

## The Sultans of Jazz

### Local musicians spell out the steps to becoming a 'King of Cool'

KRISTEN YOUNG  
The Battalion

Jazz bands are not founded on adolescent whimsy. They are not spawned by pimply teenagers who spontaneously get the gang together in the garage. Just ask D.A. McDowell, Michael Holleman and Bryan Littman. All three are professional musicians in local jazz bands. McDowell is the founder of Jazz III, Littman founded Big Apple Trio and Holleman is a drum player for Big Apple Trio. "Jazz is not kid stuff," McDowell said. "You have to do your homework. Jazz is high art; it's a sophisticated art."

To become a real jazz musician, to form a real jazz band, requires years of passionate commitment to the art. According to Holleman, the best place to start is alone with one's instrument. "Learn (to play) the instrument properly and you'll go further," Holleman said. "MTV makes it look so easy. Jazz has become a visual thing instead of audio. It's hard to find players anymore."

McDowell acknowledges the advantages of a formal music education. However, the biggest asset for a jazz player is the ability to improvise. "Jazz is loose," Holleman said. "There's a lot of space in the music that allows the musician to get creative. In jazz there are more jumping off points. You can play with the notes. Space creates tension and gets the listener involved." According to McDowell, a song may last seven minutes at one gig and 15 minutes at the next, depending on the soloist's creative inspiration.

All three musicians agree that improvisation is a God-given talent. "A jazz musician is like a running back," McDowell said. "You can't tell him how to run and dodge. Jazz is about improv." Holleman compares jazz to basketball: There is a general game plan, but the situation is constantly changing and the player must be able to react spontaneously to those changes. "Jazz is like a language," McDowell said. "You either have enough knowledge to pick it up or you don't. Jazz musicians can play with others right away."

McDowell asserts that the only way to learn the language is to "get into the music scene subculture."

"It takes a lot of listening," McDowell said. "Learn from guys like John Coltrane, Miles Davis and Oscar Peterson."

Littman recommends tuning in to local radio jazz providers KAMU 90.9 and KEOS 89.1. He urges aspiring musicians and college students to attend live jazz performances. "Go out and culture yourself," Littman said. "Try it all!"

Granted, College Station is not exactly the jazz hub of America. The prevailing attitude among many a cultured townie seems to be: If you can't boot-scoot to it at Harry's, it's not music. Nevertheless, there is a limited number of local venues where one can experience jazz: Sweet Eugene's, the Tavern, Christopher's and a few others.

Holleman recommends prospective jazz musicians become acquainted with other musicians. "The music business is a small world," says Holleman. "People tend to know each other." Holleman encourages the aspiring jazz musician to "sit in" for one of the players in a band and prove one's talent. "Good players seek out other good players. Band leaders look for people who communicate well. Musicians must be able to bounce off each other. The soloist instigates where the song is going. Others have to be sensitive enough to compliment each other." Once the rookie musician is plugged into the network and his talent is established, groups who are in need of a musician will know who to contact.

McDowell advises rookie musicians to spend a few years as a band member before attempting to organize a band. "Play in someone else's band, then you can learn your own part before having to handle the entire band," McDowell said. Once the band is established, there are many new considerations.

One major challenge is how to effectively market the band. "You have to market yourself," McDowell said. "The

leader of the group has to be the business leader of the group. Most of our jobs come from references from past jobs. But you have to make cold calls sometimes."

Another consideration is geographical location. The prospective jazz band leader might consider settling in a large metropolitan location. Littman said that attempting to succeed as a jazz musician in College Station is a definite challenge. "There aren't many venues to play in. Jazz is something you have to acquire a taste for and people around here have an apathetic attitude toward trying something new. I get frustrated sometimes trying."

It is evident that fleeting inspiration and random whimsy do not produce a successful jazz band. But if you have the passion, the talent and the courage to admit to your Dixie Chicken-frequenting friends that you abhor Merle Haggard and that jazz is your passion, then forge on. But remember the advice of Michael Holleman: "Don't be afraid to make a mistake. And if you do make a mistake, remember to make it again and again." Such is the nature of jazz.



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BY J. GOLDFELD



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## Volume Control



RUBEN DELUNA/THE BATTALION

John Kelley  
High Desert Sound System 2  
CD Courtesy of Moonshine Records

Track selection is everything in a mixed CD and John Kelley's new release is a blueprint for how it should be done.

On *High Desert Sound System 2*, Kelley combines an eclectic mix of songs from numerous genres into a work that takes the listener on an hour-long journey through a night at the best club imaginable. Kelley starts off with minimal techno and goes into tech-trance followed by a smooth transition from tribal techno through ghetto house and finally ending up in smooth, late-night house. Kelley picked future classics for this compilation — Ben Simm's tribal remix of Joel Mull's "The Mole," and Novy and Eniak's "Pumpin'," an early Frankie Bones style ghetto-tech groove. The good news is there is something for everyone on this mix CD with tracks by producers as varied as Timo Maas, Samuel L. Session and Southside Spinners.

The bad news is that Kelley's mixing style is questionable at times. There are no major mistakes in the mixes, but one can hear the occasional push and off-beat. More importantly, Kelley seems to favor some tracks over others to the point that the best parts of some songs are lost.

"The Mole" is a great track because of its breaks, but the listener only hears two of them on Kelley's mix, whereas "Pumpin'" is played for a full seven minutes. It is a good song, but it is left in so long that the listener is tempted to skip past it after three or four minutes. This is a shame, as Kelley's mix out of "Pumpin'" and into Ben Simm's minimal tribal techno track, "Work It," is the smoothest and trickiest of the album.

Despite the bumpy spots, this is one of the best mix CDs of the year. (Grade: B+)

— Jason Bennyhoff

The Aislers Set  
*The Last Match*  
CD Courtesy of Slumberland Records



The '60s have been over for thirty years, but someone forgot to mention it to the Aislers Set. This band sounds like it should have come at the height of the flowerpower era — the listener can almost picture them opening for the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show.

The album is a collage of folk style acoustic guitar and vocal ballads mixed with Siouxsie and the Banshees style punk songs full of power chords and xylophones. *The Last Match* is the most diverse album of the year so far, and that is the album's greatest asset and its biggest flaw.

While there is something for everyone on this album, there are also songs for no one. Many songs on the album suffer from singer Amy Linton's flat vocals and the proliferation of the pseudo-word "la." The album was also recorded in a garage on a reel-to-reel recorder, trading sound quality for an indie feel.

Still, there are some notable successes on the album, "The Way to Market Station" and "Lonely Side of Town" among them. However, they barely make up for the rest of the album's disasters. (Grade: C+)

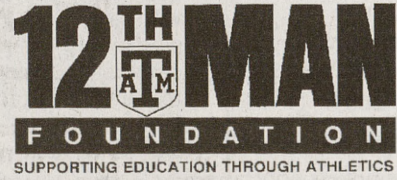
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