



# FORGET THE CIRCUS Run Away with the Band

BY CHERIE YURCO

■ Take your run-of-the mill college marching band from North Dakota. Add a dash of classic big band jazz. Then, funk it up. Just for kicks, throw in some truly twisted acrobats and crazy burlesque flair, as the band cranks out a crazy mix of rock, funk, and jazz, with influences from world music.

This music mix may not sound like a recipe for success, but after just one performance of the MarchFourth Marching Band you'll be a believer. You may even want to run away and join the band.

"Our show persona is unique," says Katie Presley, 33, a trumpet player with

MarchFourth Marching Band, trying to describe the group. "It's like Cirque du Soleil, but grittier; it's like Frank Zappa meets Duke Ellington with a circus twist." It certainly holds true that, for this eclectic and high-energy group of colorfully clad musicians, stilt walkers, and acrobats, the name "marching band" really doesn't tell the story.

That story really began about 10 years ago, when John Averill's job in animation ended and he decided to try something else. A recreational bassist living in Portland's Alberta Arts District, Averill had a lot of friends who were

musicians, so he set up a business putting four- to six-piece bands together for one-time events. He would name the group, give them a set list, and once the event was over, they'd disband. The business took off.

"I sort of built a reputation for putting on really fun parties," says Averill, who was able to lure some of Portland's best musicians for his gigs.



M4 band members Richard Cawley (left) and Katie Presley.

## Something Different

Then came a Mardi Gras party booked for Fat Tuesday, March 4, 2003. Averill decided to try something a little different this time. With the help of friends, he gathered up about 30 musicians, dancers, and other performers from his neighborhood, taught them seven cover tunes, and called them the MarchFourth Marching Band. The party was a success.

Two weeks later, they regrouped to march through Portland's streets for an anti-war demonstration. "We only knew the seven songs, but we marched for a couple hours," says Averill. "That was when we realized there was something special about what we were doing. It was a chemistry thing—the energy, the crowd response."

"The irony that the band that had 20 or 30 people in it is the one that stuck hasn't been lost on me," says Averill, now 43, who plays bass with the group. "I never could have imagined this kind of band existing 10 years ago, but it was a pleasant surprise."

By 2004, MarchFourth was named Best Local Band in Portland and its fans had begun calling it M4. In 2005 M4 recorded its first album and took on some gigs outside of Portland. An invitation to perform in Germany as part of a World Cup celebration came in 2006, and in 2007, M4 went on an eight-week national tour. For 2011, touring began in February and continued into the fall with short breaks. The musicians have happily had to put their "day jobs"—everything from real estate to carpentry to photography—aside.

## Dressed to the T

From the start, whimsical, mismatched costumes have been part of M4. Band members are colorful and dramatic on stage, with lots of playful makeup and outfits that look like they survived a marching band wardrobe room explosion—everything from top hats, to modified marching band jackets, to fishnet hose and feathers. Many of the group members are craftspeople who make their own "uniforms," props, and drum harnesses.

"Almost everyone owns a sewing machine or has some skill, men included," says Ryan Moore, 35, who's been in M4 for about a year and a half. "We find things in thrift stores and alter them to fit our needs. We help each other out and encourage each other to look good."

Moore, who has been playing drums for 25 years, approached Averill early on and said: "I love what you are doing and I would love to be a part of it." There were no drum openings at the time, so Moore, who was working as a private drum teacher and sound engineer at the time, waited patiently for an opening.

## Covers to Compositions

Though they began by playing just seven covers, the group's talented musicians soon began writing original music for M4, which resulted in a second album in 2009 and a full-length DVD that came out in 2010. As many as eight band members currently contribute to M4's melodic, high-energy repertoire with tons of international flavor. "We have enough original material to play for three hours or more," says Averill. "That's one of the reasons I stay in the band as a musician. We have all these different songwriters and so many influences."

One of the best things about the group, according to Averill is that they haven't been pigeon-holed to one particular genre. "We started out with New Orleans music, gypsy brass, Afro beat, and samba," says Averill. "We've definitely mutated toward more rock, funk, and jazz over the past three or four years."

