

Band's mission: To get everyone dancing 'and rock the crap out of them'

BY PAUL LUKE, THE PROVINCE AUGUST 17, 2014



Famous Players Band leader Kelly Becker (centre with blond hair) is surrounded by band members Tilden Webb, left, Ed Laslo (red guitar) singers Gina Hetland, Ainee Sulz and Stephanie Standerwick, drummer Ainee Sulz, Issah Contactor (sitting to left of Becker) and Michael Shannon (guitar).

Photograph by: Mark van Manen , Province

Your daughter's getting married and has been hinting she'd like to hire a high-profile rock band for her blessed day.

Luckily, you've salted away a few bucks over the years. Enough that you can even fantasize hiring a classic rock group like Journey, or Cheap Trick, depending on the price tag.

But there's a problem that has nothing to do with these bands' fees.

Quite a few of the older guests may be indifferent to Journey, at best. The youngest may know only one or two Journey songs. The dance floor could wind up disastrously empty.

Vancouver bassist Kelly -Becker has a solution to the problem of age groups' clashing musical tastes. For a tiny fraction of a fading rock act's price, you could hire his outfit, Famous Players Band, to play the wedding. Famous Players can play a ridiculous number of classic rock songs from the 1960s and '70s. They can also perform current Top 40 hits from every musical genre.

The Vancouver group, which has a staggering repertoire of more than 3,000 tunes, plays weddings and corporate bashes around the globe.

Playing no original material, they are content to be miraculously multi-faceted clones. Those who have heard the chameleonic band say Famous Players can do ABBA or Iggy Azalea better than ABBA or Azalea.

'YOU SOUND EXACTLY LIKE THEM'

"We're not Journey," says Doron Bell, one of the band's lead singers. "But we've never done a gig where the reaction wasn't like, 'Oh my gosh, you guys sound exactly like them.'"

They may never be as famous as The Guess Who, as seductive as Leonard Cohen or as maniacally worshipped as The Tragically Hip — they're a dance-and-covers band, after all.

But in the world of wedding and corporate-party planning, Famous Players has become one of B.C.'s, if not Canada's, most coveted bands for hire. In the past year, they've been flown to Beijing, Barcelona, New York and Maui to play at private events.

Many musicians write songs to change how listeners see the world. Famous Players Band wants only to change how people move their -bottoms.

"This is a weird little niche of an industry, but there's a demand for high-quality entertainment," says Becker, the group's founder and boss.

"We have one mission: To get everybody on the dance floor and rock the crap out of them."

ANYWHERE FROM SIX TO 14 PLAYERS

The band, which started in 1999, is well prepared to execute that mission. Depending on the event and a client's budget, the group expands from a six-person core to as many as 14 players. It can even add a dance team.

Famous Players packs four to five lead singers onstage during the up to 16 appearances it makes a month.

If an opening for the band comes up — and it's such a good gig that turnover is low — Becker recruits instrumentalists and singers from the Vancouver area.

“The roles have become -pretty refined over the years,” says Becker. “I know exactly what we're looking for and just -cherry-pick the best person to fill the role.

“Some of the best musicians in this city are in this band, have been in this band, sub in this band.”

If they pass the audition, new band members start learning the massive repertoire.

So adept are the musicians and so quick-changing the band's repertoire that new material may not always get rehearsed. Becker sometimes assigns his players homework to learn a few songs, which may be played for the first time during a sound check.

'VERY MUCH A PERFECTIONIST'

Band members are expected to deliver immaculate recreations of others' recordings but with a live urgency that gives them an edge over original studio versions.

“Kelly is very much a perfectionist, which is what you have to be as a top entertainer,” says Stacey McKitrick, an Abbotsford country artist who sang with Famous Players from 2005 to 2010. “If there's a medley, he wants you to stick to exactly the way it's set up.”

Becker's attention to detail has earned the band the trust of private event specialists.

Planner Soha Lavin, owner of Vancouver-based Countdown Events, has been working with Famous Players for eight years. She books the band for weddings, galas, charity functions and corporate events.

Famous Players blends sophistication with power, superb musicianship with “crazy, crazy, crazy -energy,” Lavin says.

But what really sets them apart is their knack for reading a crowd, Lavin says. Other bands may simply impose a repertoire of oldies or Top 40 hits, but Famous Players' set is shaped by listeners' responses, she adds.

Countdown's high-end clients are discerning but Famous Players has never disappointed, Lavin says.

NOT CHEAP, BUT 'WORTH EVERY PENNY'

She won't disclose how much Famous Players charges.

“They're not the most expensive and they're not cheap. But they're worth every penny,” Lavin says.

“People are always saying to me, ‘I'm so happy we hired them.’”

The hundreds of companies that have hired them range from Emirates Airlines to Telus to the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Set lists vary from show to show, depending on the wishes of party planners and the collective personality of clients.

