



1937 FLOOD TO PERFORM

The band, not the disaster — is turning 50 and planning a bash on New Year's Eve.

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WEEKEND

The 1937 Flood to perform 50th anniversary bash on New Year's Eve

By **JAMES E. CASTO**

For HD Media

The 1937 Flood — the band, not the disaster — is turning 50 and planning a big musical bash to celebrate.

"We trace our roots back to a party at Dave and Susie Peyton's house on Dec. 31, 1973," said Charlie Bowen, guitar player and the Huntington string band's leader. That, Bowen explained, was the first time he and Dave jammed together. Thus, he said, it clearly makes sense for the musical group to celebrate their 50-year anniversary with a New Year's Eve party on Dec. 31, 2023.

Alchemy Theatre's Geneva Kent Center for the Arts at 68 Holley Ave. in Huntington will be the setting for the celebration (the former Geneva Kent Elementary School building).

"The fun will start about 7:30 p.m.," Bowen said. "We will play two full sets and then jam until the toast at midnight to celebrate the arrival of the new year. Tickets are \$20 and include all the live music you can handle, plus finger foods and the toast at midnight. Alchemy Theatre has been very kind to us, and we want this to be a fund-raising event for this remarkable local theater company."

Tickets will be available at the door and can be ordered online. The link is on the FloodAt50.com website.

Bowen said The Flood likes to describe itself as "West Virginia's most eclectic string band."

"The string band tradition goes back to at least the Civil War, and string bands were among the first groups recorded in the early 1900s," Bowen said. "A string band would come to a party and try to play whatever anybody asked for, whether it was a traditional fiddle tune, an old blues number or a Tin Pan Alley hit somebody had just heard on the radio. I like to think we do the same thing."

Bowen was born in Charleston, grew up in Ashland, went to school at the University of Kentucky and then moved to Huntington. Back in the day, he and his wife Pamela both worked at Huntington's two newspapers — The Herald-Dispatch and the now-defunct afternoon paper, The Advertiser.

For five decades the band he leads has entertained enthusiastic audiences by playing everything from the blues of Mississippi John Hurt and well-known folk tunes to American songbook standards like "Fly Me to the Moon."

The band did shows aboard the famed Delta Queen riverboat and has performed at



THE 1937 FLOOD | Courtesy photo

The 1937 Flood — pictured earlier this year with Michelle Hoge as guest vocalist — will celebrate its 50th anniversary with a New Year's Eve performance at Alchemy Theatre's Geneva Kent Center for the Performing Arts in Huntington.

the Paramount Theater in Ashland, Ky., the Culture Center in Charleston and Tamarack in Beckley, picked with West Virginia's legendary fiddling senator, the late Robert C. Byrd, played with the Huntington Symphony and entertained football fans at Marshall University tailgate gatherings.

In the early 1970s, Bowen, Peyton, who also worked at the newspapers, and Roger Samples, a wonderfully talented musician from Mount Sterling, Ky., began regularly getting together to play music. Then, in 1975, while playing at Huntington's Dogwood Arts and Crafts Festival, Charlie and Dave met fiddler Joe Dobbs.

"In those days," recalls Bowen, "Joe — who had been a professional fiddler back in his home in east Texas — had pretty much stopped playing, but we encouraged him to get back into music. He did so and the three of us — David, Joe and I — formed the core of the band for the next four decades. No doubt about it, we were a band. But one without a name."

So where did the group's peculiar name come from?

As the story goes, when the Bowens bought a house on Huntington's South Side they were invited to a party by their new neighbors. Throughout the evening, people dropped by to say hello to the Bowens and, for some reason, to tell them how high the waters of the big 1937 Ohio River flood (uh, the real one) reached their particular houses.

Bowen later told the story to Dobbs and

Peyton. Time passed. Then when the guys went on stage for their first gig somewhere in Kentucky they suddenly realized their group had no name.

Without hesitation, Dobbs walked to the mic and told the audience: "They call us 'The 1937 Flood' because back in Huntington, they're still talking about us."

