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Music

The Brakemen

By GARY GRAFF , Of The Daily Oakland Press

02/08/2004

February 8, 2004
 The UpBeat

Name: The Brakemen.

Formed: October 2002 in Dearborn.

Sound: Rock.

Members: Jon Milan, vocals and piano; Richard Pinkerton, vocals; Scott Clauser, guitar and vocals; Lou Simon, guitar; Darryl Lee, bass; Phillip J. Hale, keyboards; and Brian Harris, drums.

Influences: The Beatles, Bob Dylan, The Band, Randy Newman, Tom Waits, the Rolling Stones, Scott Joplin.

Day jobs: Milan is a free-lance writer who's worked for DTE Energy and the Detroit Metro Times. Pinkerton owns and operates the Music Menu in Greektown. Clauser is a free-lance videographer. Simon works at the consumer help desk at DTE Energy. Lee is a Detroit parking meter officer. Hale is a 9-1-1 operator in Detroit, and Harris is a full-time musician.

What's in a Name?: Milan says the Brakemen moniker was chosen "for a lot of reasons" involving the romance of railroad life in the United States. "A lot of our songs are kind of slices of life about lost America, and the railroad seems to be a very large part of that. There's something romantic in a lot of blues songs about jumping on a freight train and trying to go somewhere in America. It was kind of like the heart and soul of America at one time, and that's lost today, too."

So you wanna be a star: Milan and Pinkerton began writing together in the late '70s, coming up with stage musicals - they've written three - before starting their first band, the Crowd. Over the years they've played in other groups such as Imaginary Friend and Mabel's Dreams. "I write the music and Rick and I collaborate on the lyrics," Milan explains. "Nine out of 10 times we'll write together; the majority of the time we'll have a tune with a concept first, but it's not unusual for (Pinkerton) to say, 'Here's some lyrics I've been writing. What do you think?,' and we'll fit them to a tune."

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Who knew?: Besides the Brakemen, Milan also works with the Huron Valley Serenaders, a tuxedoed swing trio that specializes in jazz and ragtime from the early 20th century.

Favorite gig: The Brakemen had a particularly good time at the annual Anti Auto Show party, January at the old Hastings Street Ballroom, which is now an art gallery. "It was nice to get in touch with that side of the community," Milan says. "We had streakers walk across the stage while we were playing, guys and girls. We were doing one of our songs called 'Little,' and I told the guys in the group that those guys had a lot of guts streaking to a song called 'Little.' "

What's next: Milan says that the Brakemen would like to go "as far as we can with this," and he thinks the future may be on college campuses. "It seems to us that age group is open to political thoughts and open to what's going on in America today. We definitely want to do what we can to drive political awareness, especially with everything that's going on now."


Hear 'em: The Brakemen self-released their first album, "14 Songs by Milan & Pinkerton," in November. It features guest appearances by Sponge's Vinnie Dombrowski, John Sinclair, Liz Larin, Johnnie Bassett, Thornetta Davis and Nikki James.

See 'em: The Brakemen next perform with the Orbitsuns on Friday at the Bullfrog Bar & Grill, 15414 Telegraph Road, Redford Township. Call (313) 533-4477.

Surf 'em: www.thebrakemen.net.

(The Oakland Press will regularly feature a different band or musician in The UpBeat. To be included, send background information, a black-and-white nonreturnable photo, daytime phone number and current CD to: Gary Graff, The Daily Oakland Press, P.O. Box 436009, Pontiac 48343.)

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