

The Question is: What *Don't* They Play?



by: Kelly Clarke

Biff: "Brave Combo won the 1999 and 2004 Grammys for Best Polka Album."

Bob: "There's a Grammy for polka?"

Yeah, yeah, Brave Combo has heard it before. But have you heard them?

If not, do. Head for their next Central Texas gig at the Austin Fine Arts Festival at Republic Square Park where they'll wrap up the afternoon on Sunday, April 3, and watch your TV listings for a rerun of the "Co-Dependent's Day" episode of *The Simpsons*. (As if their high-energy shows weren't animated enough, last year the band got the cartoon treatment from their fan and friend, "Simpsons" creator Matt Groening.)

In the meantime, find at least one of their recordings—they're in the "normal," not polka, sections of record stores and are well-represented on download services and websites like allmusic.com—and play it next time you're in a party mood. When you're not in a party mood, "Polkas for a Gloomy World" will fix that.

Not into polkas, you say? Not a problem. The list of musical genres Brave Combo has mastered is as long as the conga lines that their audiences invariably form whenever they play live.

Taking the term "world beat" to a stellar level, they respectfully mash up dance rhythms from beyond Poland: Mexico, Africa, Argentina, Cuba, Jamaica, Japan, Italy, Germany, Ukraine, Frankie Yankovic's secret timeshare in the Vienna Woods, the Wurstfests of Middle America, Ricky Ricardo's Tropicana nightclub, inner-city Detroit, the Lower East Side, and that weird and wonderful land called Hollywood. If you've only heard the theme from "Rosemary's Baby" with Mia Farrow la-la-ing through it, you have no idea what a beautiful waltz it is until you hear Brave Combo's gentle cabaret treatment of it.

Simply put, any musical genre in a Brave Combo performance is like the Texas weather: Wait five minutes and it'll change. "Part of what we're about is dealing with short attention spans, and we all have short attention spans," explains founder Carl Finch.

Despite the punch-line sound of their repertoire, their attitude toward their task is anything but a joke. Everything they play, from the Weill-inspired original ballad "Always Vienna" to the rippin' polka/hora cover of The Doors' "People are Strange," is rendered with complete sincerity. Says Finch: "We really dig this music; it's been a driving thing with us to make people realize how incredibly hip these rhythms are."

Each of the musicians has years of experience and expresses sincere appreciation for his fellow band members. For example, Finch says, "A lot of my fun comes from being onstage with Jeffrey (Barnes, woodwinds [sometimes two at a time], whistles, reeds, vocals) and backing him up when he plays some incredible solo. I'd match him against any horn player in the state."

The basic band has a sound much bigger than its five players, and to inaugurate their second 25 years in show business, the band will move one step closer to big band status with the addition of more players in guest appearances.

Lead singer Finch plays guitars, keyboards, and accordion. Rounding out the current lineup are Bubba Hernandez (bass, tuba, vocals), Danny O'Brien (trumpet, flugelhorn), and Alan Emert

(drums, percussion). The new incarnation will frequently include Brave Combo's once and future clarinetist Tim Walsh, a founding member returning after a 22-year hiatus; Bradley Williams on accordion and concertina; and percussionist Mike Dillon. Other former members, such as drummer/percussionist Joe Cripps, still sit in now and then.

Descriptions and accolades they've earned include "mosh-pit polka" (Washington Post), "Rage Against the Mazurka" (Billboard), multiple years of "Pop/Rock Talent Deserving Wider Recognition" (Downbeat), "one of the few groups who's actually doing something" (the late rock writer Lester Bangs), and "entertainers who just won't take no for an answer" (Garrison Keillor, introducing their first appearance on *Prairie Home Companion*).

Finch has evangelized his band's philosophy countless times to a variety of people. The former art major once charmed reclusive artist Frank Stella into a lengthy dialogue about the Polish and South American influences in their respective products. He has won over and made friends with the reclusive Harvey Pekar and his fellow legendary comic-book superstar, R. Crumb. The band's early take on exotic rhythms so captivated the Talking Heads' David Byrne that he included them in his movie "True Stories" and invited them to play at his wedding reception. Tiny Tim bought into the mix, and the band backed his final album.

As time goes on and Grammys accumulate, the Denton-based band spends fewer and fewer discourses defending their sincerity and playlist, even to themselves. Still, there were two sides to winning those polka Grammys.

Along with the accolades, the band took flack from people who argued that the award should have gone to performers in the more traditional vein. The second award going to the "odd outsiders" just added insult to injury for that minority.

