

First Night fest planners pin hopes on good weather

BY GREG KOWALSKI
STAFF WRITER

The midnight culmination of the First Night/Birmingham New Year's celebration in and around downtown Birmingham promises to be a colorful, musical event featuring a Chinese dragon, lights and showy pyrotechnics.

Provided it doesn't rain. Usually, event planners worry about cold and snow this time of year, but all this week the big fear has been rain. Should it rain, the pyrotechnic circuits won't work and the delicate silk Chinese dragon won't be let loose to prowling among the crowds.

A lot of people are expected, said event producer Jill Riddle. "We're expecting 10,000 to 12,000 people," said Riddle. "It could top last year's 10,000 attendance."

"We're getting 400 to 600 calls a day from people asking for information about First Night," Riddle added. "They want to know where it's at, and we explain that it's held in 11 locations throughout the city."

The alcohol-free celebration of the arts goes from 4 p.m. to midnight and is designed to be a family-oriented alternative to typical New Year's Eve parties.

The \$7 entrance buttons allow access to a wide variety of entertainment, ranging from puppet shows for the kids to performances by noted flutist Alexander Zornig and singer Ortheia Barnes. Among the other entertainers will be the singers Ron Caden and Josh White Jr., the KJB Blues Band, the White Heather Highlanders Pipe and Drum Corps, the Bugs Bedlow Band, the folk and bluegrass group Footloose, the Langford Singers and even Merlin the Magician.

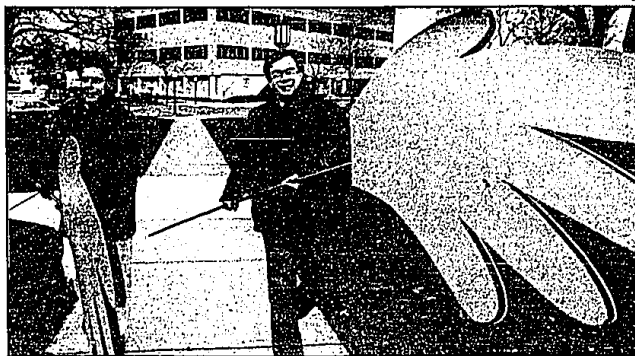
The band The Brothers From Another Planet will play dance



and First Presbyterian Church.

Because parking may be limited, four shuttle bus routes have been set up from downtown to all event sites. Event listings and performance schedules are detailed in a flier given to people when they buy the buttons. Additional copies will be available throughout the city during the event.

Also new to this year's festival is an expanded menu including pizza, chicken and salads at Seaholm High School; soups, beverages and desserts at First Baptist Church; beverages and light snacks at the First Presbyterian Church; pizza and hamburgers at the YMCA; the Ice Arena will have its usual offering of hamburgers, hot dogs, French fries and chicken sandwiches.



STEPHEN CANTRELL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Big hands: Artist Robert Dempster (left) and Christopher Scheive prepare to set up two of the 22 sculptures of hands designed by Dempster, which will be on display in Shain Park during the First Night celebration. Entitled "Mother Earth Applauds the Arts," Dempster said the hands will sway in the wind, as though they were clapping.

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