



GUMBOHEAD'S

RECIPE

FOR

SUCCESS

⋮ BY Sharon Parker

Our musical styles are so diverse, we are really hard to pin down stylistically.

We're like the weather here in St. Louis...

We're Louisiana music with a St. Louis spin.



I'M SITTING IN A BOOTH AT BROADWAY OYSTER BAR WITH SEVERAL MEMBERS OF GUMBOHEAD, AND THEY'RE WORRIED ABOUT HOW THEY'RE ALL GOING TO FIT ON STAGE.

Due to some recent remodeling at the venue, they fear their seven-member band may now be too large for the stage. "A crash diet is out of the question," jokes one of the guys.

Gumbohead is full of big flavor, onstage and off. From Tim Halpin's (guitar, harmonica, vocals) festive Mardi Gras beads and leather beret to Andy Coco's (bass, vocals) well-groomed ponytail, the boys are stylin'. Ron Sikes (percussionist, rubboard) sports a stocking cap on the bone-chilling December night we meet up at Broadway Oyster Bar. The band also includes Tony Esterly (guitar), Tom Martin (accordion, piano, organ), David Mills (saxophone, vocals), and Benet Schaeffer (drums). Their soundman goes by the name of Captain Spaulding.

Halpin, the band's founder, tells me 'The Story of Gumbohead.' Coco and Halpin worked together at an ad agency, where they discovered they shared a passion for New Orleans music. "Wouldn't it be great if we could put a band together that incorporated all these great musical styles?" they wondered.

For two or three years, they toyed with the idea. Then, in the summer of 1999, they got a CD of five songs to learn and began realizing their dream. Coco, Halpin, and Martin are the only remaining members of the original band, which included other musicians. Mills joined them about a year later, replacing the original

saxophonist. About six months later, they acquired Sikes through an ad on the internet. "From the first note of the first song," says Coco, "we knew we had something special together."

The guys played around trying to come up with a good name. "Literally, it came to me in a dream," says Halpin. "I dreamt of a tribal-looking guy and he had a plate of gumbo on his head. I woke up and wrote it down. It immediately said something about the kind of band we were, and the kind of music we play. Gumbo is a mixture of a lot of different ingredients, like New Orleans music is."

As Halpin explains, the band's head logo not only represents their many musical inspirations, but also signifies wrapping your head around something new and different, and allowing everything in. Like New Orleans, and music from that delta city, the band not only celebrates diversity, it thrives on it. Yet they are careful not to be labeled strictly a 'New Orleans music band.'

"Influences," says Halpin, "We've got influences." As he describes them on their Myspace, Gumbohead is the 'illegitimate love child of Art Neville, Buckwheat Zydeco, Dr. John, Anders Osborne, and Professor Longhair.'

"Our musical styles are so diverse, we are really hard to pin down stylistically," adds Martin, "We're like the weather here in St. Louis. Call us Louisiana music with a St. Louis spin."

"I always feel limited by genres," says Coco, "because there's a whole lot of St. Louis in our music, too." He refers to Gumbohead's music as 'zydefunk,' a fusion

of zydeco, funk, blues, jazz, Cajun, Creole and more. "All these cultures are covered; we really play the spectrum. We almost called our CD 'Confluence' because of all of the talent and musical history that flowed up the Mississippi River to St. Louis. The river played a major role in St. Louis music, bringing musicians and styles up from New Orleans. We owe a lot to those styles of music. The roots of St. Louis music can be traced back to The Delta."

WE DON'T DO COVERS.

Band members good-naturedly bristle when asked about playing covers. "We don't do covers," says Coco, "we do interpretations. We're not a tribute band. We play music we're passionate about from a specific region. Actually, the band came to fruition because we knew so many people in St. Louis were going down to New Orleans to see live music."

"Which is incredible music," adds Martin, "we try to be faithful to the spirit of it. That is represented in the variety of what we try to interpret. A lot of people haven't had the opportunity to go to New Orleans; they haven't experienced the culture and quality of what's there. We bring that to St. Louis through our music."

We discuss goals and the band's direction. The consensus is they play mainly for the joy of making music together, and their love of the music. Gumbohead's primary goal was to have a monthly gig at Broadway Oyster Bar. In eight years, the band estimates they've played about 100 gigs at Broadway Oyster Bar. Once they began making regular appearances locally, they set their sights on the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival (aka Jazz Fest). Now they want to be the premier Mardi Gras band in St. Louis, and beyond. So far, they've appeared twice in New Orleans during the week between Jazz Fest's two weekends, in both 2006 and 2007. They hope to be invited to play a Festival weekend show.

"We would play the tiniest stage at the earliest hour; it wouldn't matter as long as we were able to say we played Jazz Fest," says Halpin. "We don't want to displace New Orleans bands, but we would be proud to represent all those bands outside of Louisiana who love and respect that kind of music. We wouldn't want to play in place of a New Orleans band, especially one out of a home or living in a city that was not their own. I know the goal in this (STL Sound) is really to promote St. Louis music, but New Orleans still needs help and we want people to come see us here in St. Louis and be their connection to that culture."

