

Band Floods Listeners For More Than 40 Years

By TIFFNEY HENSON
For The State Journal

It begins with a tapping of the toe. Then it moves up. Maybe your hand slaps your knee. Before you know it, you're clapping your hands and bobbing your head. It's not bluegrass. It's not newgrass. It's not folk.

No, it is none of those. It just happens to be true Appalachian music that cannot be categorized.

Meet The 1937 Flood, a band in a category all its own. Charlie Bowen, guitar player and band leader, says the group calls itself 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 recorded in the 1900s," Bowen said. "The idea was that the string band would come to the party and try to play whatever anybody asked for, whether it was a traditional fiddle tune, an old blues, an Appalachian ballad or some new Tin Pan Alley tune someone had just heard on the radio.

"I like to think we do the same thing."

The Flood has been nourishing listeners' souls for more than 40 years. When the group first played in the 1970s, it didn't even have a name. But like the real 1937 flood

in Huntington, which is still talked about to this day, the band took the correlation the same way.

The sounds the band creates might best be described as jubilant. The combination of talented musicians and quirky instruments such as the kazoo and autoharp join perfectly with a guitar, banjo, violin, bass, harmonica or any other instrument which happens to join the gig. The experience leaves music notes dancing inside one's body long after they are finished playing (and I only watched the YouTube videos). The variety of styles and sounds are like a buffet for hungry ears.

"I think that's the answer to why people like to listen to The Flood," Bowen said. "If you don't like the tune we're playing right now, wait for the next one. It's bound to be



Photo courtesy of Charlie Bowen

The 1937 Flood fills the stage during a live performance.

different by about 180 degrees."

The Flood is still together, making its relationship as a band longer than that of the Beatles, The Kinks and even The Everly Brothers. Bowen said always being open to trying new things is the secret of the band's longevity.

"The bottom line is that we try to hold on to things we've learned and stay open to always learning new things," he said.

But along with the crescendo of being together, there also must be something diminishing.

"It's difficult sometimes for us to remember to pace ourselves," Bowen said. "The only downside to being around for 40-plus years is that we're old guys."

Despite the soulful, almost youthful energy emanating from the tips of their fingers to listeners' ears, Bowen said half the band members are now older than 70.

"Joe, our fiddler, will be 80 in August," Bowen said. "Joe is so good — something of a legend among West Virginia fiddlers — there's a temptation to just turn Joe loose and let him play an entire gig by himself, but that wouldn't be fair to Joe, nor the rest of the band."

In the same way notes are put together to arrange any of the band's songs, the musicians who come and go each play a special role for the band's veteran players. Along with Bowen and The Flood's other founders, David Peyton and Joe Dobbs, the band has seen many other people bring something new to the group.

"When Chuck Romine played with us for six years, he brought a rollicking tenor banjo sound, reminiscent of the great old Dixieland sound that was in Chuck's background," Bowen said. "And during that period, we borrowed heavily from the traditional jazz standards of the 1920s and 1930s, many of which we still play."

The Flood's fifth and newest album, "Cleanup and Recovery," is available for purchase on its website 1937flood.com as well as at The Red Caboose Regional Artisan Center in Huntington.



Photo courtesy of Charlie Bowen

Current Members of the band, from left: Doug Chaffin, Charles Bowen, David Peyton, Michelle Walker, Randy Hamilton, Sam St. Clair and Joe Dobbs.