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## The combo plate brave and bouncy

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By THE NEW MEXICAN  
June 9, 2006

For a brief period back in the 1950s, a wave of windup-doll jokes made the rounds. Wind up the Miles Davis doll, for example, and it turns its back on the audience. Adapting the joke to Carl Finch, the loquacious multi-instrumentalist who has led the multidimensional Brave Combo over the past 27 years, it would go: you don't need to wind him up; he's always on.



Brave Combo album cover

Founded in Denton, Texas, Finch's hometown, Brave Combo is best known as the band that takes any and all types of material — psychedelic rock, ethnic folk songs, anthems both religious and national, hackneyed standards, and so forth — and

turns it into tightly played, infectious dance music. The venerable and much-maligned polka long ago became Brave Combo's favorite rhythm.

The group has released more than 25 albums, the latest of which is the thematic Holidays!, a fanciful, chronological journey through major and minor holidays. Brave Combo consists of Finch on guitar, keyboard, accordion, and assorted smaller instruments; Jeffrey Barnes on the entire saxophone family, harmonica, pennywhistle, and guitar; Danny O'Brien on flügelhorn; Ann Marie Harrop on bass; and drummer Alan Emert.

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Brave Combo's live sonic impact is far greater than what you might expect from only five players. This might be because Barnes can blow more than one horn at a time if he needs to. But it's also true that the technical precision and obvious joy that the group's members bring to their music result in a giant, happy, and exuberant noise.

Pasatiempo spoke with Finch as he was on his way to Waco, Texas, for a show. He and the band perform at the Santa Fe Brewing Company on Friday, June 9, and at the Launchpad in Albuquerque on Sunday, June 11. Here's some of what Finch had to say:

**Pasatiempo:** People don't usually mention Brave Combo without connecting you to Denton. What's that place like?

**Carl Finch:** Well, Denton has produced some pretty unusual things. Roy Orbison lived in Denton for a while. Pat Boone lived here for a long time — even opened up a restaurant. Sly Stone is from Denton, and a lot of his family still lives there. We had two Miss Americas from Denton: Shirley Cothran and Phyllis George. The band Bowling for Soup is from Denton, Slobberbone is from Denton, and the New Bohemians — a lot of their early stuff came from an annual festival in Denton. There's a club there today, this funky little club called Rubber Gloves, and they get all the hip underground bands that break. People like Daniel Johnston will show up there.

Jonathan Richman might come through.

**Pasa:** Where did your group get its name, and what does it mean?

**Finch:** There are a couple of stories. The first story is [that] I liked the word combo, 'cause in the late '70s and early '80s, that was the least cool name you could have for a band. It's a great-looking word, and I liked what it implies about people playing together. For me, it had a more loungy, groovy sound. And brave, because polkas were at the core of what we did, but we wanted to play polkas in rock-and-roll clubs.

What made me realize that it was the right name was that my wife was teaching at an elementary school in a little town about 30 miles away [from Denton], and a pillow salesman came to the town, selling these vibrating pillows to the teachers. She bought one and brought it home, and it turned out to be a pretty good pillow, actually. But the packaging had the word vibrate written on it in these supercool, lightning-bolt letters. I liked the letters, so I cut them out, and after I cut them out I realized that I could make the word brave from the letters in vibrate.

**Pasa:** Were you always fascinated by the polka, or were you a hard rocker in your youth?

**Finch:** Oh, yeah, I grew up totally into rock and roll. Was in my first band in seventh grade, playing with a band that went out of town to play. By ninth grade, I was jumping in the van with older guys, drinking beer, and swerving all over the road. I remember when I was a kid, I read Circus and Hit Parader faithfully and knew all the stuff. When the Yardbirds broke up and there was news of the New Yardbirds, I was totally on top of that. The Nazz with Todd Rundgren, Jeff Beck — they were important to me.

**Pasa:** The album you did with Tiny Tim [Girl, released in 1996] — how did that come about?

**Finch:** The guy that co-produced that album had brought Tiny Tim to Dallas a few times, and on one of these trips, he decided he'd like to have a band accompany him, and we were the only band he thought could keep up with him. Tiny's show, in those days, was just him and his ukulele doing one tune after another like "Won't You Come Home, Bill Bailey." We were able to follow him, so that went very well.

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Another time we got together and laid out the seed of the album, but it took another eight years to make it happen.

**Pasa:** There are places on this latest album where you guys sound like They Might Be Giants. Do you think they're doing a similar thing, only without the weird dance rhythms?

**Finch:** I think we're totally in the same ballpark. We did a festival with them in Springfield, Mass., about three years ago. We did the show, and we were backstage saying goodbye, and John Flansburgh and John Linnell came over and said, "Y'all ought to know that we went to Irving Plaza in New York in 1981, and we saw a band that gave us the inspiration to do what we thought we should do." That was one of our first shows in New York, and it had gone really well. Over the years, we'd heard rumors that They Might Be Giants had told people they liked us, but it was really something to hear them say it directly to us.

**Pasa:** You seem to draw a lot of interest from people in the world of cartoons and comics. What's that all about?

**Finch:** That's weird, isn't it? Like, Harvey Pekar is a big fan, and he came out to our show in Cleveland a couple of years ago. At the first break, he came up and said hello. He told me he had actually written a piece about us for the [Los Angeles] Times about four years earlier. But he's not the kind of person you would think would be into "up" music. You would never imagine that, so I was delighted. He was there with his wife and their adopted daughter. Halfway through the next set, I looked out where they had been sitting, and there was nobody sitting there, so I figured, shoot, they'd left. After the show, though, he came back up and said he'd danced all night. That blew me away — Harvey Pekar dancing.

Then we were in California once, in Davis. When the show was over and I was tearing my stuff down, this guy came up and said, "You know, R. Crumb was here." And I went, "No way." So I ran out, and there he was. I had to go up and say hi, so I ran up to him. He turned around, and he said, "I want you to know that Brave Combo is the only band I would pay money to see." And our relationship with Matt [Groening] is just unbelievable. He'd been a fan forever, and we hadn't even known it. He came up and introduced himself and started rattling off all the shows he'd been to. All of those people, they all have an interest, oddly enough, in traditional music and roots music. That's how Harvey and R. Crumb know each other, from collecting old recordings.

They seem to be drawn to obscure things. Harvey and I have had conversations about old klezmer clarinetists. But the novelty thing is certainly something that we've had to deal with, and I think that was always our only hope, if we're ever gonna have a hit, that's how it was going to have to be perceived.

#### details

Brave Combo  
8 p.m. Friday, June 9  
Santa Fe Brewing Company, 27 Fire Place  
\$12; 988-1234; all ages

7 p.m. Sunday, June 11  
Launchpad, 618 Central Ave. S.W., Albuquerque  
\$12; 505-764-8887; all ages

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