TRUE TO THE ROOTS

Just as St. Louisans have embraced the Mardi Gras tradition, we've also embraced the music of the Delta. Gumbohead put out their

first CD, entitled *Live and Cookin'* in 2001. Fans enjoyed them on KDHX 88.1 FM, where their music is often played today. In 2004, the band recorded *Get You Some*, a six-song EP featuring interpretations of legendary Louisiana songs, including works by Clifton Chenier and Art Neville, among others. The EP was recorded in the KDHX studios. Also in 2004, they recorded a track, "You Never Can Tell (C'est La Vie)," on the Chuck Berry tribute CD, *Brown-Eyed Handsome Man*: St. Louis Salutes The Father of Rock and Roll.

Then, in September of 2006, the band released their CD *Gumbohead*, featuring five original tracks and eight interpretations of Louisiana tunes. Not only has *Gumbohead* been played locally on KDHX, but it has received airplay on various public radio stations across the U.S. They've also been played on satellite radio, and on one of their favorite stations, WWOZ, in New Orleans.

Some of *Gumbohead's* material was contributed by individual band members. Sikes wrote "Spy Boy" which appears on the *Gumbohead* CD. This sophisticated instrumental smoothly melds jazz and funk in the signature sound *Gumbohead* fans crave.

The band credits Martin's talented keyboarding with much of the band's success. Martin wrote "Hot Sauce Boogie;" his bandmates nicknamed him 'Hot Sauce.' He plays piano, organ, piano accordion and two different Cajun accordions. "Tom is the hub around which the band musically rotates," says Coco.

"The cool thing about doing a studio project, is we could have more horns and invite more musicians to play with us," say Martin. The band is proud to have worked with renowned musician, Brian Casserly (trumpet/singer/songwriter), who wrote "Stir the Pot" about making gumbo. Casserly is credited and plays on their CD 'Gumbohead', along with guest appearances by Ben Reece and John Wolf.

SPREADING THE LOVE AROUND

In addition to their Mardi Gras and Broadway Oyster Bar appearances, *Gumbohead* has played at Mt. Pleasant Winery and for local Concert in the Park series. Over the years, they've played at fundraisers, private parties, wedding receptions, dive and upscale bars, barbecue joints and crawfish boils. Local festival appearances include: River Splash; The Big Muddy Blues Festival; the Old Webster Jazz & Blues Festival; and the Whitaker Music Festival at the Missouri Botanical Garden.

Out of town, *Gumbohead* has appeared at Ribfest in Chicago, The Taste of New Orleans Festival in Peoria; the Rollin' On The River Festival in Keokuk, Iowa; and the Decatur Celebration, Illinois' largest free street festival. The band also played Blissfest last summer in Harbor Springs, Michigan, Halpin's

hometown. "It was really special to play for my old friends and relatives," remarks Halpin.

Since Hurricane Katrina, *Gumbohead* has shown their altruism and love for their Louisiana brothers and sisters by raising over \$2,000 with a CD of live tracks sold at gigs; and all proceeds going to Tipitina's Foundation, a charitable organization in New Orleans.

Interested in learning how their audience views *Gumbohead*, I approach two women doing tequila shots at the bar. "They're one of my favorite bands who play here," said off-duty Broadway Oyster Bar employee Michelle Vessels, "We always know they're going to draw a crowd. Everyone loves them."

This becomes obvious as the show begins. From the opening song's first chords, Halpin's vocals have the crowd dancing in their seats. This song features an awesome sax solo by Mills, as well. *Gumbohead's* second song includes chorus-line kicks by band front men and sexy choreographed hip jerks to one side. It doesn't take long to get the audience on the dance floor. Once the band plays their zydeco portion of the show, Coco announces it is time to 'zydefunk' and can they ever get funky. Commanding saxophone, blistering guitar solos, and fervent vocals transform Broadway Oyster Bar into a Bourbon Street joint.

Heather and Brian Mullins are seeing the band for the first time. "They've got a funky sound and they're easy to move to," says Heather. "They sound like polytechnic Cajun blues," added Brian.

Lynn Gerstner, who is originally from St. Louis, but now resides in Seattle, has come home to visit relatives. She gives *Gumbohead* an enthusiastic two thumbs up.

As St. Louisans, we often overlook that visitors and newcomers to our city are influenced by our music. It's not just the hotels, restaurants, and tourist sites that attract guests to St. Louis. We take for granted our reputation—both nationally and abroad—for our music, most specifically blues music. *Gumbohead* is definitely doing their fair share as ambassadors promoting the St. Louis music scene.

