



## The Once a Month Band

By Sharon Barnes in *Our Town Monthly*

In the good old days before iPods, there were "potato bugs." Not to mention juice harps, spoons, squeeze boxes, harmonicas, piano accordions, mandolins, fiddles and violins, guitars and banjos and any number of other stringed and percussion instruments that families used to make their own music.

Andy Kintz and Nick Heuberger played fiddle. So did Al Etzel, who played with his brothers and sisters in the Etzel family band. Frank Basl played mandolin and John Zolkoske played the violin "so sweet and so low it could make a man cry." These local dads and granddads played for Grange hall dances and house parties or just for the pure pleasure of the music. Most of them are gone now, but their musical traditions live on.

When Dick and Kate Heuberger moved back home to Sublimity from Washington state in 1995, they weren't really thinking about tradition. Dick, who plays guitar and mandolin, only wanted to jam with his friend, Gary Kintz, an accomplished guitarist and singer. Although their spirits were willing, both had young families and their calendars were filled with sports and school activities. It would be more than 10 years before they finally got together, along with Gary's brothers - John Kintz on vocals, Doug Kintz on guitar and Ted Kintz on drums. Before long they were joined by several more friends and shirttail

relations including drums. Before long they were joined by several more friends and shirttail relations including Jim Zolkoske on guitar and keyboard, Ron Etzel on harmonica and mandolin, Ron's brother, Larry Etzel on fiddle, Steve Bender on guitar and Mike Nielson on bass guitar.

This core group of musicians began playing together or a month in each others' garages, family rooms and back yards and, for want of a better name, came to call themselves the Once a Month Band. Their talents quickly dovetailed into a rich and eclectic blend of cowboy songs, classic country, American folk, a little blue grass, a little Jimmy Buffett and a little of whatever else they just happen to like.

Although they joke that all their songs are made up of the same three chords, listeners appreciate the subtle riffs and intricate harmonies, the fiddles that morph into violins and back again, and the rhythms and spontaneity that make the old songs sound new, and the newer songs sound timeless.

Although most of the band members learned their fingering and strumming on grandpa's mandolin or dad's guitar, some admit they didn't always appreciate their folks' music for what it was. "When I was a kid, I got really tired of playing those old songs," said Larry Etzel. "I hate to say it now but when I came home for

holiday visits, I sometimes left my fiddle behind on purpose, just to make sure I wouldn't have to play."

Gary Kintz shared a similar sentiment. "When I was a teenager, Grandpa encouraged me to play and even took me up to Etzels a few times to play with them. I didn't really like the music. But when Grandpa got older and became less sure of his ability, it was my turn to coax him to get his fiddle out and play with me."

Mike Nielson bought his first electric bass guitar and amp when he was 16 and hid it at his friend Steve Bender's house for a few weeks before getting up the courage to tell his parents. "I think we wanted to be rock stars or something back then, and thought the music might take us places," he said. "But 30 or 40 years later, it's the traditional music or country music, or whatever you want to call it, that resonates with us now." It also resonates with the band's growing number of fans.

Having an audience is relatively new for the Once a Month Band, which has played for a few charitable events but does not give "performances" or hire out for gigs. When they first started playing together more than two years ago, not even their wives came to hear them play. But it wasn't long before they felt that something just wasn't right, that they were missing an essential and fundamental element of music making - namely, food. And what is good food and good music without good friends?

The Once a Month Band still plays in garages, family rooms and back yards, but they occasionally meet at the Union Grange Hall and other venues that offer a little store space guest artists who drop by to play, and for the family and friends who are always welcome. The monthly jam sessions have become a throwback to the potluck suppers and house parties of bygone days, a sweet echo of traditions brought full circle. Listening to the music, the laughter and the voices that sing along, it's easy to believe that these are the good old days.