

Honk! Music

Activism Set to

BY CHERIE YURCO

■ Exiting the Boston's "T" stop in Somerville, there was a different sound in the air on one crisp fall Saturday morning—spectators anticipated the start of something special, while performers milled around, practicing riffs on their drums and horns. Twenty-seven street bands had begun arriving on Friday, from as far away as Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Austin, Texas, to perform in events held throughout the weekend.

Somerville host band Second Line Social Aid & Pleasure Society Brass Band (SLSAP, for short) spoke briefly at the opening ceremony, and an initial honk was sounded to launch this year's Honk! Festival, the sixth one.

By 1:00 p.m., Davis Square was resonating with sound and fun as musicians, stilt walkers, and dancers performed in nearby parks and alleys according to a rotating schedule. Other Honk! festivities—a Sunday parade, cruise, symposium, and neighborhood outreach performances—continued into Monday.

The First Honk!

Like many of the Honk! bands, SLSAP started out as a protest band, formed in 2003 for an anti-war protest. Band members had so much fun that it continued as a community band after that.

"We don't have a specific message," explains Reebee Garofalo, 66, a retired teacher from University of Massachusetts, and SLSAP's snare drummer. "We generally support progressive causes, anything from union rallies to fundraisers for community gardens. Our motto is: 'If the cause is true and the time is right.'" As for a mission, he says, "Fun is of very high value and making the world a better place ranks right up there with fun." Currently, SLSAP has around 23 members.

About a year after it began, SLSAP band members began finding other recreational street bands on the Internet. "At a certain point, we started wondering aloud how many bands like this existed," says Garofalo. The Honk! Festival began as a way for SLSAP to reach out and fraternize with similar bands around the country.

"They put together this festival so that bands with the same mission could gather, play together, and perform

for others," explains saxophonist Ken Field, who is a member of SLSAP and on the Honk! Festival organizing committee. About a dozen bands showed up.

Field, who unlike most Honk! band members is a professional musician, had his doubts about that first festival held in 2006. "I thought, this is never gonna work; it's just not organized enough," he explains. "I was just so wrong. I was blown away. I wanted to get involved and make it happen in the future, so I joined the committee."

Wild, Unruly Honks!

A Honk! Festival is a bit difficult to describe. Garofalo calls it "a moving spectacle of wild and unruly marching bands, playing the most infectious music you can imagine. It's not only in your face—it's in your body. And it's accompanied by interesting visuals—30-foot puppets, stilt walkers, fire twirlers, hula hoopers, and all manner of dance and theater."

Repertoire ranges from the musical traditions of New Orleans second line brass bands to European klezmer, Balkan, and Romani music to Brazilian Carnival traditions, cumbia rhythms, and bhangra influences. "Internationally, there's this rich tradition of marching bands," explains Jason Fialkoff, a member of Austin's 35-member Minor Mishap Marching Band, which has traveled to Boston for Honk! Festival a few times. "I think there's just something that resonates with people. The music is so accessible—senior citizens love it, little children love it, people of all ages love it."

"When I first attended Honk! I could barely process the joy and mayhem that was occurring all around me," says Mike Antares, 35, of Austin, who began playing drums just so he could join Minor Mishap, after photographing them at an event. "The urge was irresistible, and I was so captivated by the costumes—it looked and sounded amazing. I wanted to be part of it."

Field compares these street bands to the protest movements and folk singers of the '60s. Mary Curtin of Somerville's Dirty Water Brass Band agrees. "Today's political climate is encouraging people to participate in this way," she says.

Curtin, 62, who is an arts promoter and also handles public relations for Honk!, has been involved with this type of movement for years, initially with the Bread & Puppet Theater in the 1980s. She calls Bread & Pup-



Among the musicians from the 27 bands performing at Boston's 2011 Honk! Festival were members of Environmental Encroachment (above and top right) of Chicago, Illinois, Dirty Water Brass Band (center, right) and Second Line Social Aid & Pleasure Society Brass Band (bottom, right) both of Somerville, Massachusetts, and What Cheer? Brigade (page 26) of Providence, Rhode Island.

Photos: Cherie Yurco

pet, founded in New York City in the 1960s, the “granddaddy of street bands.” She initially carried a puppet while her husband played drums in the band. In her mid-30s, Curtin decided it would be more fun to play in the band, so she took up the saxophone.

In Your Face

Though Somerville’s Honk! is billed as “a festival of activist street bands,” for most of the bands, any political agendas seem secondary as they focus on taking back public space for the purpose of sharing music. There are several things that make a Honk! festival unique. For one, it’s a completely grassroots, nonprofit movement with no promoters, outside food vendors, or stalls selling junk. Local businesses—restaurants and bars—benefit and make donations to support Honk! and its visiting musicians.

Secondly, most of the musicians are amateurs. Though food, boarding, and some travel expenses are provided, bands are not paid to perform and do it simply for the joy of sharing music. Finally, there are no stages.

“Honk! is very participatory—the line between spectators and performers can dissolve in an instant,” explains Antares. “Without stages, the music becomes experiential.” Some bands even weave through spectators, enticing them to participate. “We want everyone, whether eight or 80, to feel the power of music,” he adds.

