

STREET SCENE

After 20 years, Sun Messengers finally cut an album

BY CHRISTINA FUOCO
STAFF WRITER

During the last 20 years, The Sun Messengers have provided a soundtrack to nightclubs, bars, the Detroit Music Awards, wedding parties and Detroit Pistons games.

Now the R&B band wants its music to echo throughout the homes of its fans. After two decades in the business, The Sun Messengers have released its debut CD "Late Night Cruise."

"People don't know us as a recording act. We've been primarily known as a live act. Our place in Detroit music history has been established, but we're hoping to lengthen our legacy," said Rick Steiger, the band's leader, who plays the baritone and alto saxophones.

The Sun Messengers' material has appeared on compilations, two singles, a cassette and a four-song 12-inch EP. The band never put out a full-length recording simply because it didn't have time.

"Actually four of the tracks were recorded in February of 1996. Then there were two factors — after about May we get really busy plus we believe in rapid-testing the material. We don't just put it together and record it. We have to develop and



Serenading The Palace: The Sun Messengers — from left, Tippi Hayes, William Elijah, Terry Thunder, Russ Miller, Dan Mayer, John "T-Bone" Paxton, Arthur "Speck" Colden and Rick Steiger.

play the material for awhile."

"Late Night Cruise" features a mix of original and cover tunes including the Count Basie-inspired "Splanky," and a reworked version of Teddy Pendergrass's "I Can't Leave You Love Alone." The eight-piece band

honors Motown with "Imaginary Heaven," a melody of The Temptations' "Just My Imagination," written by Southfield resident Barrett Strong and his partner Norman Whitfield, and "Heaven" by the group Solo. The title track, penned by keyboardist

Arthur "Speck" Colden and Valerio McCullers, infuses funk and jazz.

The Sun Messengers is one of the few bands in the area who isn't struggling to get its music heard. From high atop The Palace of Auburn Hills, The Sun Messengers serenade Pistons fans with original and cover songs.

"Playing in front of 20,000 people a night adds to the name recognition. It really helps. It's the final piece in a puzzle," Steiger said.

"It's part of a great thing. This is the prime time for basketball but a slow time for the band business."

As a tribute to the 1986-87 Detroit Pistons, band member William Elijah, trumpeter/vocalist, wrote "Who's Got Da Skills?" a bonus track on the 14-song CD, available at The Palace Locker Room store at the arena.

William Elijah knocked it right out. He said, "OK, you do this. You do that" and boom, he wrote the words right at the game. Now that they're (The Pistons) playing better again it'll give us more inspiration to write songs. There's been a lot of frustrating losses," Steiger said.

This is the third season that The Sun Messengers has served as "the official band of the Detroit Pistons." The Harper Woods-based band was hired after Palace Sports and Entertainment executives saw The Sun Messengers' performances.

Over the years we had seen them playing at various spots in the metropolitan Detroit area and always thought that they displayed a fun style and atmosphere. (But it's) not only that. They're a quality group of musicians. They were just what we were looking for," said Peter Skorch, vice president of broadcast-

ing and multi-media for Palace Sports and Entertainment.

The organization wasn't looking for a "house band" but created the position for The Sun Messengers. Having the band play at Pistons and selected Detroit Vipers home games, hearkens back to the days when stadiums and arenas provided live music during sporting events.

"It's a live sporting event, a lot of the live entertainment has been extracted from the game. Everybody used to have an organ player, now it's all canned music. There's nothing wrong with canned music but after you play 40-50 games in a season and your fans are only identifying with the same 15 songs all year, then that's when you add a live element like The Sun Messengers and make it more a diverse entertainment event," Skorch explained.

The eight-member group — which also includes Terry Thunder (drums and vocals), Tippi Hayes (bass), Russ Miller (sax), John "T-Bone" Paxton (trombone and vocals) and Dan Mayer (guitar) — plays throughout the game.

"We play a half hour before the game, and then we play a lead-in to time-outs, and then we play in and out of time-outs and some-

times through the whole time-outs, and then one song at the end of the game," he said.

For Steiger it's a dream come true.

"I'm a big basketball fan. I've seen a lot of good basketball."

Although it has taken 20 years for The Sun Messengers to put out its first CD, it's going to take a lot less than that for the next CD to come out. A follow-up will be in stores this year as a way of celebrating The Sun Messengers' 20th anniversary.

"We took the month of January off from rehearsing. We're back into rehearsals and now we're sort of deciding and choosing the songs. You can imagine a band that's been around as long as us, we have quite a few songs," he said.

"I'm dead set on creating a presence for the band as a recording act. Even if it's just locally."

The Sun Messengers performs at home Detroit Pistons games at The Palace of Auburn Hills, 2 Championship Dr. (I-75 and Lapeer Road), Auburn Hills. Tickets are \$15-\$25. For more information, call (248) 377-0100 or visit <http://www.palacetickets.com> or <http://www.rust.net/~steiger/sunmess.htm>

American Mars aim is to make the world go away



CHRISTINA FUOCO

brightly run across ticker-tape screens.

At its shows, the goal of the Dearborn-based etheral pop band American Mars is to make it all go away.

