



PHELAN M. EBENHACK

The former store fronts became the backs after Main St. was moved to the other side of the buildings.

cover story

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buildings, many of which are now in shambles after years of neglect. The Palace Theater, a movie theater built in 1909, now has a gaping hole in its front, through which heaps of stone and mortar can be seen. The Carnegie Library, built in 1903, now houses government offices in its bleak and unkempt space.

Despite the immensity of the task — halting and reversing a 20-year decline — a concerted effort by city government and civic groups to lure businesses and shoppers back into the area has begun and is making progress. An organization committed to the revitalization of downtown, called Downtown NOW!, is leading the campaign to jump-start the community.

The group was established a year and a half ago by the city council after a survey showed what people already seemed to know — the area had potential, but was neglected. Downtown NOW!'s purpose is to gather and disseminate information to interested businesses about available downtown properties and loan programs, and to keep an inventory of the area's physical assets.

These tasks play an important part in the effort, but President Pam Wiley says a more pressing concern is education of consumers, government agencies, businesses and investors. There is a "negativism" toward downtown Bryan that runs through the community, she says. But this negativism stems from peoples' misconceptions of the area — such as the existence of parking and crime problems — and her job is to showcase the "wealth of opportunities" in the area, she says.

"They're real problems because they're perceived to be that way, so for us they are a problem and we have to learn how to change people's minds and get them down here," she says.

Some steps have already been taken to correct the misconceptions

and show off the area's improving health. FestiFall '90, a showcase held in early October for the local artistic community, attracted about 10,000 people to downtown.

Wiley says events such as these are invaluable in helping change attitudes and spread her message of Bryan's renaissance. "I think the attitude about downtown has changed so much in the last year — that it's not dead," she says. "It never was dead. It might have been having a heart attack, but it wasn't dead."

Although people's attitudes are slowly changing for the better, Wiley realizes the challenge ahead of her group. "It's really funny because things are going so well in downtown that you don't think you have to go around and tell people that, but we found out we do."

In addition to remaking Bryan into a shopping area with unique specialty stores, the planners want it to be a cultural center with an eye toward family-style entertainment. Downtown NOW! has received ownership of the Palace Theater from the city, and plans to modify the gutted building into an outdoor theater as soon as it raises the funds required for the project.

But for now, Wiley and Downtown NOW! are focused on recruiting new businesses into the area. The group has made it much easier for businesses interested in the area by consolidating information about various funding programs and building spaces available. Many of the federal, state and local loan programs offered are aimed at business recruitment. But no matter how economically attractive the area is, Wiley says, the dilapidated appearance of downtown may hamper their efforts.

In a historically conservative town such as Bryan, Wiley says, some property owners are reluctant to spend money restoring the buildings for fear the money would be wasted if



no businesses move in. But risks must be taken for the revitalization effort to succeed, and some people are willing to try.

Frank Fields opened the Brazos Stock Exchange, a small, elegant restaurant in the middle of downtown, in July. The building, which had been a grocery store from the 1920s to the 1960s, required a massive restoration effort — in which everything but the ceiling was rebuilt — before Fields could open the restaurant. But now that it's done, he says he is happy with the results, and business is good.

Fields and Wiley agree that the area is ripe for development. They say it is just a matter of time, effort and education before their labors bear fruit. "There are really no negatives to downtown, other than in people's attitudes," Fields says. "I think there are a number of people out there waiting for someone to do it and do it well. All it takes is some imagination and some money."

Amy Cameron, president of the Downtowner's Association, also believes the time has come for downtown Bryan to snap out of its 20-year mid-life crisis.

"There's just so much that could be done. There's a lot of potential here."

That potential slowly is being realized. Within the last two years, Downtown NOW!'s Wiley says, a handful of new businesses have opened and many people have expressed interest in starting businesses in the downtown area. Buildings that have sat abandoned for years are being renovated or torn down.

With one eye on past mistakes and the other on future possibilities, Cameron is optimistic.

