

Brave Combo composes songs inspired by Denton

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While mostly known for its polka sound, Brave Combo has combined jazz, cumbia, rock 'n' roll, cha cha, the hokey pokey and even the chicken dance in a single performance.

The two-time Grammy award-winning band that originated and is still based in Denton has been belting out these modernized polka tunes for almost 30 years.

The band was asked to write an instrumental piece as part of Denton's sesquicentennial anniversary and performed its new song "The Denton Polka," on Jan. 30 at the Denton Civic Center.

Bandleader Carl Finch said that he decided to add vocals to the song in light of the current Fry Street situation. He said that he realized it was an opportunity to make the song bigger than what the band was originally asked to do.

"The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to work a reinforcing vibe into the song," Finch said. "It was certainly an honor."

As a result, the band ended up with two songs: "The Denton Polka," which is a darker, more introspective polka, and "The Denton Life," which is a bouncy, happy polka, Finch said.

Since Brave Combo formed in 1979, it has released more than two dozen albums that manage to blend everything from reggae, ska and Japanese pop, to Latin, Czech and German-style dance music.

It has spread its hybrid polka rhythms throughout Europe and Japan, including such films as "The Personals," "Fools Rush In," "Envy," David Byrne's "True Stories" and Clive Barker's "Lord of Illusions."

In 2004, the band made one of its most culturally exalted appearances by playing its "Willkommen Oktoberfest" song in an episode of "The Simpsons."

Finch said that the impact was enormous.

"The coolness factor is gigantic, so I absolutely recommend getting on "The Simpsons,"" Finch said. "You'll be amazed at how hip people think you are, even if you're not."

Finch said polka has always been considered a joke or novelty music, but Brave Combo's steady progression of taking the old and making it new might carry on the tradition of polka.

"Most people have a preconceived idea about polka music based on what they're conditioned to think through mainstream media and never even thought about whether it should be given a different perspective," Finch said. "But if we can change their opinions about that style of music, then we can move mountains."

The band's five-piece orchestra is comprised of guitarist, keyboardist, accordionist and singer Carl Finch, bass guitarist Ann Marie Harrop, drummer Alan Emert, trumpet and flugelhorn player Danny O'Brien as well as multi-instrumentalist Jeffrey Barnes.

"I'd like our audience to leave [a show] with some kind of new knowledge," Barnes said.

Barnes is known for playing a wide array of woodwinds, reeds, pennywhistle, harmonica and guitars in simultaneous fashion. Barnes has even been known to play two saxophones at the same time.

In spite of all its achievements, Brave Combo said it agrees that Denton really doesn't have any polka awareness.

Nonetheless, it continues to pick up new fans along the way and "expose people to a lot of stuff," O'Brien said.

"I like it when people who have never listened to polka before, walk out [after a concert] whistling - and these are die-hard rock fans," O'Brien said.

In the grand scheme of things, Finch believes it is most important to feel that the band has done well after a performance.

"I figure if we're having a good time, then [the audience] is going to dig it," Finch said. "We're trying to remind Denton that we have a chance for diversity."