

FEATURE

Musicians dust off instruments to strike up band

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Jim Farrell hadn't picked up his clarinet in 55 years.

But he was in good company when he joined the New Horizons Band: Many a fellow member hadn't picked up a flute or clarinet or drumstick in 50 years before signing on with the assembly.

"I thought I'd give it a try, and see if I remembered everything," said Farrell, 77, a parishioner at St. Louis Church in Pittsford, after a recent band rehearsal at Temple Beth El.

After finding he could still play the clarinet, he decided to tackle a different instrument, and bought himself a bass clarinet. He is now one of two bass clarinetists in the band.

Some New Horizon musicians had never picked up an instrument. Organizer Roy Ernst estimated more than half of his band joined without musical experiences.

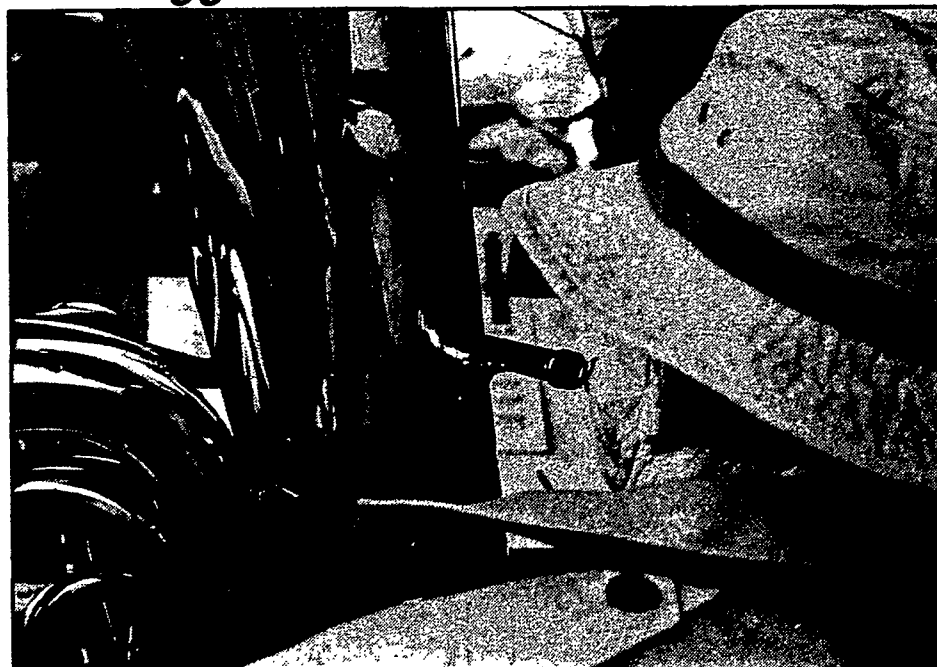
"A lot start from scratch," he said, also at the rehearsal. So these potential musicians attend group lessons prior to the rehearsals.

A 58-year-old professor of music education at Eastman School of Music, Ernst created the senior citizens band in January 1991, and has watched it nearly double in size. He's flown around the country, in fact, to help start 13 other New Horizons bands.

Though you don't have to know music to join, the one hitch is age: You have to be more than 50 years old.

Ernst explained his intention in creating the band was to provide a perfect match — retirees and music.

The band provides an intellectual chal-



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

The New Horizons Band played for a Nov. 10 groundbreaking at The Summit at Brighton, adjacent to the Jewish Home. The band, which consists entirely of people over 50, plays several concerts a year.

lenge, a social event and "there's always something coming up, and always something to work toward," he said.

"There are kids — we call them kids — in their 40s champing at the bit to get in the band. We have a lot of fun," said Florence Mooney, 61, who was caught between the desire to learn flute or snare drum with the band, but chose the drum. She's also in her 24th year playing tambourine and singing for the St. Joseph's Church folk group in Penfield.

The Rochester-area band's 100 members rehearse twice a week and perform



Florence Mooney (center) keeps tempo with the percussion section of the band.

numerous times a year, at local malls, nursing homes, and other places including Nazareth College, where they stage an annual concert.

Besides traveling around Monroe and neighboring counties to gigs, some of the musicians attend New Horizons music camps in places such as Aspen, Colo., and Lake Placid and Chautauqua in New York.

"We get a lot of requests to play, and we get great attendance for our concerts," Ernst said.

Band members choose their own instruments, but the band seems to be a well-rounded gathering of wind and percussion instruments.

"If we had too many saxophones and

somebody comes and says, 'I'd like to play the saxophone,' I'd say 'Great,'" Ernst said. "Your enjoyment depends a whole lot upon the instrument you play."

Ruth Koss of Sacred Heart Parish took the chance to set down her guitar for a flute. "It isn't as heavy as the guitar," she noted, quickly packing it up while others wheeled carts carrying their instruments.

The band has developed several components since 1991: a Green Band for beginners, a dance band, pep band, German band, several ensembles, and a Gold Band and Silver Band — two large bands created when the whole band was split to be more manageable.

Ever the dedicated music educator, Ernst said he emphasizes two points about the band.

"Once you learn music you never really forget that. It's always there," he said. And second, he said, "There is widespread belief you can't learn music as an adult ... In our group we certainly put that to rest."

"We're getting better. You should have heard us in the beginning," joked Rita B. Rose, 81, of St. Patrick's Church in Victor. A saxophone player since eighth grade, she went on to play in several community bands before joining New Horizons in 1991. Never having played drums, she chose to learn them for the New Horizons Band.

"But I had surgery on my knee, and couldn't hop from the snare drum to the timpani on crutches," she said. So she soon switched back to the saxophone.

Despite some pretty fine musical talents in the band, Larry Freitas, 66, of St. Ambrose Church noted, "There are no prima donnas."

A percussionist since his childhood, he'd played in the U.S. Army band in Germany and in a group that played for weddings during his college years. But he gave it up while raising four children. Now he plays for the New Horizons band and its dance band.

Bud Huntoon, of St. Helen's Church, a drummer from the big band days, also plays in the dance band. He's played drums since he was 14, and performed with the U.S. Navy in Africa and with the Danny Mance dance band for 20 years in Rochester.

Despite that impressive background, he said, "It's fun to play with somebody who's just starting. We're here to enjoy ourselves."

"We all care about each other," Rose said. Band members send each other cards during illnesses and support each other after deaths in the family. One musician waylaid by illness comes just to watch. And all are delighted that two musicians met in the band and married.

As big as the band has become, no one goes unknown. Band members wear name tags with large lettering and there are jokes that someday they'll add their ages to their tags.

"I'm trying to get people confident with their ages," Ernst said. "It's a badge of accomplishment."

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EDITORS' NOTE: The New Horizons Band will perform at 7 p.m. Friday, Dec. 6, at Eastview Mall; 7 p.m. Friday, Dec. 13, at Greece Ridge Mall; and 6 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 18, at the Greater Rochester International Airport.



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