"Bryan isn't the only town this has happened to. Eventually people realize that the downtown area is going down and they do something and revitalize it. It's just taken Bryan a little longer to realize that and get going."

By all indications, it's Trout season

Trouth Fishing in America is not the big secret it used to be.

A couple of years ago, you could walk in on a Saturday night and get a seat right up front to catch Keith Grimwood and Ezra Idlet's rock/comedy act. Last week, the duo performed four times in two days, including sold-out shows Friday and Saturday nights at the Front Porch Cafe.

With no commercial airplay and no record deal, why are these guys so big all of a sudden?

"Yeah, suddenly after 14 years," jokes Grimwood, the bassist. He and guitarist Idlet first played together in 1977 as members of a Houston band called St. Elmo's Fire. Several years

and a few personnel changes down the road, the duo remains as Trout Fishing in America, borrowing its name from a Richard Brautigan book.

Trout Fishing got its first taste of national exposure last weekend, when Idlet and Grimwood performed on "Mountain Stage," a National Public Radio syndicated show. Though carried by only a few stations in Texas, the show was broadcast around the nation, bringing the band's special brand of witty folk-rock to places the two might never travel.

"This thing airs in Alaska," explains Idlet. "We could never get that kind of exposure on our own."

The Houston-based band mainly tours the Texas-Arkansas-Louisiana circuit, but recently had a warm welcome in Nashville from media and fans.

Record stores and commercial radio are starting to take notice of the group.

"We've gotten some airplay on public radio before," Idlet says. "A fan would take in a tape and ask them to play our stuff. But now record stores carry us, and our songs are playing on commercial radio."

"I hear they're playing us in Maine."

In the past, the musicians say, people heard about Trout Fishing in America largely by word of mouth. Their music and video releases weren't carried by record stores, but were produced on the band's own independent label (paid for out of the musicians' own pockets) and sold at concerts.

Trout Fishing's growing popularity and the warm atmosphere of the live shows stem from the same feature — audience involvement. Between sets and after shows, the musicians stay on stage to talk with fans, peddle shirts and tapes, and sign people up for their mailing list.

Idlet says the list, used for sending newsletters and concert schedules, now holds more than 8,000 names.

Glancing around the room during Saturday night's show and the kids' show that afternoon, it's obvious few crowd members are there from a casual lack of something to do on a Saturday. Loyal Trout fans sport autographed T-shirts from various stages of the band's career, and they know all the lyrics.

Many of the group's most popular songs — the ones requiring props and audience sing-along — were originally written for children.

"When we had kids, it affected the



Ezra Keith

music," Grimwood says. The group originally began playing for children at the invitation of fans who were teachers.

"We'd play in elementary schools and day-care centers," he says. "We didn't know any children's songs — we'd just play Creedence Clearwater Revival or something, and the kids loved it."

The group began writing and performing children's songs about monsters, teddy bears and dinosaurs. Idlet says they approach concerts for children and adults in the same way. "We try not to talk down to the kids," he says.

Many of the kids are loyal fans, as well. "We're watching them grow up," Idlet says.

"We've been playing for 14 years," says Grimwood, "and it's really weird — people will come up to me at the adult shows and say 'You played for my elementary school.'"

Trout Fishing's children's video,

"Go Fish," brought further notice to the band when it captured a gold medal at the 1990 Houston International Film Festival.