"I came down here specifically to see these guys. It's my first time seeing them play and I love them. I feel like it's Mardi Gras come early," raves Tom Archer, who relocated to St. Louis from Hawaii in June 2007.

Long-time fan and friend of the band, Ed Hanewinkel, says, "I'm 51 and I grew up with southern rock. I'm a fan of Cajun cooking and Cajun music. I have a lot of experience with the New Orleans lifestyle and these guys fit the bill. I've known this band personally since they formed."

Just as *Gumbohead's* music is energetic and inviting, so are their fans. I am duly impressed with the musical knowledge and warm personalities of *Gumbohead's* fans.



Rick Rahmberg teaches me how to use a handcrafted shakere (shaker) he made himself. I am stunned when he generously offers to let me keep it. Through discussion with Rahmberg and Monica Heil, I learn more about the music they are passionate about.

Heil explains that the primary difference between zydeco and Cajun music is that zydeco features an accordion and Cajun may or may not include a fiddle. Not only is this music alive and thriving in St. Louis, but there exists a whole culture surrounding it. Together, Rahmberg, Heil and I enjoy a terrific interpretation of "L.A. Woman" by the Doors. That the hot and spicy Gumbohead version is really about LA (Louisiana) Woman is especially delicious.

Heil also introduces me to 'Threadheads' the term for fans who post on a message board for the New Orleans Jazz Fest; and The Threadhead Patry, an annual fundraising party whose name was accidentally misspelled on early promo materials, and it stuck that way. The Patry is held the first Tuesday after the first weekend of Jazz Fest.

Rahmberg tells me, "Gumbohead is the only band outside of New Orleans or Louisiana to be invited to play at The Threadhead Patry for New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival (aka Jazz Fest) the past two years in a row. This is quite an honor for a band outside of Louisiana. The people in New Orleans were amazed that a St. Louis band could play their music so well." Rahmberg knows what he's talking about. Sikes, Gumbohead's percussionist, couldn't make it the first year; so the band invited Rahmberg to accompany them by playing the frottoir, a Cajun rubboard, or washboard.

Not only did Gumbohead perform well, they played for a good cause. With a committee from around the country, pulled from the legion of Threadheads, The Patry raised close to \$25,000 over the past two years for the New Orleans Musician's Clinic.

While I listen to Coco sing "On a Night Like This," I contemplate Gumbohead's recipe for success. Along with their musical magic, the band blends genuine altruism with respect for each other and the cultural heritage of both New Orleans and St. Louis. They season it with "laissez les bon temps rouler," crackling contagious energy, and plenty of 'Hot Sauce.' As for fitting on stage, the only thing Gumbohead should be worried about is having a stage big enough for their sound, and all the "joie de vivre" that flows with it.

Whatever your music taste, make sure you flavor your Mardi Gras with a serving of Gumbohead this year. The band kicks off Mardi Gras with a second line parade and one set at the Mayor's Mardi Gras Ball on Friday, February 1; followed immediately with an appearance at the Casa Loma for the Mystic Knights of the Purple Haze Ball, that same night. On Parade Day, February 2, they'll be at Lucas School House in the afternoon and Broadway Oyster Bar around 9pm. Fat Tuesday, February 5, you can catch them at Harrah's Voodoo Lounge from 7pm-8:30pm.; and BB's Jazz, Blues & Soups at 10pm. ☺

To learn more about Gumbohead's upcoming shows or purchase CDs, visit them at: www.gumbohead.com and myspace.com/gumbohead

Chicken and Sausage GUMBO

From the Encyclopedia of Cajun Culture
(<http://www.cajunculture.com/>)

Chicken and sausage gumbo is a Cajun favorite, and although available in restaurants year-round, it is particularly popular as a homemade dish during the wintertime. Making a gumbo can be time-consuming (the roux alone can take about thirty minutes to prepare), but the final product is well worth the wait.

Ingredients:

- Roux (oil and flour)
- 3 14½ oz. cans chicken broth
- 2 small onions
- 1 bell pepper
- 3 cloves garlic
- 3 or 4 stalks celery
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 cube chicken boullion
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon red pepper
- 1 teaspoon filé (ground sassafras)
- 1½ lb chicken
- 1 sausage link (about 1 to 2 lbs)
- green onions
- rice

As the saying goes, "First, you make a roux." Once this is done, in a large pot combine the cooled roux with chicken broth, then add water until the mixture reaches one inch from the top of the pot. Boil for 30 minutes, skimming occasionally to remove grease. Add chopped vegetables, and boil for another 30 minutes. Add boullion, seasonings, and meat (cut chicken, sliced sausage), and boil for 60 to 90 minutes. Serve over rice, and garnish with chopped green onions. (By the way, leftover gumbo is almost always better than freshly made gumbo.) If Cajun sausage is unavailable in your area, try summer sausage as a substitute. This recipe makes about 25 to 30 bowls of gumbo.