

A Special Orchestra

Written by John Bear/News-Bulletin

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Belen resident Bryan Castleberry has been playing with the Special Orchestra since leader Gair Linhart started it in 1999.

"I have been playing guitar, drums and I sing," Castleberry said. "I've been with Gair since he was in a honky-tonk band."

"Oh gosh," Linhart said, feigning embarrassment. "Don't tell them about that."

The two met at a bar, the Little Blue

Springs Cafe, which used to sit on the road to Mountainair. Linhart played there on Friday nights. Castleberry came in with his mother one night and the rest is history.

The two arrived for their interview in a van packed with a cornucopia of musical instruments — guitars, sitars, even a custom-built cymbal on a stick contraption built in the 1960s. It's basically a broomstick fitted with a cymbal and a large piano string.

Castleberry has been focusing on the drums as of late. He uses a snare and a ride cymbal, an entire drum set being a bit too loud for the Special Orchestra's purposes.

"He's the backbone of the Special Orchestra," Linhart said.

Linhart said the Special Orchestra originated after the closure of the Los Lunas Hospital and Training School, a state facility for the developmentally disabled. Many of the center's residents remained in the area.

Linhart, who began working at the center in 1987, was a member of the educational staff and served as music and movement director for more than 200 residents. He started the orchestra soon after the facility closed in 1997.

"We saw a need to continue the music," he said.

It is a largely decentralized organization, and chapters have sprung up in Colorado, New York and elsewhere. There are no fees and no dues. The group functions on the kindness of other service organizations and, aside from a check from the National Endowment for the Arts, donations (which, by the way, are tax deductible).

The Belen chapter meets the second Friday of every month at 7 p.m. at the Belen Recreation Center, 715-B S. Main St. Linhart said not everyone can attend every meeting, so they try to make each one a special event in itself. The group played at the dedication of a Rail Runner station.

"We like people to come to rehearsals, but it's not necessary," he said.

The orchestra is a way for children and adults with disabilities to make and enjoy music. Linhart has devised a method for people who might not be able to form the complex chords on a musical instrument to play along. The orchestra uses primarily stringed instruments, which are easier to get a pleasant sound out of than, say, a trumpet or other horn.

The stringed instruments are all tuned "open," which means that just hitting the strings produces a chord, in this case a C major. Many famous musicians, including Keith Richards and Joni Mitchell, use open tuning on their guitars.

Castleberry participates in both the Special Orchestra and Special Olympics, where he plays softball, track and bowling. He recently came in second in the track event.

Orchestra and Olympics have taken him as far away as Ireland and allowed him to meet such luminaries as Muhammad Ali.

"It was cool," he said. "I just went over, smacked him on the arm and said 'get over here.'"

Though they play in the same band, Castleberry and Linhart have different influences.

Linhart, after a great deal of thought, said, in his opinion, the best vocalist during his formative years was Sam Cooke. He later admitted to liking Gilbert and Sullivan, Puccini and Bohuslav Martinu, which probably explains his desire to bring musical theater into the Special Orchestra.

Linhart is trying to get the group's dance musical, "Everything That You Feel," filmed. He was in the process of sending out a proposal to Steven Spielberg.

The group has had some short videos made about it and had a proposal rejected by documentary king Ken Burns, who is mostly known for making PBS films about Jazz, the Civil War, baseball and other topics.

The group already has a dance troupe run by Azita Creighton, who has a daughter in the orchestra.

The Special Orchestra plays many of its own numbers, but its roots are in the rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll of Linhart's youth.

Castleberry, on the other hand, is an avid fan of gangsta rap and loves rapper Warren G.

Much to Linhart's chagrin, that has affected Castelberry's alter ego, Rappin' Bryan.

"Yeah, Rappin' Bryan in the house," Castleberry said.

His alternate persona makes an appearance in the musical.

Linhart said Castleberry's taste is more than likely karmic retribution for the torture he subjected his father to when he was growing up.

"I grew up when they made good music," Linhart joked.

The Special Orchestra will hit the stage at the Valencia County Sheriff's Posse at 6:30 p.m., Thursday, May 27, for a free show.

For more information on the Special Orchestra, log onto the group's website at specialorchestra.org. Some videos by the group are available on YouTube.



Submitted photo: Members of the Special Orchestra Dance Troupe perform the group's musical, "Everything That You Feel."

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