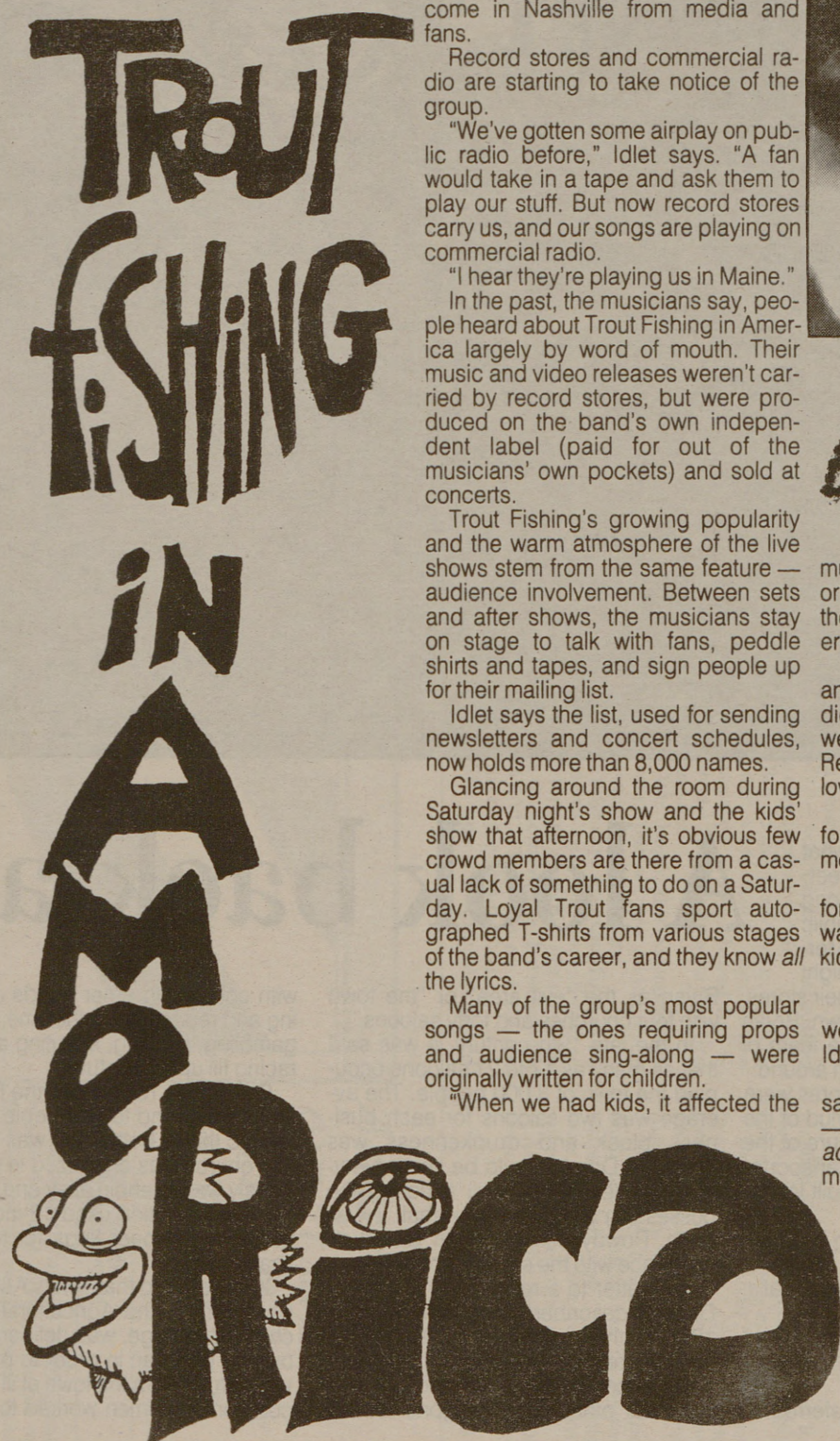
Grimwood said he wouldn't exactly describe making the video as "fun," but this one was easier than the first, which was geared to adult fans. The two agree they still get a little stage-fright when the camera rolls.

With all the recent recognition, what's the next step for Trout Fishing in America?

"We just want to keep doing what we're doing, but maybe on a bigger scale," says Grimwood. Securing a recording contract with a major label is not necessarily the best way to go, they say, but both would like to expand their touring circuit.

Trout Fishing in America will perform a main stage show at the Kerrville Folk Festival this spring, and their latest CD, *Truth is Stranger Than Fishin'*, is available in College Station at Marooned Records.

—C.M.



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