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The Observer SARASOTA



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THURSDAY, JULY 3, 2008

GUITAR HEROES

by Heidi Kurpiela | Community Editor



Chaz Schmitz, Big Dave Schmitz, Dennis Pitsch, Dave Schmitz Jr. and Tim Schmitz

The Grateful Dad

Bone up on your classic rock, Sarasota. Dave Schmitz and his teenage sons are coming to a bar near you.

The Schmitz Brothers Band rarely convenes on the couch.

Yet at 7 p.m. on a Friday night the motley crew crammed in this living room could be any other family in any other living room. They're familiar. Snug. Happy. Comical. Even the Schmitz dog — clumsy, yellow and all tongue — could be any other dog as he paces and pounces on three-year-old Katie Schmitz.

A chubby-cheeked kid in a tie-dyed T-shirt and bright red shorts, Katie curls up in the crook of her father's arm and squeals, "Geeze Scooter," as Big Dave Schmitz shoos the dog away from his daughter.

Two couch cushions over, Chaz Schmitz, Big Dave's brother, a tall guy with a James Taylor brow line asks: "What do you say to a drummer in a three-piece suit?" And next to him Dennis Pitsch, a pony-tailed native of Rock Island, Iowa, croaks: "Defendant will you please rise?"

Lara Schmitz, Katie's mom, sighs and stands. Scooter, she says, has got to go outside.

Big Dave laughs, runs a hand through his mop of ruddy hair and asks: "How can you tell if your stage is straight?"

But the commotion is so loud that even if you had paid attention you wouldn't have heard the punch line



"We could get a lot tighter," says Tim. "We take a lot of artistic liberties. Sometimes we have moments of brilliance, sometimes we have train wrecks."

— that if the stage is straight your drummer will drool out of both sides of his mouth.

If the Partridges could jam

Less hokey than the Osmonds, less disciplined than the Von Trapps, less white bread than the Bradys, the Schmitz Brothers Band pays tribute to Woodstock-era musicians — Bob Dylan, Neil Young, David Crosby, The Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin and Woody Guthrie-type rockers.

Maybe you've heard the Schmitz Brothers play J.R.'s Old Packinghouse on Cattlemen Road or at downtown Sarasota's The Bungalow and Shamrock Pub. Heck, last week it even played Bennigan's Bar & Tavern next door to Michael's on East.

The band's grassroots popularity is spreading.

Big Dave, 47, is the patriarch of the band — a guitarist whose first gig was a 1977 graduation party on

HEAR THEM PLAY

The Schmitz Brothers Band will play **The Shamrock Pub**, 2257 Ringling Blvd., Sarasota from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Friday, July 4. and **The Bungalow**, 301 S. Pineapple Ave., Sarasota from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 2. They'll be back at The Shamrock Pub from 8 p.m. to midnight Friday, Aug. 8. For information, call 952-9484 or visit www.schmitzbrothers.com

the Jersey shore. Pitsch, 51, is the drummer. Chaz, 48, plays bass and drums on an as-needed basis. Big Dave's 19-year-old twin sons, Tim and Dave Jr., are the undeniable front men. Tim is the lead singer and plays guitar. Dave Jr. plays bass. And then there's Katie, Big Dave's preschool-age daughter, who in the words of her father, already rocks a mean violin.

"Timmy really leads the band," says Chaz. "He's one of those really quiet, reserved kids who gets really into it when he's playing."

"Back when the boys were 14 they

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weren't virtuosos, but neither was I," says Big Dave, who lives off Bahia Vista Street. "Now they've become these monster players; these virtuosos, and I'm still not there yet."

For identical twins, Tim and Dave look drastically different.

Dave is cleaner cut, a pre-med student at Ithaca College in Upstate New York with shaggy bangs and a bubbly girlfriend named Caroline who baby sits Caroline on weekends. His goal is to be a surgeon.

Tim, dressed in flannel, has longer hair and chest hair and mustachioed. He is also a sophomore at Ithaca College, but hasn't declared a major yet. More Eddie Vedder than John Mayer.

Both boys started playing violin at Siesta Key's Out-of-Door-Academy when they were 6 years old. They studied under ODA's Linda Vasalaki, a member of The Florida West Coast Symphony, and in third grade they moved on to the cello and viola.

They burned though instruments like some kids burn through toys. By fifth grade, they were stringing classical German waltzes. By seventh grade, they were jamming with their father in the garage.

In 2001, they joined their father on bass

and guitar for an open mic night at Churchill's Pub on Osprey Avenue.

"It was a little bit weird," says young Dave. "Most of the places we played were pubs. By the time we were 16 our friends were like, 'How cool is it you can play the Five O'clock Club?' Still, it was kind of an odd position to be in."

"When they were old enough to talk they were singing into their dad's mic," says the boys' mom Kathy Schmitz. "Our house was always a very musical environment. I guess I really didn't think they'd grow up and join their dad's band, maybe their dad did."

"They like the classics," she says. "They like the stuff we were going to see when we were 17 years old. They flirted with Blink 182 and Green Day, but that stuff never lasted."

'Hard rock stuff'

Big Dave grew up playing bass in New Jersey and Connecticut. His older brother Chaz taught him how to play.



The Schmitz Brothers Band play the Flying Dog Cafe Friday night. Photo courtesy of Evan Ekasala

Back then it was all about Steppenwolf and Black Sabbath, all the "hard rock stuff," says Chaz, who played The Stone Pony in Asbury Park, N.J., around the same time a young Bruce Springsteen did.

Both brothers studied music at The Hartford Conservatory, a 117-year-old performing arts school in Hartford, Conn. Chaz graduated in 1982 and shortly thereafter hit the road with his band.

Big Dave moved to Sarasota in the early 1990s when the boys were toddlers and impossible to tell apart.

"Man, we used to dress one in yellow, one in blue," he says. "When they were 3 years old, forget it. When they got older, and Dave got the freckle, it got easier."

Music ebbed and flowed. Big Dave worked as a computer technician and the boys started violin lessons.

"Music," he says, "is something you always have. You work the bugs out of your life and come back to it."

More than a deadhead band

Young Dave's 17-year-old girlfriend is cuddled next to him on the couch. A senior at ODA, she's not a fan of her boyfriend's choice of college.

"It's too far away," she sighs.

Both boys graduated from ODA in 2007 and both opted to go to Ithaca for school.

"We probably could've gone to different schools," says Dave. "But we decided early on that this was how we wanted it."

Tim shrugs.

"Look," he says. "We're two parts of a three-part band, of course we'd go to the same school."

Dave Jr. plans to be a surgeon. Tim's undecided what the future holds for him.

"Obviously, they'll go their own one day," says Big Dave. "But I'm not worried about it. I know we'll always jam."

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