

Being fired led to new success

By JIM WINDELL



Orange Lake Drive band members are (from left) Kenny Burch, Ross Pooley, Laura Thompson, Andy Combs and Steven Schuetz.

The road to good music and commercial success is rocky and unpredictable. If Andy Combs had not been fired as a drummer from a band 3½ years ago, Orange Lake Drive might not be a reality.

Combs still speaks uncomfortably about his expulsion from a black band. "Me and Cliff Gracy had just faced this heartache of being fired," said Combs, 22, of Waterford. "But we both knew what we wanted to do was play music."

His family owned a musical instruments store, Pontiac Music and Sound, in Keego Harbor. Combs knew many local musicians and had picked a few musicians who had come into the store to form the new group. The band practiced at Gracy's house near Lahser High School on Orange Lake Drive.

"WE SPENT SO much time on that street, we decided to call the new band Orange Lake Drive," Combs said. Now, whenever the band plays, a weather-beaten metal sign appropriated under curious circumstances by the founder rests in a prominent place in front of the bandstand.

The band, three years and various personnel changes later, is looking and sounding better. Gracy has left to form a new group, but Combs has steadily accumulated a quintet of musicians who have been able to produce the kind of music he always envisioned.

"We wanted to be original and different, and have our own unique sound," Combs said. "Our idea was to play some of the local clubs that are just for listening and not be a dance band."

Orange Lake Drive, in its current metamorphosis, has surprised itself with recent success. In addition to Combs on drums, Kenny Burch plays electric bass, Steven Schuetz plays electric keyboard and synthesizer, Ross Pooley handles flute and saxophones and Laura Thompson sings and plays another keyboard.

MS. THOMPSON, a Birmingham resident, has been with the band only four months. Her replacement for a guitar player and singer is perceived as a fortuitous move by the band. For several years, Ms. Thompson worked as a single, singing and playing piano.

"I've been surprised how well we play together and as a result some incredible things have been happening to us lately," she said.

Those incredible things include a 20-episode tour of the college circuit, which just ended, and concert appear-

ances opening up for nationally known acts.

Exposure on the college circuit, a first for Orange Lake Drive, has been very encouraging, as well as profitable. "We've found that we are usually different from other bands playing colleges," Combs said. "We're contemporary and we fit into the jazz-rock thing. That's what's happening now."

Among the bands they have opened for in the Detroit area have been the Crusaders, Ramsey Lewis and Noel Pointer.

One of their regular local clubs is the Wagon Wheel Saloon in Troy. On Jan. 9, they opened a return engagement which will run nightly until Sunday Jan. 20. The Saloon, a rustic barnwood restaurant and lounge with a Victorian atmosphere, was the site of Orange Lake Drive's premiere as a band.

BEFORE THE OPENING performance last week, various members of the band sat around in front of the bandstand trying to explain their music.

"We're trying to do what other local

bands also try: to blend a commercial Top 40 sound with jazz," said Schuetz, also arranger and composer. "We play fusion music but not on each song. We use rock and jazz but hope it works separately as well as a whole."

If that's not clear, it points to the difficulty musicians have in describing their own music. The music during their opening night performance emphasized a jazz influence. Schuetz's compositions provide an excellent framework for the solos from the flute and saxes of Pooley. He grew up in a musical family and his taste for solos is obvious.

Ms. Thompson sings animated and expressive vocals in a strong voice that conjures images of Phoebe Snow and even Janis Joplin at times. The music of the band has cross-over appeal heightened with an unusual sound produced by the two pianos and absence of a guitar.

Pooley's flute contributes a softer sound on some tunes, and unlike some fusion groups, Orange Lake Drive is not overbearingly amplified. There is

never a blur of sounds. Solos are important, and so is a sensitive, emotional communication with the audience.

SCHUETZ ADMITS he had some concern about the music's evolution in the last couple of years.

"I wasn't sure if people would listen to two styles of music, jazz and rock. On some songs we do pop tune and then we come back with something very contemporary. But people are changing and waking up, they are listening to music as music and not always classifying it."

That's important for a band like Orange Lake Drive that tends to defy a strict classification, and it may be a good sign for the future of the live music business.

For people who love a contemporary blend of rock and jazz, although not necessarily in each song the band plays, Orange Lake Drive is itself a good sign.

The group plays nightly from 9:30 at the Wagon Wheel Saloon, Rochester Road at Big Beaver.

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