

King's English Band plays only for fun

By CAROL AUSTIN
Battalion Reporter

From the very back table, through the thin haze of smoke, I could see the band take the stage. Saturday night's crowd was a rowdy one at Grin's, but the band didn't seem to mind.

Stage lighting was provided by neon beer signs and pinball machines.

"Have a beer, everybody!" The washboard player hollered, and the band broke into "Ragtime Annie."

For a bunch of English teachers, they weren't bad.

They are the King's English String Band, composed of eight members of the English Department here.

They apparently don't mind being seen swilling beer in public. "If we were in it for our dignity, we wouldn't be here in the first place," says Dr. Dennis Berthold, banjo player and vocalist.

Their motto — *festivitatem habemus* (we have fun) — is a believable one. Dr. Doug Street the washboard player, never looked that happy arguing the merits of C.S. Lewis in Children's Lit.

Just how did they get there in the first place?

Beginning one evening at Gene and Marynell Young's home as a social affair, they discovered that collectively, they all knew the same relatively obscure tunes.

Natives of Borger and Phillips, Texas, the Youngs were high school sweethearts. "The towns were a mile apart, which made it far enough to be romantic and close enough to be handy," Marynell said.

It was in graduate school in Tennessee that they picked up the old Irish and Appalachian fiddle tunes, as did washtub bass player Malcolm Richardson, whom they met at the University of Tennessee.

"That's the other UT," Marynell said.

Washtub bass is a strange instrument for an opera buff to fiddle with.

But, "We all have our musical quirks," Dr. Sylvia Grider, limberjack and spoon player said. Grider is a folklorist, with a PhD in Folklore from Indiana University. She currently teaches folklore and freshman English.



Photo by Ken Herrera

The King's English String Band, composed of eight members of the English Department here, play their own style of music at Grin's Beer Garden.

Berthold, on the other hand, attended the University of California, and as a summer job, was the Los Angeles travelling playground folksinger. He received his PhD in American Literature from the University of Wisconsin and came here in 1972. A self-taught banjo and guitar player, he has a voice like the archetypal seafarer he analyzes in his *Literature of the Sea*.

The band's "What You Do With A Drunken Sailor" was rousing.

Dr. Doug Street sang an old Irish ballad with a brouge so thick that I was transported to a Christmas long past with me grandfather, Harry Finnigan, singing 'round the piano.

Street was in a number of folk groups in California in the 1960's,

playing drums, banjo, guitar and washboard. Alas, he couldn't fit the guitar into the car on the way to Nebraska for graduate school, but after a long search, he found an old brass washboard in a junk shop.

"I think I paid a buck and a quarter for the cobwebby thing, and stained it mahogany. It's classy now," he said.

Clint Machann, guitarist par excellence, is the Old Ag of the bunch, having received his M.Ed. in 1970. He currently teaches Victorian literature.

Apparently, The King's English doesn't worry about the prestige of its bookings, having played Machann's Czech family reunion in

Snook last Saturday.

"We had plenty of beer and barbeque and dancing, and it was really fun," Marynell said.

Having a good time is the primary reason for the band playing anywhere. Usually asking about one dollar to cover expenses, such as new strings and babysitters' bills, they have played at the Backstage Restaurant, Grin's and last year's Bryan Chili Cook-off.

Last but not least is penny whistler Rose Norman. A technical writer in Geological Oceanography and wife of Malcolm Richardson, she plays a recently acquired penny-whistle and spoons and she and Richardson dress alike on stage.

It's obvious they're having a good time up there. The lyrics get drowned occasionally by the pool players' jubilant shouts, but that's because I've seen one of them make three trips to the bar for more Heineken Dark.

Various secondary reasons for playing — helping preserve a traditional music form, exposing students to a different kind of music, working off a little tension or just showing people that English teachers are human too — they're providing good entertainment.

And when they break into a rollicking "Stay All Night, Stay A Little Longer," I feel as if they really mean it.

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Lee Roy Leschper Jr., Doug Graham, Carol Austin, Lynn Blanco, Ken Herrera, Keith Taylor and Mark Hancock.

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On the Cover: Football is not just another sport in Aggieland. It's a way of life. Here, a band member whoops after an Aggie score. And some Aggie fans believe in starting their young Aggies early — sometimes before they're born. For more photos, turn to pages 4 and 5. Photos by Lee Roy Leschper Jr.