" when she was part of the ensemble, and now she's again in the musical, now as a main role and vocal soloist.

Although veterans like Bagby are on the cast, they are accompanied by a new group of up-and-coming theater enthusiasts.

"I'm really excited because there are new people in big roles, which is fun for me," Poletti says. "There are actually new students in the ensemble as well, so I get to work with a lot of students I haven't worked with before. We kind of have a new energy in this cast, so I'm excited about how they work together."

"Guys and Dolls" was first conceived by producers Cy Feuer and Ernest Martin as an adaptation of Damon Runyon's short stories written in the 1920s and '30s concerning the time's gangsters, gamblers and other characters of the NYC underworld. After it was first written by Jo Swerling and deemed unusable, radio comedy writer Abe Burrows was asked to rewrite it. The rewritten version seemed to work on Broadway, receiving a Tony Award for Best Musical, and it was shortly made into a film adaptation in 1955 starring Marlon Brando, Jean Simmons, Frank Sinatra

and Vivian Blaine.

A large portion of that success is now attributed to the show's music, written by composer and lyricist Frank Loesser. According to both Poletti and Handley, the score of the play, which will be performed by the 23-member pit orchestra, remains a crowd-pleaser.

"We use the books that professional musicians play on Broadway—not some watered-down school version of it," Handley explains. "There's in some cases some virtuosic playing required of the players, especially

with the challenging contemporary rhythms."

The same is required of the show's soloists and vocal ensemble, who have some fairly intricate harmonies, according to Poletti.

Unlike most CHS productions, "Guys and Dolls" will play only for one weekend from March 14-16 with showings at 7 p.m. every night at the CHS center for performing arts.



photo by GRACE DEAN

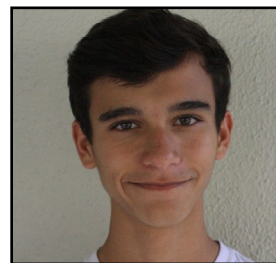
Jeremiah Lamph as gambler Nicely-Nicely Johnson leads the congregation in singing Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat in a dream sequence of the musical.

OPINION

Glory of sports teams isn't reciprocated in arts



BY JORDI FAXON



It's an American tradition for parents to cheer on their children's school's sports teams and for students and faculty to idolize the team members. It's a tradition to celebrate them at their homecoming dance and give them athletic awards monthly.

While there's nothing wrong with participation in these innocuous customs, there are many other extracurricular activities, especially those pertaining to arts and humanities, that aren't held in the same regard as sports are. While it's great that athletes get praise for their hard work and achievements, there's no reason for members of other activities not to get the same recognition.

Some might not even be aware that our school's culture, to a certain extent, entails a hierarchy of importance, and that it has a tendency to unintentionally neglect, or even undermine, the merit, value and incredible talent that comes out of some of these underappreciated activities. While this campus is relatively good at shedding light on the arts and giving it its due respect, there is still some room for improvement.

For instance, let's direct our attention to all the rallies our school holds before big sports games. Have the school faculty asked themselves why there aren't pep rallies held for mock trial's state championships? Or for the spring concert? Sure, there are one or two mentions of these activities at pep rallies, but sports teams consistently get their own cluster of chairs

at these reunions. Isn't that a little illuminating of where our values might be held?

And what about our daily bulletins? There's a sports section in all bulletin announcements, not only providing the times when athletes should leave class, but also congratulating them on their goals in soccer or touchdowns in football. Couldn't the bulletins congratulate the Model U.N. diplomat who delivers a riveting argument for the deployment of international aid in the Balkans? Or the choir member who sung a heavenly solo on a Bach chorale?

One of the strengths in our school's recognition of the arts is that it holds the Visual and Performing Arts Showcase, where students and teachers see the various VAPA programs present their work, but this event comes only once a year.

In a conversation with music teacher Brian Handley, he stated his opinion regarding the equal distribution of glory. Namely, he thinks that the situation has gotten much better and that coaches are now much more cognizant of the importance that's due to music programs, but he also acknowledges that any of these inequalities in publicity likely come from societal norms.

It seems this way at times, with local newspapers containing whole sports sections that either include numeri-

cal statistics for the minor games or narrative detail for the greater ones. Although the Monterey Herald did recently publish highlights on the CHS mock trial team and some Pacific Grove High School musicians who are due to perform at Carnegie Hall, the local newspapers tend to focus on the school

sports more than other school activities.

This double standard is not practiced overtly, as in no one directly says that the arts are less important than sports, but it's subconsciously acted upon and, until now, mostly unquestioned and merely held up by the Ineffable Doctrine of Bandwagon: "Everyone else does it."

So should we hold our school to this status quo? Or should we try to live up to our title and be the innovator among the schools on the Peninsula?

If the school wants to provide an equal footing for all students, it'll have to address these disparities.

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