“It’s an attempt to change perceptions about what is possible and allowable in a public space. That is very consciously a part of the politics of the festival,” says Garofalo.

“The word on the street is what makes the groundswell happen,” adds Curtin. “You get caught up in it, even if you just walk into it. Bystanders are suddenly surrounded by a scene like no other; bands of different shapes and sizes have taken over the square and morphed it into something otherworldly. My feeling is that Honk! is a success if you walk away feeling that, musically, something has happened to you that may have changed your life.”

The Honk! Spreads

One of the positive developments to



come out of Somerville’s Honk! Festival is that it has inspired people to start recreational street bands, activist or not, all over the country. “There are a lot of people who played band music in high school or college, and are looking for a way to reapply those skills to do things that will change the world in their own little way,” says Field.

“I think Honk! has inspired a lot of people to return to instruments they had dropped,” adds Curtin. “Honk! bands are pretty welcoming to those who want to join. It’s empowering for the people in the bands because they help various causes.”

Even if there isn’t one near you, it’s quite easy to start your own street band, explains Fialkoff. “All you really need is a Craigslist ad, and you have a band,” he says.

“It’s empowering when people realize they don’t need a third party to make it happen. They are a self-contained entertainment force,” Curtin concludes.

Some Honk! participants have taken it one step further, starting their own festivals. Now there’s Honk!TX in Austin, Texas, in March; Honk Fest West in Seattle, Washington, in June; and in October there’s Pronk! in Providence, Rhode Island, and Bronk! in Brooklyn, New York.

Garofalo encourages you to contact Boston’s Honk! committee for advice, but adds that it’s a lot of work. “We work really hard trying to control every aspect, and then there’s a moment, about three or four days before the festival, when you realize

nothing else you do will really matter, and it is all completely out of your control. The best thing you can do is sit back and enjoy the ride.”

Honk!TX

Jason Fialkoff and Mike Antares, who participated in Honks in Boston and Seattle, were two of the organizers of Austin’s first Honk!TX in March 2011. “We got to see the differences in how Boston and Seattle were organized and also how differences in city infrastructure affected the performances,” says Fialkoff, explaining how each Honk! festival is slightly different.

“We call Honk!TX ‘a festival of community street bands,’” he explains. “Not to say we are not political individuals, but as a festival, we put community first. We do something that is definitively Austin, but also keep in mind that we have the Honk! name on our festival.”

“The hardest thing to do, when putting on a Honk! festival for the first time, is describing it,” says Fialkoff, who is an energy analyst. “We struggled with trying to explain it to the city, to business sponsors, and even local bands. It’s really just this explosion of music in a concentrated area; it’s incredible. All you really need is space.”

In the end, it all worked out for the event held simultaneously with Austin’s huge annual South By Southwest music festival and conference. “We did a parade in the middle of South by Southwest,” says Fialkoff. “South By really got behind us and helped sponsor us with the city and make things happen.”

The main performances were held in Austin’s Adams Park. “We put a few thousand people in the park that day,” he says, proudly explaining the impact that Honk!TX had on his community. “We started our sets in the middle of the day and we had senior citizens coming with their lawn chairs; we had children out the entire time. I imagined someone walking home from the supermarket, and all of a sudden, in that empty park that you walk by every day, there are thousands of people and marching bands in weird costumes and colors are playing.”

And that, according to Honk! organizers, is what it’s all about.

It’s No Accident

LEARN HOW TO PLAY PERFECT ACCIDENTALS

■ As you probably know, the key signature at the beginning of a piece of music tells you which notes, if any, should be played sharp or flat. So why do you sometimes see extra sharp, flat, and natural symbols pop up throughout a piece? They’re not accidents—they’re accidentals, and they indicate deviations from the key signature.

Accidentals are printed to the left of the note that they affect. A sharp symbol (#) raises the pitch of the note by a half-step, while a flat (b) lowers the pitch by a half-step. A natural sign (♮) cancels a flat or sharp that was in the key signature.

Double sharps (x) and double flats (bb) are less common; they raise or lower the pitch by a whole step. This will result in the sounding pitch being the same as another note altogether. For example, A-double sharp (A \times) is the same pitch as B.

An accidental remains in effect for the remainder of the measure. For example, if a C is marked “sharp” by an accidental, all other Cs that appear for the remainder of the measure will be played as C \sharp , unless otherwise indicated. When a new measure begins, the original key signature goes back into effect. (Sometimes you’ll even be reminded to return to the key signature with a “courtesy accidental” in parentheses the next time the note appears.) The only exception to this rule is when a note is tied across the bar line—in this case, the accidental remains in effect for the entirety of the tie, regardless of the new measure.

Finally, it’s important to point out that accidentals only affect the exact pitch that they mark. That is, they do not apply to the same note up or down an octave.

A-flat

A-natural

A-sharp

A-double flat

A-double sharp

Now that you have a few basic rules about accidentals under your belt, you’re ready to play—no mistaking it! Also, be sure to check out more useful references at www.makingmusicmag.com/forte/clip/.

