

The Woodies' unique sound draws variety of fans

By John LeBas
THE BATTALION

When guitarists Ron Piwko and Tony Chester were working together last year at a lumber yard and trying to think of a name for the band they were forming, only one choice seemed logical.

Options such as "The Lumber Boys" proved undesirable. "The Woodies" was borne of a simultaneous and mutual burst of inventiveness, and despite the sexual connotations, the name was appropriate and catchy; and it stuck.

Now, The Woodies are riding a wave of fan support, capitalizing on a unique sound characterized by complex guitar harmonies and feel.

The band is performing tonight at the Dixie Theatre. Piwko and Chester perform without a drummer or bassist.

"It's two guitars, two vocals, and we make a lot of noise," Piwko said. Musical influences are so diverse that The Woodies' sound is hard to define, Piwko said.

Elements of blues and country, among other genres, have helped shape the band's unique musical face.

The Woodies have heard fans dub them as "James Taylor on speed" and "America on acid."

The closest similar-sounding band Chester can think to name is the (new) Eagles.

"We're like the Eagles in that we do so many different types of songs within the same style," Chester said. "But you wouldn't necessarily compare us to the Eagles."

Piwko said the duo is still young, which makes it hard to characterize its music.

"We're still in the birth phase," Piwko said. "If people like lots of intricate guitar work and good harmonies, that's what we're about."

The mostly acoustic songs are written through a collaborative process based on mutual respect, Piwko and Chester said.

"Ron is a classical songwriter," Chester said. "He writes his lyrics first

and then writes music and melody lines second. I do just the opposite. Our styles are so different, it comes out in a neat mix.

"We do collaborate and write songs together, but a lot of times, I'll write a song or he'll write a song and the other one will put what he wants to it."

"We work with it until we get a finished product, and it's a collaboration at that point. Ron's the most talented songwriter I've ever played with, and he seems to feel the same way, as well."

A crucial part of The Woodies' style is feel, Piwko said. The songs are too complex for him and Chester to play sloppily, he said.

"I think that's what makes The Woodies, the feel," Piwko said.

The two also use different lyrical approaches. Piwko will write a song based on an idea, whereas Chester writes on inspiration.

The lyrics, while sometimes serious, are not characteristically specific — Chester said lyrics should be open to interpretation and personal application.

Piwko and Chester met each other through working with local musicians last year.

Since November, The Woodies have performed at Fitzwilly's and several private parties with other local musicians such as Ruthie Foster.

"If there's anything that has bonded me and Tony in what we're doing, it's that other people we respect in the business like what we're doing," Piwko said.

The duo self-produced its first tape last year, which has been selling quite well.

"We basically made a 'poor boy's' tape — we did everything ourselves," Piwko said.

"We never really planned on marketing it, but people seemed to like it. We were just going to use it to show club owners what we could do," Chester said.

This summer, the pair will go to Nashville to record its first album.

There, they will record with professional producers and a hired band.

"We will probably form our own label, but we're hoping to get picked up (by a major record label)," Chester said.



The Woodies

Regardless of whether they will have to promote this second release themselves, The Woodies hope to tour extensively and expand their fan base.

Piwko and Chester have found this fan base to be unexpectedly diverse.

"The cross-section of people who like us is amazing," Piwko said. "There's a 9-year-old boy who goes to sleep listening to our tape every night."

The Woodies can boast fans in "the biker crowd," and even a 50-year-old woman listens to the band.

Along with appreciation for these fans comes The Woodies' respect for their listeners.

"We'll never insult anyone's intelligence," Piwko said. "There's not any commercialism in us — the most commercial stuff we do is not commercial."

To take advantage of their forthcoming opportunities, Piwko and Chester have put school on hold, but remain fiercely proud of their Aggie heritage.

"We're looking forward to the day when we can come back and say, 'We are from here, and we're happy to be home,'" Piwko said.

Unusual hobbies find niche at A&M MSC NOVA participants gain leadership skills through fun and games

By James Francis
THE BATTALION

Life is not always filled with fun and games, but there is one organization that tries to do just that.

MSC NOVA, whose membership is only \$1, is open to anyone and provides individuals with countless gaming experiences.

Clay Hanna, chair of NOVA and a sophomore business major, said bringing different types of activities for students to enjoy is the aim of NOVA.

"We provide recreational activities that enhance the student development process," he said.

Although NOVA is a gaming organization, individuals attain leadership and management skills and learn how to identify with students on different levels.

"NOVA has given me confidence and the ability to manage people and time better, and I get things done more efficiently," Hanna said.

Alison Tashima, head of public relations and a sophomore English and journalism major, said NOVA brings together similar tastes.

"It's been an opportunity to meet some interesting people and play new things that have diversified my interests," she said.

What sparks diversified interests are the various games NOVA offers to members and other Texas A&M students.

From chess to ACUI games, which includes

everything from bridge, bowling, table tennis to role-playing, NOVA offers just about everything in the gaming industry.

