

# THE 1937



# FLOOD

West Virginia's most eclectic string band celebrates nearly 50 years of music and memories.

By James E. Casto

The 1937 Flood — the band, not the natural disaster — has been entertaining enthusiastic local audiences for nearly 50 years, playing everything from the blues of Mississippi John Hurt to American songbook standards like “Fly Me to the Moon.”

Charlie Bowen, guitar player and band leader, said the group describes 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 new 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, both Bowen and his wife Pamela worked at Huntington’s two newspapers — *The Herald-Dispatch* and the now-defunct afternoon paper *The Advertiser*.

In the early 1970s, Bowen, Roger Samples and Dave Peyton, who worked alongside the Bowens at the newspapers, began regularly getting together to play music. Soon a chance encounter with legendary local fiddler Joe Dobbs turned the trio into a quartet. No doubt about it, they 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 1937 flood (uh, the real one) reached at their particular houses.

Bowen later told this story to Dobbs and Peyton. Time passed. The guys were on stage for their first gig somewhere in Kentucky and 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 talkin’ about us!”

The name stuck.

In the band’s long history, dozens of musicians have been members of The 1937 Flood, each adding something to the group’s sound.

“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.”

Former members no longer actively involved in the band include Romine, Dave Ball, Jacob Scarr, Stewart Schneider and Bill Hoke.

Two of the group’s founding members have passed on; Joe Dobbs died in 2015 and Roger Samples in 2016. After a fall and subsequent surgery in 2016, Dave Peyton can no longer play his Autoharp with the group.

But the group plays on. Today’s members include Bowen, Doug Chaffin, Sam St. Clair, Randy Hamilton, Michelle Lewis and Paul Martin.

Over the years, the group has issued half a dozen CDs of its music. One recent CD, “Live, In Concert,” was its first ever live album.

“In many ways, the album was a dream of ours for years,” Bowen said. “In fact, Joe Dobbs would have loved the fact that we finally have a live CD. It was our late fiddlin’ friend’s favorite comment that the band always sounded better at parties and concerts than it did in rehearsals and in studios. ‘It helps that everybody’s a ham,’ Joe would say with a grin.”

The band has performed far and wide. It’s picked with West Virginia’s fiddling senator, the late Robert C. Byrd, played with the Huntington Symphony Orchestra and entertained football fans at Marshall University tailgate gatherings.

Since 2017, The 1937 Flood has been the house band at “Route 60 Saturday Night,” a monthly 90-minute musical variety show at Route 60 Music in Barboursville.

“The band is like family to me,” Bowen said. “We have a different plan than a lot of bands. Our whole idea was to play the music and enjoy it. I always leave it to the other members of the group whether we get out and play in public or not. I’m all for just getting together and learning how to play the songs. If we spend the whole year sitting in a room together playing music, I am happy. If we get out and do shows, that is fine, too. It is really all about the music and all about the friendship we have between us.”

For more information on The 1937 Flood band, visit [www.1937flood.com](http://www.1937flood.com).

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