

Many of Flint's best bands have plenty in common

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Courtesy PhotoThe Blackjacks will perform at 8 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 14, at Churchill's Food & Spirits, 340 S. Saginaw St. in Flint.

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FOR THE FLINT JOURNAL

In the Flint music scene, there's a real sense that "everybody knows everybody" that continues into the bands themselves. A drummer fills in for another. A guitar player joins another band because he's a friend of a friend from another band. It's a very tightly knit community.

The closeness gets even closer with Metamora's The Genesee Ramblers and Flint's The Blackjacks.

The two bands share influences, genres, musical styles and members. But it's not just on a fill-in basis.

Genesee Ramblers singer/guitarist and Blackjacks drummer Mike Boyd has known Blackjacks singer/guitarist Aron McCormick since he was 15, sneaking into shows that McCormick was

playing with Wig Barn, which was heavily steeped in the blues and American roots music. The two struck up a friendship based on a love of music.



Courtesy PhotoPat Knight, left, and Mike Boyd perform with the Genesee Ramblers.

“I went to all the Wig Barn shows I could to hear music that wasn’t being played anywhere else,” Boyd said. “Sure, there were punk and metal shows, but nothing quite as interesting as what Aron was doing with Wig Barn.

“I was interested in the music, where it came from, who did it originally, that kind of thing,” Boyd said. “And Aron was the perfect teacher. He invited me over and we listened to records. After a couple hours, I was listening to music in a whole new way.”

McCormick’s collection of jazz, blues, country and western, rockabilly, swing and rock was representative of most of the music Boyd would later play in The Genesee Ramblers and as a drummer for The Blackjacks.

Pat Knight, upright bassist for both bands, tells a similar story about discovering music through McCormick, although Knight came in through the side door because he was already well versed in rockabilly.

“I had been to Europe in the early ’90s and there’s a huge rockabilly scene there,” Knight said. “It’s a real lifestyle. ... All these European kids are living like they would have in America of the 1950s. It was wild.”

After coming back from Europe, Knight had a desire to play that kind of music. He had been in punk and rock bands, playing electric bass, but he wanted to get a rockabilly band going, so he bought an upright bass and started looking for a band to join or put together.

“Pat was a huge rockabilly influence on me,” McCormick said. “I knew some of the main artists like Eddie Cochran, but he was naming off bands and people I didn’t know. It was a real education.”

When the trio gets together as The Blackjacks or when Boyd and Knight get together as The Genesee Ramblers, they share what they’ve learned with the audience.

“We play songs we dig,” Boyd said. “We don’t just play one thing or work from the same set list all the time. We’re always trying new things to see if they work.”

Knight added, “It’s a lot of fun being able to decide what we want to play, kind of on the fly. I’ve been in rockabilly bands that are strictly rockabilly and, even though the music’s great, it gets old after a while.

“When we’re playing,” Knight said, “we’re having a ball. And that connects with the audience. If we’re having a good time, then they’re having a good time.”

Along with the deep bag of covers that includes Motown, blues, rhythm-and-blues, rock and country, Boyd adds some original tunes to The Genesee Ramblers set list. He began writing songs in 2003 and, Boyd said, “after the initial explosion, it’s been a little slower and I’m still working on my craft.”

One standout original is “Rise and Shine,” which, Boyd said, “came out of the dark years.” The song tells the story of being ticked off with a girl.

“I put my frustration with the relationship into words,” Boyd said.

Preview

- What: The Genesee Ramblers
- When: 8 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 17
- Where: Calvelli’s Eatery & Spirits, 44 W. Park St., Lapeer
- Admission: Free

Also

- What: The Blackjacks with DJ Michael Absher
- When: 8 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 14
- Where: Churchill’s Food & Spirits, 340 S. Saginaw St., Flint
- Admission: Free

The English major quickly made the connection that songs are poetry with music and chord changes, so songwriting has been a natural progression. Boyd said he's got song ideas that are always in his head or notebook, just waiting to be fleshed out.

While waiting for more songwriting inspiration, Boyd said he's happy to just turn people on to new music.

“The Genesee Ramblers is kind of like a variety show,” Boyd said. “Only without the plate-spinning. I’m working on it though.”