

SAX OBSESSION

A Section Takes on a Life of Its Own

BY JESSICA NOVAK

■ Lyn Behnke, 50, has been playing saxophone since high school and nearly took up music as a profession. "It was between being a nurse practitioner and a band director, and the night before auditions, my sister broke my middle finger," Behnke says. "So I didn't get to play for a scholarship. But I never really left it."

Behnke is now a member of The Atomic Guppies, a five-piece sax ensemble from Tawas City, Michigan. The group began as an off-shoot of a 17-piece big band, Soundwaves Jazz Orchestra, which took on a life of its own during a sax sectional rehearsal.

Behnke and fellow members Jim Sapp, 65; Sharon Huitema, 67; Jake Huitema, 63; and Anissa Emery, "the puppy" at 40; decided to model themselves after The Nuclear Whales, a six-piece, professional sax group featuring saxophones ranging from the sopranino to contrabass.

"I was looking for music and The Nuclear Whales came up and we were all taken with them," says Behnke. "We just love the music that they do and we were fortunate enough to get some of their arrangements."

Today, The Atomic Guppies perform eclectic repertoire monthly at local churches and often at festivals, wine tastings, weddings, and other community events.

But, why saxophone?

"We play saxes because of the flexibility of the instrument," says Behnke. "You can make a sax sound like anything. In

some tunes, we can make the whole group sound like an accordion, or very clear and bell-like, or brassy like a marching band."

There are also many variations of saxophone to try. In the Atomic Guppies, all the saxophonists play several types, while tuba player Jake Huitema adds the lowest bass notes. Their instrumentation includes the soprano sax (in B \flat), alto (in E \flat), tenor (in B \flat) and baritone, also called bari sax, (in B \flat).

The Guppies role model, The Nuclear Whales, extend their instrumentation to include the much smaller sopranino and much larger bass and contrabass saxophones. The sopranino is in the key of E \flat and very rare. Most are straight like a clarinet and they are notably used in *Bolero*, an orchestral piece by Maurice Ravel.

The bass saxophone is pitched in B \flat and was

the first saxophone designed by creator Antoine-Joseph (Adolphe) Sax. It is used primarily for bass lines, as it was designed after the ophicleide, a large, brass, bugle-like instrument in the tuba family. The contrabass uses twice the tubing of the bari sax and is considered the largest woodwind instrument. It is also in the key of E \flat and extremely rare.

Though Behnke expressed interest in adding the monstrous contrabass, which stands six feet, eight inches tall and has a



The Atomic Guppies sax ensemble performs a mix of eclectic music. L to R: Jake Huitema; Sharon Huitema, Anissa Emery, Lyn Behnke, and Jim Sapp.



Just a few of the Atomic Guppies' instruments arranged on a Lake Huron beach near the group's hometown of Tawas City, Michigan.

17-inch diameter bell, to the Guppies sound, the instrument's expensive price-tag has prevented them so far.

"We keep an eye out on eBay," Behnke says. "I think the last price I saw was \$20,000. So it had better come with a running transmission and four tires."

The Atomic Guppies act as mentors to younger sax players, including members of the Molecular Minnows, a high school sax quartet, and the Glowing Roe, also called the Tadpoles, a quartet of 12 and 13-year-olds. The Guppies provide both groups with music and they rehearse with the Tadpoles every Sunday.

"I feel really strongly about music in the schools," says Behnke. "I'm sure music programs all over the United States are being cut, but particularly here in Michigan. So we want to do everything we can to support kids interested in playing music and we're doubly interested in kids who want to play sax."

So far, the youth groups have been successful in spurring interest in music and Behnke hopes to begin a countywide youth jazz band in the future.

Until then, the Guppies keep busy

expanding their repertoire, which includes pieces that span the genres of swing, marches, polka, and even pop music, like The Beatles.

"Of course we play, 'When I'm 64,'" says Behnke. "Because some of us are."

Though saxophone is a widely-used instrument in many genres, and with lots of well-known players, like John Coltrane, Lester Young, "Cannonball" Adderley, Charlie Parker, and more recently, Clarence Clemons of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, it can be a challenge to find the right setup. Behnke advises adult beginners to find an experienced player to help them find the right reed, mouthpiece, and horn.

After that, it's all about practice. "Once you've got the right set up, it should be easy," she says. "Sax is an easy horn to play, but difficult to play well."

JESSICA NOVAK IS A GRAD STUDENT IN ARTS JOURNALISM AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY AND LOVES THE SAXOPHONE EVEN THOUGH IT IS ONE OF THE ONLY INSTRUMENTS SHE COULD NEVER GET MORE THAN A SQUEAK OUT OF.

HISTORY

The saxophone was developed by a Belgian, Antoine-Joseph (Adolphe) Sax, born in 1814. His father was an instrument maker and Sax learned the trade as well. However, the younger Sax noticed a balance problem in ensembles, where strings were overpowered by woodwinds and woodwinds by brasses. The saxophone mixed brass and woodwind qualities to create a malleable sound to even out the ensemble.

The first saxophone appeared in 1841 and in 1844 it was revealed publicly through the Paris Industrial Exhibition. By 1845, saxophones were replacing oboes, bassoons, and French horns in military bands as Sax proved that the instrument could improve the tonal quality of the groups.

Though Sax originally developed 14 different instruments, today the most common are soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, and bass.