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Jazzy Brave Combo does it, polka-style  
By: CAM MILLER - For the North County Times

Meet Brave Combo, a polka band with an attitude.

A conventional polka band it's not, but when you try to hang a label on the five-piece Texas-bred ensemble's music, it slides right off. Some have called it mosh-pit polka and still others have called it klezmer soft rock. But a reporter for Billboard probably came the closest when he described it as being "world-wise unclassifiable."



*Brave Combo*

*When: 6 p.m. Aug. 11*

*Where: Calavera Hills Park, 2997 Glasgow Drive, Carlsbad*

*Admission: Free*

*Info: (760) 434-2904*

*Web: [www.carlsbadca.gov/arts](http://www.carlsbadca.gov/arts)*

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The band itself has fared no better. It's been called a hot jazz quintet, a rock Muzak bubble-gum band and a party band with a purpose. Yet, when asked for his take on the band he organized 27 years ago, Brave Combo leader Carl Finch said simply, "We're a polka band." However, when he was asked further if anyone had ever tagged his group an in-your-face band, he laughed, replied, "No" and then added, "but we are."

Though the band and the music it plays may defy conventional definitions, Brave Combo has won two Grammys in the polka band division. The most recent came last year for an '04 album, "Let's Kiss," which includes "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" played as an oberek (a lively Polish dance) and a send-up of "The Flight of the Bumble Bee." Six years earlier, Brave Combo won for the recording "Polkasonic," which featured equally oblique versions of a variety of genres.

"When we won the first Grammy, we thought it was a fluke and so did everyone else," said Finch, whose band will be performing Aug. 12 at Calavera Hills Park in Carlsbad as part of the city's weekly TGIF Jazz in the Park free concert series. "So, winning the second one came as a total surprise. Yeah, I've taken ribbing about winning Grammys for polka albums, but as far as I'm concerned, a Grammy is still a Grammy, whatever it's for."

Finch and three of his buddies formed Brave Combo fresh out of college ---- all were graduates of North Texas State University ---- with no goal other than to discover what other forms of music would sound like when played like a polka.

"Later we decided to show the public the popular perception of what's cool and what's hip weren't what they seemed to be and that given a modern spin, polkas are both hip and cool," said Finch.

A hit record right off the reel helped sell Brave Combo's point of view, though not everyone bought in. The biggest turn-off came from a segment of polka purists who felt Brave Combo was infiltrating their culture and trying to take it over.

Finch said the naysayers' quarrel with the band dealt more with ethnicity than authenticity. He explained polkas owe their origin to Eastern European countries, but none of the members of his band has European bloodlines.

"We're a mutt band," said Finch, "and some resented it. But in time they came over to our side when they realized we were capable of playing full sets of Czech, Polish and other polkas endemic to their countries."

There aren't many musical genres Brave Combo hasn't skewered: the classics, marches, Latin melodies, swing, you name it. To show you how far they can stray afield, two of their most popular numbers are their rock versions of the "Hokey Pokey" and the "Chicken Dance." And it was their recording of the latter song that was played for the benefit of 3,000 unflappable contestants in the recent Great American Chicken Dance competition.

Though it has grown from a four-piece to a five-piece band, the band's members remain as versatile as their music is diverse. Lead singer Finch plays guitars, keyboards and accordion. The rest of the band is rounded out by Danny O'Brien, a trumpeter and flugelhornist; Jeffrey Barnes, a reed player who also blows a mean pennywhistle and often plays two instruments simultaneously; drummer Alan Emert; and bass guitarist Ann Marie Harrout.

Still based in Denton, Texas, the quintet now plays about 150 dates a year and has performed on a couple of episodes of "The Simpsons"; on PBS radio's "Prairie Home Companion" (where host Garrison Keillor introduced Brave Combo as "as a band that won't take no for an answer"); in Japan, where the group played polka-cized Japanese pop; as well as barn dances, county fairs and, at the other end of the cultural scale, the Kennedy Center.

In short, they'll play anywhere, anytime, and they once spurred a man to do the chicken dance in a Porta Potti.

"Hey, anything goes with us," said Finch, whose band accompanied the late Tiny Tim on his final recording date. "All we need is a little help from a guy who's as crazy as we are."

About the only times the band is forced to play it reasonably straight comes when it is hired to play an evening of Latin dance music.

"We might be able to fool around with the melody, but dancers want the basic rhythm of the salsa, samba and other Latin steps to be kept intact," said Finch. "So, we do what they want."

Earlier this year, the Brave Combo went high hat, sort of. They joined symphony orchestras in three Texas cities for concerts ---- Arlington, Las Cunas and Garland.

"Things went better than we could have ever expected," said Finch. "Playing 13 songs with a symphony leaves a lot of room for something to go wrong, but nothing ever did. We're already in negotiations with three other symphony orchestras, and I'm having new arrangements written that will be more challenging," Finch said. "We've discovered there's a part of the world we hadn't explored before and now we want to be a part of it."