The name stuck.

"Early on," Bowen recalls, "Dave and I used to talk about the possibility of giving up our day jobs at the newspaper and trying to make a go of it as professional musicians. It was Joe Dobbs (who had worked as a professional fiddler in his youth) who set us straight on this notion. He said, 'Trust me. If you want to keep loving the music, don't do it for a living.'"

"In other words, do you want music to be a job or a joy? His formula obviously worked. At shows today, just as at those decades ago, we regularly hear people in the audience talking about how much fun we seem to be having on stage. 'I can never tell,' one fan told me, 'who's having the most fun — the audience or the band?'"

Vocalist Michelle Lewis sang with The Flood for nearly 20 years before she left West Virginia. She and her new husband, Rick Hoge, now live in the Cincinnati area. "She has a standing invitation to do a guest appearance with us whenever she's back in Huntington," Bowen said. "She accepted that

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invite earlier this year when she joined us for an appearance at Sal's Speakeasy in Ashland."

Today, Bowen is the last of the original Floodsters still standing. "We lost Joe in 2015, Roger in 2016 and David in 2020. Then we lost Bill Hoke in 2022 and two more members, Chuck Romine and Doug Chaffin, this year."

But the zest of the band's original recipe is still evident in The Flood. New members come to the band with the same diverse interests as the founders, and the group is still devoted to the eclecticism that was the group's founding principal.

The line-up
Current members who play along with Bowen are:

Sam St. Clair, who came on board in 2001 as the band's harmonica player. A commercial property manager by day, Sam is a Huntington native who has traveled extensively around the world. He has tales of everywhere from Brazil to New Zealand. Sam has a degree in art, was a champion wrestler in high school, and these days helps out with coaching wrestling and also teaching in the yoga studio operated by his wife, Joan.

Randy Hamilton, who

joined in 2012, was born in Paintsville and raised in Southern Ohio. Randy had a love of music from an early age. Having seen his uncle and cousin play guitar and sing he knew that is what he wanted to do and that started him down the musical road 45 years ago. Randy plays bass guitar, acoustic guitar and also sings lead or harmony vocals. Before joining The Flood, Randy played locally with the Sheldon Road group.

Joining up in 2022, Danny Cox was born and raised in southern Ohio. Dan was not quite 13 in the spring of '72 when his dad bought a guitar from a nephew for \$3, brought it home and, with a big grin, handed it to his son. "I hadn't asked for or shown any interest in learning to play guitar," Danny recalls. "Mom taught me D, G, and A7 to accompany the 'Great Speckled Bird.' It was a beginning." Danny played in several bands over the years as he traveled around the country as a field service engineer. After he retired, he moved back to the Tri-State Area in 2019 and married his 7th grade girlfriend.

Jack Nuckols joined this year after jamming with the group on assorted percussion instruments, from bongos and spoons to cool brushes on snare and hi-hat. Bowen and Nuckols have been friends for 60 years, having met in a high

school speech class in Ashland in 1963. A retired high school history teacher, he now teaches as an adjunct professor. He also was recently re-elected as a long-time member of the South Point, Ohio, school board.

Bowen notes: "Although she never takes the stage, my wife Pamela is a key member. She's our business manager, photographer and videographer and generally keeps us in line."

The band did its first CD in 2001 and have done a half dozen more in the years since.

"Lately," says Bowen, "we've been performing monthly at a wonderful Ashland venue called Sal's Speakeasy. The decor makes it look for all the world like a 1920s speakeasy."

Meanwhile, the band has offered free weekly podcasts since 2008. Podcast subscribers receive a new tune each week, usually something taken right from a recent rehearsal. And the podcasts have formed the basis for one of the group's most ambitious projects to date. Radio Floodango is a free music streaming series, built on a continuous randomly generated playlist of tunes automatically selected from some 700 released in the podcasts over the past dozen years or so.

For more information on The 1937 Flood band, visit www.1937Flood.com.