

Pascack Press

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VOLUME 14 ISSUE 18

PASCACK VALLEY'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

JULY 26, 2010

HELPING KIDS



This Girl Scout earned the Gold Award by starting a mentoring program for children in Park Ridge.

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MONTVALE

Washtub rock

Local band has vibrant history

BY THOMAS CLANCEY OF PASCACK PRESS

What if we told you the first ever music video was filmed in Pascack Valley? Specifically, at the Park Ridge Burger King in 1972 by a couple of kids from Pascack Hills High School.

Then known only as Son of the Original Synthetic Hickey Good Time Rinky-Dink Jug Band, Inc., and in conjunction with a friend's father who was in possession of a 16-millimeter camera, the boys filmed that milestone moment in music history only for the film to sit neglected, in a can, for nearly 35 years.

Pascack Press recently trav-

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Cause for paws

Pet therapy project earns Gold Award



Amanda Russo of Montvale earned the Girl Scout Gold Award by training her golden retriever, Beckett, to be a therapy dog.

MONTVALE

When Pascack Hills High School graduate Amanda Russo earned the highest award in Girl Scouting, man's best

friend - her dog, Beckett - was by her side.

The member of Montvale Girl Scout Troop 1050 earned the Gold Award by completing a 65-hour leadership project to

benefit her community.

Russo says she has always been a passionate animal lover and wanted to incorporate that into her Girl Scout Gold Award. She trained and certified her

golden retriever to be a therapy dog.

Therapy dogs are trained to provide comfort and support to people in hospitals, schools,

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PHOTO COURTESY JAMIE WATKINS

TIGERS POUNCE

Emerson's Auburn Tigers wrapped up a great season by becoming undefeated champions.

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Rock in time...

A century-old postcard shows a main thoroughfare in Park Ridge.

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HACKENSACK UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER NAMED "HOSPITAL OF THE YEAR"

BY NJBIZ HEALTHCARE HEROES PROGRAM

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THANKS TO ALL OF OUR HEALTHCARE HEROES

Jug Band: 40 years later, returning to town

FROM PAGE 1

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eled to Nutley and walked in on the band, now called The Almost Original Synthetic Swampgrass Jug-Band.com, as they were relearning a song - also about 35 years old - prepping for this week's concert, a homecoming of sorts. They'll be performing on Thursday, July 29 at 7 p.m. at Montvale Borough Hall, 12 Mercedes Drive on the Great Lawn (or in the council chambers if it rains).

So now, without further introduction, here is the oral history - written for the first time - of this unique local band.

"You were supposed to be serious."

There was one member of the band who could actually play guitar. So, naturally, the guys forced him to play banjo.

It was to be a one-time thing: the original seven members, some who had gained the trust of music teacher Mr. McDaniels, passed the audition and got into the 1970 Pascack Hills High School Pop Show.

"You were supposed to be serious," said Jim Vasconcellos, an original band member who is the band's upright bassist, washtub bassist, jug player and recaller of interesting facts.

Rehearsals began in November of 1970 - the band's genesis - and the stakes were set high.

"Some of the talent was actually pretty good," said Doug Bowen. "And then we got up."

The cascading performance of "Where oh Where" from the hit TV show "Hee Haw" culminated in seven-part harmonies and full choreography.

"We were attempting to see



Photos courtesy Dave Rubin

A vintage image of the band. They'll be performing at Montvale Borough Hall on Thursday, July 29 at 7 p.m. From left: Jeff, Dave, Gary Wickfors, Jim and Doug.

how stupid we could be on stage and get away with it," said Vasconcellos. "It was supposed to be a total inside joke - a one-shot deal - and see how stupid we could be in front of the whole school."

Catching magic in a bottle (or an original Thomas Edison wax cylinder)

In 1972 the evolving lineup traveled to Pee Wee Erwin's Teaneck studios and created a tape

recording (it wasn't until years later that their sound was literally captured on one of Edison's original wax cylinders).

From those recordings, it was Gary Wikfors' song "Burger King Blues" that would be plucked out and storyboarded for an original music video. The song was inspired by the Park Ridge Burger King, the first fast food restaurant of its kind to come to the region.

"About half the band worked

at the Burger King," said Bowen.

Jeff Tyler, who grew up in Montvale, had recently joined the band to play fiddle and mandolin. As a school project, Tyler storyboarded a plot for a short film. When he enlisted a friend's dad who worked in the television industry to come film it, the stage was set.

The day of the shoot, however, Tyler lost his notebook and the star of the video didn't show. They pressed on and filmed the video, with classic images of the local eatery and comical pokes at the menu items like the "Whopper" and the "Wailer."

Tyler would be handed the film in a can, where it stayed for nearly 35 years until his son, at the time a video editing student, finally created a finished product, now available online at their website, www.jug-band.com.

Going pro

The band stayed together throughout college and started getting some big gigs.

"We went professional," said Tyler, pausing for some comedic timing, "for about three months until one of us got a job."

The band had gotten early inspiration from Bowen's older brother, who also had a jug band.

"They were worse than we were!" joked Bowen.

Drawing on influences from Jim Kweskin and the Jug Band and the 1960s folk music revival, the band created its own dynamic repertoire of jug band, bluegrass, folk and blues - a sampler of American music combined with a flair for entertaining and crafting original music.

In their first professional gig, the band opened for comedian George Carlin at Newark College, now NJIT.

"The guys who booked us didn't realize that seven acoustic musicians might need more than one microphone," said Vasconcellos.

It was still a blast. They landed a gig opening for the famed Vassar Clemens. Guitarist Dave Rubin still has his autograph on a small business card, kept right next to his official jug-band membership card, hand signed and dated 1975.

The band would play weekly at local hotspot the Lion's Den (now Davey's Locker) and nearly landed their big break in 1977. A high-ranking friend at Race Park in Englishtown, N.J., brought the band to the 1977 Grateful Dead concert with the idea to sneak them onstage in front of 50,000 people. Ultimately overshadowed by the presence of the New Riders of the Purple Sage as an opening band, and dissed by a lack of access to the buffet, the band never performed despite their backstage passes.

"For every band you have a moment where you could have really done something," said Tyler. "That might have been the moment, had it been another day and had the New Riders been late, they would have thrown us on stage..."

"We could be big in Japan"

In the ensuing years, the band members all got married and raised families. Some went on to earn Ph.D.s, one is a best selling author, and others are college professors. Yet, they've kept in touch over the years.

With the 40th anniversary of the band's debut at the Pascack Hills pop show approaching this November, the band is planning a private party to celebrate.

"We'd absolutely love to see anyone who might vaguely remember us because we're planning a reunion celebration and we want to make sure we invite everyone," said Tyler.

As the band members' families started to grow up, the band had a resurgence, with many wives, sons and daughters joining for performances. Now as their children attend college and have other pursuits, it's become just the adults again, said Tyler.

"Some day, when we grow up, we hope to maybe take it on the road and go somewhere," he added.

"We could be big in Japan," said Rubin. "What we're hoping for is a cover on 'Rolling Stone.'"

Whether inventing novelty instruments (i.e. the electric Jew's Harp - crafted partially out of an erector set - or washboard bass) or writing original music about their lives in New Jersey (such as "Rubber Necker"), the band is truly having fun playing and performing. That's something any casual observer can plainly see.



The Almost Original Synthetic Swampgrass Jug-band at a recent rehearsal, from left: Jim Vasconcellos, Doug Bowen, Clyde (the dog), Jeff Tyler and Dave Rubin.