

BRAVE COMBO

GRAMMY AWARD WINNERS FOR THE ALBUMS, *POLKASONIC* & *LET'S KISS*

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Brave Combo. Rarely, if ever, has a band name been more apropos, not only at the group's inception, but even more so more nearly three decades after the fact. At first glance, back in 1979, the Denton, Texas, based outfit was, in shorthand, pegged as a New Wave polka band, a courageous if not almost oxymoronic endeavor during that particular rebirth of the cool. Yet it clicked and launched a stunning run that has now catapulted it into the new century. Over the last 29 years, Brave Combo has collected a dizzying array of descriptive musical

pegs, boldly going where few bands have gone before, and even fewer could (or would) dare to venture. Succeeding in its first mission, Brave Combo is America's premier contemporary polka band, and a Grammy winning one at that. In the same breath, to name some but hardly all of the colors found on Brave Combo's musical palette, one can describe them as a groundbreaking world music act, a hot jazz quintet, a rollicking rock'n'roll bar band, a Tex-Mex conjunto, a sizzling blues band, a saucy cocktail combo, a deadly serious novelty act, a Latin orchestra, and one of America's dance bands par excellence. It's all in a night's music for Brave Combo, often in a synergistic fashion that includes everything from klezmer surf rock to rocking cha cha to what *The Washington Post* calls "mosh pit polka," as well as to the hokey pokey and the chicken dance. And zydeco, acid rock, Muzak, bubblegum, cumbia, classical, and the twist, to still not exhaust the list. This plethoric multitude of musical styles and flavors is frequently mixed, matched, and melded, into delicious, new concoctions by an imaginative team of musical gourmet master chefs.

"We're just trying to be a brave combo," is how bandleader Carl Finch explains what *Billboard* calls the band's "world-wise, unclassifiable music." The prime directive is to "break down people's perceptions about what's cool to like in music. Our deal is to shake up people's ideas about what they label hip, or right or wrong." In the process Brave Combo also shakes listeners' hips and tail feathers, sparks delight, provokes imaginations, rocks all night long, and elicits more than a few chuckles.

Brave Combo launched its 25th Anniversary year with the ultimate cultural sanctification by making one of its most prestigious appearances, of many, to date. On March 21, 2004, they played Oktoberfest in the beloved American burg of Springfield on an episode of "The Simpsons." As followers of both Brave Combo and the long running animated hit should not find surprising, "Simpsons" creator Matt Groening is a devoted Brave Combo fan. "They prove you can be hip and still be happy," says Groening. "Really, Brave Combo should have their own cartoon."

After all, Brave Combo's quarter century of music certainly displays a fascinating yin and yang mix of the utterly and delightfully surreal, juxtaposed with perfect sense and wisdom. What Finch calls its "barrage of incongruous elements" flows from its deep sincerity, outstanding musicianship, and a firm belief that music should be fun and life-affirming.

This mission statement has yielded more than two dozen albums that range from Japanese pop to Latin American dance tunes to the orchestral classics to more permutations on the polka than

you can shake a beer stein at. They have marched in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade underneath Woody Woodpecker, recorded with the late Tiny Tim, and played such private fetes as David Byrne's wedding and the 200th episode party for "The Simpsons." The Brave Combo trail also includes festivals of all stripes, rock clubs, colleges, roadhouses, dances, state fairs, cultural centers (including the annual Midsummer Night's Swing at Lincoln Center in New York City) and more - basically anywhere there's a stage and an audience willing to open up their minds and dance.

Along the way they've won the admiration of such fellow visionaries and iconoclasts as Groening, Byrne, Garrison Keillor, and Harvey Pekar, as well as audiences of all ages, persuasions, and musical tastes. Brave Combo has charmed countless listeners and won avid devotees as they play some 150 dates a year that include everything from the Labor Day weekend West Fest Czech polka festival in Central Texas to being perhaps the world's finest (okay, maybe only) St. Patrick's Day polka band. They've taken their polka-plus-more sound multiple times to Japan and Europe, including appearances at such Continental festivals as Roskilde (Denmark), Printemps de Bourges (France), Steirischer Herbst (Austria), Storsjoryran (Sweden), and Lowlands (Holland).