In response, Finch wrote in his online newsletter that while he understands why some people would be disappointed that the Grammys didn't go to a band that plays what some call "the real thing," "we have become part of the polka fabric and have influenced the evolution of polka music in this country. And we are doing our best to preserve the traditions and to resurrect as much great polka music from the past as we can."

He now reflects that "winning twice had such an effect on us—we figured that the first one was a fluke, so the second one was unexpected. We couldn't fall back on the 'fluke' explanation any more." And the polka part of the award? "A Grammy is a Grammy; it doesn't matter what it's for... and it helped us realize that we're better known than we thought."

Anyone who has read any of the band's coverage knows the basic story. Twenty-five years ago, Finch and Walsh discovered a mutual interest in bargain-bin music. They formed Brave Combo with a bassist and drummer, toured mental institutions and random joints, and released a record called "Polkamanía." Their first full-length album, "Music for Squares," received attention in the national press and turned them into minor media darlings among jaded music critics. Radio oddity Dr. Demento awarded it "world's ugliest album cover" for the ragged appearance after a night of polkaing of the feet of Gina Barnes, Jeffrey's then-girlfriend and now-wife.

The band's following grew from the Southwest to the Northeast and northern Midwest. Their guest appearance on *Prairie Home Companion* exposed them to a new set of listeners and their fan base continued to grow—all the way to Japan, where several albums have originated.

They even have what Finch calls "a growing army of fanatic Brave Combo fans," the Bucketheads, whose Deadhead-like name comes from the paean to Surrealism: "Ice Machine in the Desert" with its catchline, "Don't forget your bucket!"

A compendium of the band's influences could be subtitled "Who's Who of Musicians Unknown to Common Man," including Larry Chesky, Steve Jordan, and Perez Prado. Be honest, now. Can

you match those musicians with the instruments they play?

Accordianist Chesky started it all for Brave Combo; one of his polka albums rescued from the three-for-a-dollar bin gave them some unexpected ideas. "I'd play this stuff when I was working around the house, listening to it like it was funny," Finch explains. "Later, I'd catch myself whistling one of the melodies. I became really concerned why I liked it and wanted to hear more. It was like a bad drug or something.

"Then I realized there's an incredible amount of honesty in the way these people play—they love what they do. These albums are all saying, 'Just try to wear a frown at a polka party!' I think people are ready for that kind of honest emotion again." Lately, as inspiration for their expanded sound, the band has been listening to a late-1950s big (polka) band called The Connecticut Twins.

Brave Combo's Tex-Mex and Latin music stylings, which have grown substantially since Bubba Hernandez joined the group in the mid-80s, share a kinship with the legendary Esteban (Steve) Jordan, who also understands and utilizes the link between polka and rock. He rips a mean conjunto cover of "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" on the accordion.

Finch notes that Jordan and other Mexican vocalists have a style all their own. "They imitate the accordion when they sing—very passionate, lots of walking thirds and sixths. It's been a big influence on my own singing and playing."

Another unlikely source for material is Christmas music. What may have started with the "O Holy Night" cha-cha grew into a surprisingly satisfying album of holiday music set to an international beat: "It's Christmas, Man!" which, of course, includes "Santa's Polka."

"'O Holy Night' makes a great cha-cha," Finch says. "It just happens to be a religious song, too. We're not trying to offend anyone. It's just that people can't hold back when they're faced with their sacred cows." Amen.

Who are their fans? Teenagers in towns with strong Polish populations, who insist they hate their parents' music but can't resist Brave Combo's exuberant stage shows. Large Mexican families drawn to familiar conjunto sounds. Former Arthur Murray dance instructors who appreciate an authentic beat when they hear one. German grandmothers daydreaming of the old country. Baby boomers who just like to dance. And anyone who appreciates the weird juxtaposition of serious musicianship and out-and-out lunacy.

Says Barnes, "The freedom of expression in our performances is unbelievable. We don't have to sneak things over on our audiences because they automatically accept practically everything we do."

...with a few conditions. At most shows, fans insist that Brave Combo can't leave the stage before they've played the highly interactive "Chicken Dance" (yes, the one you flap your wings and waddle to) and at least one of their many versions of "The Hokey Pokey." My favorite rendition is the speed-metal version, but you might prefer the classic-hip-hop-funk one, or one described as "maniacal swing." Just so long as they don't play the original roller-rink version. For all of the band's interesting and sometimes kitschy arrangements, when it comes to the kindergarten-style Hokey Pokey, "audiences hate it when we play it straight," Finch says.

Speaking as much about their general philosophy as the Hokey Pokey, he adds: "We have to play it with a groovy beat. The power is in the groove."