“One day we will be playing for real estate agents in Fort McMurray and the next day it's an international group of scientists,” Becker says.

“Or a collection of pool-supply salespeople that invite us to follow them around the world for their sales rewards events, year after year.”

The toughest shows are those in the afternoon.

“People feel self-conscious about dancing in the light of day,” he says.

“That being said, we have a show that is high energy and -professional. People always tell us they've enjoyed themselves, even if nobody -dances.”

'IT'S A PRETTY NICE LIFE'

Becker declines to discuss how much he pays band members, but McKitrick describes him as fair and honest. Unlike musicians in young and struggling bands, Famous Players members are spared the trials of cramped and stinky tour buses. Nor must they fight to earn a living after signing oppressive contracts with record companies, -Becker says.

“When we travel, we travel in style. We stay in very nice hotels. We eat fabulously. And we get to play music. It's a pretty nice life.”

Becker, who graduated from a two-year music program at Capilano University, initially made his name as “an old-school funk bassist.”

Famous Players was created in 1999, when a nightclub owner asked Becker to put together a house band for the then Plaza nightclub on Granville Street, now dubbed Venue. The band’s name came from the Plaza’s former role as a movie theatre operated by Famous Players Ltd.

The group moved from nightclub work to the private-event business, though it continues to play a few public shows.

Becker’s insistence that the band be able to ride a rainbow of genres may take his musicians way outside their comfort zones.

Before he joined the band six years ago, Bell — who also acts for television and does voice-over animation work — didn’t know Bon Jovi’s music and wouldn’t have been caught dead listening to ABBA.

EXPANDS THE MUSICIANS' RANGE

“Now, I really appreciate ABBA,” he says. “And when I do backup for Bon Jovi songs I’m singing my heart out.”

McKitrick, who now sings with country duo Austin Belle, says her years with Famous Players forced her to become a better vocalist. When a singer has his or her own backup band, they can have the band sing in a key that better suits their voice, she says. A large covers band can’t necessarily make that accommodation.

“As a singer, it’s absolutely essential to be able to extend your range,” she says. “You gain better control of your voice and can stretch to sing in different genres.”

Cover bands are sometimes stereotyped as second-rate players who can’t cut it playing original music. But musicians know better, Becker and McKitrick say.

“The Top 40 bands that you hear playing the bars — they’re the ones that are super-talented. They have to do a little bit of every genre,” McKitrick says. “Those of us that do our own records can stick to the genres that suit us best.”

Becker says he has toyed with the idea of making original records as a band. After all, group members have other jobs in music, most of them playing their own original material.

The bassist even owns and operates a commercial recording studio in his Vancouver home, where original songs could be laid down.

But he wonders whether the stable chemistry the band has found playing others’ music might turn into a volatile brew creating their own.

“We’ve never done it mainly because we’re all so unique individually. It could be kind of a mishmash of styles.”

'THROWING CURVEBALLS'

Famous Players Band has amassed a repertoire of more than 3,000 songs spanning six decades.

The private-events band commands a musical universe stretching from jazz swing to AC/DC to hip-hop to the latest confection of Iggy Azalea or Ed Sheeran.

They are constantly learning new songs, from crowd-pleasers to smouldering obscurities.

Some tunes do get played more than others. Over the last decade, the most popular song in the band’s arsenal has proven to be Don’t Stop Believin’ by Journey.

“It’s a great song,” says bandleader Kelly Becker. “People love it. Younger and older generations bond with it.”

Michael Jackson songs are pretty much guaranteed to coax fence-sitters onto the dance floor, Becker says.

With so many songs at its disposal, the band quickly adjusts to the tastes and mood of audiences.

“Most of the time we pick winners,” Becker says. “Sometimes, the crowd surprises us and it’s like a mass exodus to the bar on a song we all really liked.”

Hits are essential but performing unexpected songs makes gatherings memorable, he says. Famous Players will unearth songs such as Jump Around by House of Pain.

“People lose their nut when you play an obscure song by a band they haven’t heard in a while,” Becker says. “You have to throw curveballs to keep things fresh and the energy level high.”

Interactions with audiences can be hilarious. In Barcelona last October, the stage was swarmed by dozens of kids when the band sang Treasure by Bruno Mars.

“Once the song was over, none of them wanted to leave. It took another four tunes to remove all the little rockers from the stage,” Becker says.

When a party gets rolling, people often find the courage to ask to sing with the band. This is generally a bad idea as singing with a live band is different than warbling along to the car radio, Becker says.

At a recent event, an otherwise quiet guy in a suit jumped on stage during the Katy Perry tune Dark Horse, and begged to do the Juicy J rap section. Becker had misgivings but assented. The guy gave a brilliant performance.

“We were all floored by him. That’s always fun.”