"We want to make all of those

kinds of things disappear when people come to see us," said singer/guitarist Thomas Trimble, formerly of the minimalist duo Breech with Missy Gibson.

To accomplish that, American Mars surrounds its audience with its landscape of cinematic tales, Bauhaus-like dark guitars and Trimble's lush vocals.

"We're a little bit more visual than a typical rock band. We're not super loud. We're not a 'big scissor-kick rock group.' We're like the British trip-hop act Portishead. Their songs sound like soundtrack stuff. We want our music to play like a soundtrack," Trimble said.

American Mars released its

"soundtrack," its debut album "American Mars," in October 1997. Recorded at the Tempermill in Ferndale with Dave Feeny on Feb. 14, 1997, the CD was not an easy task.

"We did it by ourselves. There was some excitement balanced with a healthy amount of dread. We had never done it before. It really was a learning experience," Trimble said.

The band — which included Trimble, bassist/vocalist/guitarist Karl K. Richardson, guitarist Brad Richards and drummer Dave Lentz at the time — told Feeny how much money it could spend and took it from there. Although American Mars

had to work within financial constraints, the band "did everything the way we wanted to do it."

Trimble's lyrics are miniature movies in their own right. The musically haunting "Hourglass" describes the anxiety prior to the end of a relationship ("You ask your lover to tell you that you're through/You wait around for something you can lose"). "Crush," a raucous duet between Trimble and Richardson, shares the excitement of infatuation: "Is she illusion? — or sheer perfection? light of day — or dark confession? the honey sweeter — the stinger neater."

A late-starting musician, Trim-

ble has only written songs since 1987 when he was in his late teens.

"I tried to teach myself the guitar three or four times, but I just gave up. It seemed like a pretty cool stance to take — 'rock guy' said Trimble who has since learned to play the instrument.

In some circles the description "pop music" is considered an insult. But American Mars — which now includes guitarist Gary Watts, formerly of Scotti Fab and Crossed Wire, drummer Lentz and Trimble — considers it a compliment.

"It's pop with a twist. Pop's a lot more interesting than rock," Trimble said.

Lentz added, "It's a lot more inventive lately."

Trimble said "at the end of the day" there's no need to worry about labels.

"I don't think we behold to any idea like indie authenticity. We're not concerned about people questioning our credibility."

The band will soon embark on its second tour of the Midwest and the south this spring, and its first visit to Europe in the fall. Watts, who joined American

Mars last fall, explained that the highlights of the first tour for him were when the band was able to connect with the audience.

"When you can overcome complete strangers and make them forget about everything else in the room (that's satisfying). I love that connection."

American Mars plays following Jim Carroll's spoken-word performance at 9 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 21, at the Magic Stick in the Majestic complex, 4140 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Tickets are \$12.50 in advance for the 18 and older show. For more information, call (313) 833-POOL or (248) 645-6666. "American Mars" is available in independent record and Harmony House stores, through the band's website — <http://www.americanmars.com>

If you have a question or comment for Christina Fuoco write her at The Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft Road, Livonia, Mich., 48150, or via e-mail at cfuoco@aol.com, or leave a message at (734) 953-2045, ext. 2130.

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ANN DELUSI

Public Television, we're going to bring you a bunch of plays by the Bard himself.

How to fit an entire Shakespeare play into a half hour? Enter "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)" by the Reduced Shakespeare Company. The show's a fund-raiser for the Hilberry Theatre, so I called Wayne State's Blair Anderson for the scoop. "They did this play

last year, and I completely adored it. They do everything! The second act is Hamlet, first in double time, then in triple time, and then they do it backwards." Does Shakespeare lend itself to comedy? "All three actors play various roles. Classically you had men playing women's roles, and in camp you have the same thing..."

Blair made special note of the actors involved. "There's something special that all three of these great students — Karl Kipola, David Engelman and Bret Tuomi — know the classics very well. So the material speaks to theater-goers but is also funny for neophytes. They play it on many levels. They're the creme de la creme of the department. And they did this in their free time for the love of it, for the joy of theater if you will."

Next we take a look at a six-

week happening in Ann Arbor that explores surrealism, the Exquisite Corpse. I asked *Backstage Pass* producer Katherine Weider to explain. "The exquisite corpse was a name invented by the surrealists around the turn of the century. They played it in cafes and parlors, and it can be a literary game, or a visual game."

"Visually what you do is get a piece of paper. One person does the head and you cover most of it up, leaving a little bit showing at the bottom so there's some kind of connection. The next person does the torso, and you cover it up in the same way. The last person does the legs, then you uncover it all and see what you've got. And these terms are loose, so you wind up with odd things — a banana for a head, a

rooster's body, webbed feet, whatever. The media can also vary, so you have part collage, part drawing and so on."

So what can people expect in Ann Arbor? "Sharon Curry organized 60 or 70 artists to participate in this exquisite corpse exhibition. They either had to find collaborators or be assigned them, and they had about six months to get together to do these games on a large scale. The exhibit at the Ann Arbor Art Center is the result of these games, and it is really the heart of the festival."

Also on the big show, singer-songwriter Edwin McCain. That's all on *Backstage Pass* tonight on Detroit Public Television at midnight, repeated Friday at 7:30 p.m.

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