"If it's game-related, we do it," Hanna said. He also said NOVA is expanding into murder mystery gaming, which started last fall with the

"kidnapping" of Toby Boenig. Individuals get the chance to interrogate witnesses and investigate crime scenes reminiscent to the board game Clue.

The top three winners, of individual or two-person teams, receive prizes donated by the Bryan-Col-

lege Station community. Another physical activity NOVA provides is historical board gaming, where events such as the Civil War are re-enacted.

Hanna said it is easy to see NOVA is not the everyday, run-of-the-mill organization.

"We're more different from other organizations because of the type of atmosphere," Hanna said. "We're all laid back and enjoy putting on all the events that we do."

One of the events the members are involved in is NovaCon conventions, where guests are invited.

The founder of Dungeons and Dragons, Gary Gygax, is just one of the many people who has appeared at the conventions.

Also, last week, NOVA participated in International Gaming Day, where games of various cultures were introduced to participants.

Currently, NOVA is planning for NovaCon. It is also working on teaching sessions and the possibility of holding a few tournaments; and every weekend, there is open gaming in the MSC tunnel rooms.

The group is also planning its spring murder mystery, which will take place in April.

Hanna wants students who are interested in an overall gaming experience to take a look at NOVA.

"We are a great tool for getting involved in the MSC," he said.



Academie Vampirica members focus on Gothic horror, live action role playing

By John LeBas
THE BATTALION

Vampires and werewolves. Mortality. What may give some people the creeps is vastly interesting to a group of Gothic horror lovers at Texas A&M.

Academie Vampirica, a service and social club at Texas A&M, is a local branch of the Camerilla.

Steve Balfour, a psychology graduate student, said the Camerilla is a national non-profit organization that promotes charity, social organization and interactive theater.

Balfour, now club president and regional coordinator for the Camerilla, helped found Academie Vampirica last March to take advantage of what a formal club could offer its members and community.

"Our primary emphasis for getting on campus was to be able to participate in the Camerilla and college life, all together," Balfour said.

Balfour, like most Academie Vampirica members, became involved with the club through fascination with Gothic horror.

"The primary focus (of Gothic horror) is on how vampires and werewolves interact with humans,"

he said. Mortality is also a focus of gothic horror, he said. Many members are authors, and they delve into these concepts in their writing, he said.

"You can go to whatever level you want with it," he said. "Some of the writing is very deep, and there are other things that go straight down to the thriller aspect."

Steven King and focus on the thriller aspect.

Balfour also said many members experiment with art and create beautiful Gothic-inspired pieces.

The interactive theater activities of the Academie Vampirica interest many people, Balfour said. Live action role-playing, or LARP, occurs about every three weeks at the Zachry Building.

Melanie Adams, a chemistry graduate student and a chapter coordinator for Academie Vampirica, said LARPs allow people to explore and develop their skills and improvise role-playing.

"LARPs are a nice test of your creativity and improvisational ability," she said.

Participants, usually numbering up to 50 for most games, can develop one or more characters, she said.

Storytellers are also involved to make sure players follow predetermined rules and to occasionally throw a "monkey wrench" into the story.

Adams said the stories are unwritten and almost completely improvisational.

"It largely depends on what the players want their characters to do," she said.

Balfour said most of the conflicts and actions in a given story are directed at the antagonists.

"There is a lot of high theater," Balfour said. "A lot of people really work on doing the emotions and getting the makeup out and costuming."

Balfour said that in one LARP, the characters had to deal with the problem of feeding on a society infected with an AIDS-like illness.

Balfour, who typically plays a vampire, said "the vampires usually have things that revolve around a lot of political intrigue ad interaction."

He said werewolves are more nature-oriented creatures.

"Werewolves typically operate in a pack structure," Balfour said. Often, people choose traditional characters of Gothic horror, such as werewolves and vampires, Adams said, but playing an ordinary person can be just as challenging and fun.

"Imagine playing an ordinary person and having all of this stuff going on," she said. Besides club gaming, the Academie Vampirica is

also extensively involved in various gaming conventions, like WarCon, NovaCon and AggieCon.

Adams said people may have preconceived notions about LARP participants.

"We don't do anything with weapons," she said, "and no one thinks they're a vampire or a werewolf."

"Unfortunately, people have a tendency to jump to conclusions," Adams said.

The club is also involved in community service. One service activity in the works is a teddy bear collection for the police department. The teddy bears will be given to children for comfort when a situation involving police action arises.

The club has also been involved with the Big Event, the Brazos County Food Pantry and litter cleanup.

"We have a cleanup site between here and Dallas with the Adopt-a-Highway Program," Balfour said.

Dan Schmitt, a Class of '89 staff member and an Academie Vampirica member, said he enjoys the social activities of the club. Members will attend vampire and other movies together, for example.

"It's refreshing to have found a group of students with Gothic interests," he said. "Getting to go to movies, getting to hang out with people who want to do things like that, it's interesting to do this in a group instead of with two or three friends you could find who might like to see a strange movie," he said.