Brace Combo's vivid music can be heard in the films David Byrne's *True Stories*, Clive Barker's *Lord of Illusions*, *Late Bloomers*, *Fools Rush In*, *Envy*, The Academy award winning *The Personal*s, and Fox Television's "Bakersfield P.D." In addition, 1994 U.S. Olympic Ice Dancers, Elizabeth Punsalan and Jerod Swallow have skated to their music during numerous competitions and Brave Combo has been frequent guests on such public broadcasting shows as *The Lonesome Pine Special*, *Fresh Air*, *All Things Considered*, *The Next Big Thing* and *A Prairie Home Companion*, whose host Garrison Keillor calls them "entertainers who just won't take no for an answer." The Brave Combo that has accomplished all that and more is a five-piece veritable orchestra that originated and is still based in Denton, TX. Keyboardist, guitarist, accordionist, and singer Carl Finch founded the band in 1979, releasing their first records on the band's own Four Dots Records. He has also produced artists like Little Jack Melody And His Young Turks, Trout Fishing In America, Santiago Jimenez Jr., and Mingo Saldivar, compiled the Rhino Records collection *Legends of the Accordion*, and released on Four Dots the debut album by Sara Hickman, *Equal Scary People*, that helped win her a major label record deal.

Alongside Finch for nearly all of Brave Combo's years has been multi-instrumentalist Jeffrey Barnes, who joined in 1983. Barnes is known for his lively and imaginative stage wear, as well as playing an array of reeds and woodwinds, harmonica, pennywhistle, guitars, you name it, sometimes in multiple, simultaneous combinations. Rounding out the current line-up are trumpet and flugelhorn player Danny O'Brien, drummer Alan Emert and Ann Marie Harrop on bass guitar.

The band's musical agility and diversity has no doubt helped it win "Pop/Rock Talent Deserving Wider Recognition" honors three years in a row in the annual Critics Poll for the jazz bible *Downbeat*. And yes, Brave Combo remains a band, despite all the achievements, whose music all but begs wider airing, even if they have succeeded in winning over the various, finicky, disparate factions of the polka world, garnered consistently high praise in the music press, and picked up new fans every time they've played.

Does this mean Brave Combo is a cult band? Well, if it is, it's one with converts and outposts across North America and south of the border, as well as around the world. And like any self-respecting cult, there is an underlying international agenda behind the music, as *The Chicago Tribune* divined when it dubbed Brave Combo a "party band with a purpose." And yes, there is a purpose. "Peace through polka" may sound like a quip, but the way Brave Combo can erase musical prejudices and seduce people to like music they thought they wouldn't or didn't, does serve a higher calling. "I do think the acceptance of polka and other dance rhythms can help bring about world peace. If the people of the world can start dancing together, they can learn to respect each other's cultures, too," concludes Finch. "That kind of understanding will give us all a better chance to survive."

A BRAVE COMBO DISCOGRAPHY

- On Four Dots Records:
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 - *Polkamanía* (1980)
 - *Music for Squares* (1981)
 - *Urban Grownups* (1982)
 - *Originals* (1983, cassette only)
 - *World Dance Music* (1984)
 - *No Sad Faces* (1984, live)
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- On Rounder Records:
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 - *Polkatharsis* (1987)
 - *Musical Varieties* (1988, collection of best Four Dots tracks)
 - *Humansville* (1989)
 - *A Night on Earth* (1990)
 - *It's Christmas, Man!* (1992)
 - *No, No, No, Cha Cha Cha* (1993)
 - *Polkas for a Gloomy World* (1995, Grammy nominated)
 - *Mood Swing Music* (1996, collection of rare recording)
 - *Girl* (1996, collaboration with Tiny Tim)
 - *Group Dance Epidemic* (1997)
 - *Polka Party with Brave Combo - Live and Wild* (1998, Grammy nominated)
 - *The Process* (2000)
 - *All Wound Up - A Family Music Party* (2001, Grammy nominated)
 - *Box Of Ghosts* (2003)
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- On Cleveland International Records:
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 - *Polkasonic* (1999, Grammy Award winner)
 - *Kick-Ass Polkas* (2001, Grammy nominated)
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- Japanese Releases:
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 - *Eejhanaika* (1991)
 - *Kikusuiamaru Meets Brave Combo* (1993)
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- Watermelon Records:
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 - *Kiss of Fire* (1996, collaboration Lauren Agnelli)
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- On dentone Records:
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 - *The Hokey Pokey* (1995, EP of music for group dancing)
 - *Let's Kiss* (2004, Grammy Award Winner)
 - *Holidays!* (2005)
 - *Polka's Revenge* (2007)