Obviously it's a big job to lead such a dynamic and free-spirited group of performers. The current M4 roster includes one bass, two saxophones, two trombones, two trumpets, one person who alternates between guitar and baritone sax, six "Beats" (percussionists), and 10 "Beauties," including stilt walkers, fire swallows, unicyclists, trapeze artists, and dancers.

## Collective Craze

"As a bandleader I'm more of a facilitator," says Averill. "There's definitely a collective, but there's a lot of direction going on to get there. We don't have a lot of time to talk about the plan. Sometimes we don't know what a venue will be like until we get there. For example, if the ceiling is low, the stilt walkers can't do their thing, so we just don't do it. We pretty much adapt."

"Every tour is different as far as personnel, as well," says Averill, as not everybody is available for all of the touring.

For some bandleaders these kinds of adjustments would be a major headache, but Averill takes it all in stride, even enjoying the

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—Ryan Moore

Photos: Cherie Yurco



challenge. "It's not really easy, but I'm used to it," he says. "I don't think I would be in this band if we had a set show. People would get bored. Every show is different because we literally put the set list together right before we hit the stage. We have a lot of material to draw from, so we kind of look at the crowd. If there's a bunch of kids running around, we play a different set than if we were playing at 1 a.m. in some sweaty bar in New Orleans."

And, even within the tunes, there are variations. "Certain songs have open parts in the arrangement and some stuff allows for spontaneity," says Averill. "We play a set list of songs, but within that there is a lot of freedom if someone's feeling they can embellish a little bit more."

On stage the performers never stop moving, from dancing trombonists to cartwheeling stilt walkers. "It's incredibly important to stay 'in tune' with the other people on stage in terms of listening and watching, to know what kind of movements are going to happen," says Moore.

"Some of our greatest moments on stage are totally unplanned, or dreamt up on the bus when we say, 'We're bored with what is happening, what can we do to spice it up?'" says Presley, explaining how, lately, the group has been purchasing trophies

from thrift stores, redecorating them on the bus, and holding spontaneous dance contests that pull audience members up on stage.

In the early days of the band, many members maintained their "day jobs" playing with M4 on the side. However, for the past year or so, the group has been touring so heavily that it has had to become more self-sustaining. They purchased a used motor coach on eBay, which band members modified to suit their needs, and for this summer they've pretty much led a Bohemian lifestyle.

"This has created a new kind of pressure for me," says Averill who's had a crash course in the ins and outs of the touring business. "If the band ends up in the red because our guarantees aren't high enough to cover the expenses of that tour, we go into the next tour a little bit in debt. Theoretically, if we are good, and we come back to a venue, our guarantees go up and we draw more people. Basically it comes down to the number of people we bring to a venue."

### **Audience Connection**

For any group, actively engaging the audience and getting them involved is important. For M4, whose wide range of tunes and infectious performances appeal to all ages, this is even more true. Band

members say that they have been inspired by their connection to their audiences.

"M4 changes your life, whether you are an audience member or a performer," says Presley. "It's not like anything you have ever seen or done, and everybody is involved, even the audience members. Making music with the other musicians and being around the dancers in a close environment has certainly shaped my musicianship, my stage persona, and how I function in a larger community. I think that's the goal of this band, to bring together people who might never encounter each other in their daily lives. To me it's very special."

"M4 is like no other touring experience; I am part of a huge family," says Moore, who previously toured with a number of rock bands. "We give something to people during the show that's different from anything I've experienced. There's this sense of joy and love. People tell us all the time that we changed their lives, that we gave them inspiration or hope, and that's something really humbling to listen to."

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CHERIE YURCO CAUGHT AN M4 PERFORMANCE AT THE FESTIVAL INTERNATIONALE IN LAFAYETTE, LOUISIANA. VISIT [WWW.MAKINGMUSICMAG.COM/MARCHFOURTH](http://WWW.MAKINGMUSICMAG.COM/MARCHFOURTH) TO SEE MORE PHOTOS OF THAT PERFORMANCE AND LINKS TO OTHER M4 VIDEOS.