

From humble beginnings Big band set to play Rochester International Jazz festival

By COLBY BURKE

SPECIAL TO THE LCN

PUBLISHED: THURSDAY, JUNE 2, 2016 AT 1:46 AM

UPDATED: THURSDAY, JUNE 2, 2016 AT 3:13 PM



Still swingin'. Members of 78 RPM, a Dansville-based big band, pose for a photo. The band has been in existence for more than 40 years and is set to play at the Rochester International Jazz Festival this month.

After more than 40 years since starting as the Happy Wanderers, Dansville's 78 RPM Big Band has wandered further than they ever imagined. The band is set to play their fourth show at the Rochester International Jazz Festival this June.

"It was a social club, really," said band member Rich Bondi. "It sounded fun at the time, but I never thought it would last this long."

Bondi, who joined in 1978, was attending SUNY Geneseo when he received a call from his brother Jim. He asked Bondi if he was interested in playing for an Oktoberfest band. At the time, Bondi was a Division III All-American swimmer in the 100-meter breaststroke. He played trumpet in high school, but turned his focus to swimming and school when entering college.

After hanging up the phone, Bondi didn't think twice about his spontaneous decision to accept the invitation. He was ready to start playing again.

The inception of the Happy Wanderers took place in 1973. The Jackson-Hose fire company sponsored a group of friends to play at the Dansville Oktoberfest. With few rehearsals and a

limited amount of song charts, the band didn't consider itself anything more than a bunch of guys playing music together and having a good time.

"We practiced in a woodshed," band member Tom Rounsville said. "We would see the charts for about an hour and then (Director) Joe (Laberera) would come around and collect them. That was it."

Rounsville joined the band in 1976, the same year as Jim Bondi. He played trumpet at Alfred State College, but after graduating in 1973, he thought his playing days were over.

"I had to go find my trumpet," Rounsville said. "I pulled it out of the closet, dusted it off, and continued to play."

Rounsville had heard about the band from his former college bandmate, Jim Tobin, who joined the band in 1973. Tobin holds the longest tenure with the band out of each of the current members. However, Rounsville and both Bondi brothers haven't missed a year of playing since joining either.

"Throughout the years, we've had so many people come and go," Rounsville said. "We've got to have over 100 alumni, but the core group has always stayed together."

The core group Rounsville is referring to once was specified to the members that joined during the Happy Wanderers era. However, the band has played together for so long that the majority of its members have been involved for 20 years or more.

Around 1980, the Happy Wanderers began to transition to 78 RPM Big Band. The Dansville Oktoberfest began to decline in attendance, which Bondi believes was partially due to DUI laws becoming stricter.

The band still managed to find Oktoberfest's around the western New York area. Bondi recalls the band playing as many as two shows in a day, traveling from Geneseo to Bully Hill Vineyards in Hammondsport in 1985.

The Happy Wanderers also traveled as far as Kitchener, Ont. to play at festivals. Known for their annual nine-day Oktoberfest, Kitchener hosted the band on multiple occasions in the late '70s and early '80s.

"We were treated like VIP guests," Rounsville said.

As Oktoberfest events became fewer and farther between, the band began adding a variety of jazz and pop songs to their sets. They've counted more than 400 song charts, displaying the depth and variety of songs they can perform.

Even the band members have bounced around with the instruments they've played. Bondi began teaching himself the trombone after breaking his leg in 1982. With very little mobility, it was all

he could play at the time. He taught himself in a matter of a few weeks and began playing for the band.

It's an astounding feat to hold a band of any size together for over four decades. It seems even more difficult to maintain a band consisting of 16 members. 78 RPM Big Band attributes the great relationship between it's members to their laid back mentality and always remembering that they're playing to have fun.

"If we were doing it to make a living, we wouldn't be doing it," DiPiazza said.

The band's relaxed approach is one that comes from a lack of emphasis on generating income, and more on getting the audience to dance.

"There's a lot of bands out there that play for themselves," DiPiazza said. "We see what the audience is like and kind of tailor our set for them."

DiPiazza, who's son Phil is also a member of the band, specified Frank Sinatra and Natalie Cole as two artists the band often covers.

Cole headlined the Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival in 2011, which was a year before 78 RPM Big Band made their first appearance at one of Rochester's most celebrated events.

The festival, which brings in close to 200,000 people annually, has featured several local bands in recent years. They reserve the 6 p.m. slot in the Rochester Regional Health Big Tent for bands, such as 78 RPM Big Band.

The band was offered a spot at the festival after DiPiazza, who started working for Xerox right out of college, contacted a friend involved with the event. Fortunately, the festival directors were able to find a slot for 78 RPM Big Band to play in.

"We got a pretty good crowd our first time, but last year was the largest we've ever had," DiPiazza said.

The 2016 Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival will be 78 RPM Big Band's fourth appearance there in the last five years. Although they've played for over four decades, the band isn't thinking that trend will end soon.

"In 20 years, they'll be wheeling us out in wheelchairs," DiPiazza said.

The band has all agreed on trying to perpetuate into the next generation. DiPiazza and his son Phil have already exhibited the possibility of it becoming a family business.

"We've become a family," Bondi said. "We've been a part of each other's lives for a long time now."

A Quick Look

78 RPM performance

Where: Rochester Regional Health Club Pass Big Tent, corner of East Main and Gibbs Streets, Rochester.

When: June 25 at 6 p.m.

Cost: Free

More Info: 78rpmband.com.

Rochester International

Jazz Festival

Where: Multiple venues across Rochester

When: June 24 – July 2

Cost: More than 90 free concerts planned, Single entry to Club Pass shows is \$30 per persons (\$35 Kilbourn Hall), cash at the door, no advance sales. Nine- and three-day Club Passes are also available. Headliner concert costs vary.

More Info: <http://www.rochesterjazz.com>

Special Note: Honeoye Falls-Lima High School Jazz Band will perform June 25 at 5:15 p.m. at the City of Rochester Jazz Street Stage Presented by The Community Foundation. Stage is located near intersection of Gibbs Street and East Avenue in Rochester.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Colby Burke is a communication student at SUNY Geneseo. This article was written as part of a "Foundations of Media Writing" course taught in the spring semester by Michael Saffran in collaboration with The Livingston County News. Look for additional stories in future editions.