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In Music's Trenches: Full time



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musicians toil

mightily for their big break

Still chewing the last bite of a beer joint steak, Michael Bay straps on a guitar in the fluorescent glow of an electric bowling machine.

The nearby pool table is pushed against a wall, and here comes the rest of the band, unloading big amps from a truck backed up to the front steps.

In less than an hour, Michael Bay and the Bad Boys of Blues will power up a corner full of combo equipment and clock in for another night shift at the Parkview tavern, a blue collar spot on the dead end of West 58th Street.

Bay, a former welder, wears a ponytail and a flannel work shirt, not tucked in.

To see him on the street, he's still the welder. But to hear him under a low, red light in an old saloon, he becomes a virtuoso.

"Michael is a killer player," says bandmate Austin Charanghat. "His chord voicings are awesome."

The virtuoso is backed by equally deadly players – Mike Barrick on bass; Jim Wall on drums.

And when guitarist Charanghat, with his big B.B. King-style voice, fronts the Bad Boys, the ensemble becomes Walkin' Cane, a blues/rock band with its first CD released in July.

The men of Walkin' Cane are full-time musicians playing roadhouses and corner saloons, each making \$50 to \$100 a night and teaching music during the day.

They are like scores of musicians in Greater Cleveland, working gig to gig for little money and hoping to hear from some big-wig agent who might take an interest in their latest self-produced CD.

"We want a recording deal with a big label," says Barrick, who also repairs instruments to help pay the bills. "But right now, we're stuck in the trenches, playing out every night."



In the trenches you lug heavy sound boxes, haggle with tightwad club bosses and hope that the pain in your left wrist isn't a career-ending medical condition.

On this Wednesday night in the trenches, each member of Walkin' Cane will get paid \$75.

"The dishwashers usually make more money than we do," says Wall, 32, a graduate of the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston. "And that's not putting down dishwashers. They need a raise, too."

Wall also works with a jazz band that plays at the House of Swing in South Euclid just for the cover charge at the door. On a recent night, he made \$6.

But the biggest payoff for these artists is the work itself.

"We love it, and that's our curse," said Wall, who practiced eight hours a day when he was in college. "We'd do it whether we got paid or not, and we've been exploited for that."

None of the Bad Boys are raising kids, though Charanghat and his girlfriend are expecting a baby.

"We'll get by," he said, noting that at least he's not living in New York or Los Angeles, where the rents are high and the trenches are crawling with hungry players.

Cleveland is a relatively affordable place to live, and with advances in computer and recording technology, a musician can download a demo into the ears of a West Coast agent or instantly click a promo package to a national recording company without leaving Ohio.

In Cleveland, says Bay, he makes more money with his guitar than he did with his welding torches.

"I'm so lucky to do what I do," he said. "I put a roof over my head. I feed myself. Some people really suffer to do their art. My lifestyle is very comfortable."

But to stay comfortable, Walkin' Cane knows it's got to hustle gigs and push the CD, which means the band sometimes has to go on the road when the work gets tight here.

"It's a business, it's a grind," says Michael Joyce, the band's booking agent.

Walkin' Cane had played in New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Memphis, and Nashville, Tenn., and New Orleans. On New Year's Eve 200, the band worked a club in Key West, Fla.

"When we go on the road, we take turns driving," says Barrick. "We sleep on



somebody's floor.”

When Charanghat and the Bad Boys come back to town, they have little money but lots of stories, such as:

- Playing Buddy Guy's blues club in Chicago, where they met the guitar legend himself.
- Working “a dumpy bar of the highway” in Valdosta, Ga., where they got free beer but had to split \$200 and share a hotel room.
- Or getting a standing ovation in a Manhattan nightclub called Manny's Car Wash. “We had ‘em that night, man,” says Barrick. “We slammed it and everybody was on their feet screaming.”

Back in Cleveland, Barrick and his mates slam it every Thursday night at the Savannah Bar and Grille in Westlake and every Wednesday night at the Parkview in Cleveland.

On those gigs, the Bad Boys host an invitation-only jam session, featuring some of Cleveland's hottest blues/rock artists: Butch Armstrong, Jason Green, Frankie Starr, Colin Dussault, Joe Bell, Jeff Hurd, Becky Boyd, Tim Askin, The Cat in the Hat, Tracey Marie.

On this recent night at the Parkview, Charanghat is at the helm, so the Bad Boys are Walkin' Cane again, and Bay has stepped into the low, red light for a slow blues solo, working mournful notes in a minor key like a gem cutter polishing dark stones.

“He's got a lot of [Eric] Clapton influence,” says Wall. “Michael's not one to play a million notes but he makes each note count.”

The place is packed with blues lovers and musicians who stand with guitar cases strapped to their backs like gunslingers hoping to take on the virtuoso.

Through the door comes Jason Green, another killer guitar player just off a national tour with Mississippi blues man Big Jack Johnson and the Oilers. The crowd parts like the Red Sea as Green moves toward the red light.

“Smoke ‘em, Jason,” someone yells from the crowd.

The band is really slamming it now.

Barrick, wearing a black fedora, is bent over his bass, playing high on the neck.

Wall is in a sweat behind his drum kit.

Bay breaks into a solo, hammering musical space and rapid riffs together, building, building, building.

And just when the audience thinks he has squeezed every perfect squawk, every brilliant squeal out of his electric guitar, that Bad Boy lets loose with another combination of riffs



that blows the place apart.

The crowd is wild. Two guys high-five each other. Big Richy at the bar shakes his head in awe.

Outside the Parkview, which sits atop a hill overlooking the Shoreway at Westinghouse curve, the moon is high, the night quiet.

Across the freeway, workers on the night shift mine salt under the lake. A freight train heads east across the river.

Inside the bar, Walkin' Cane is working overtime. The band members have been here for six years.

How much longer in the trenches?

“We ain't going anywhere,” says Bay.

Even if they get that big break?

“We'd still come back to Parkview,” says Charanghat. We'd come in with our flannel shirts and jeans and beater cars – well, maybe not my old '89. Maybe a '96.

“And it would be, ‘Drinks for everyone!’ ”

Michael O'Malley

Image Courtesy of Dale Omori / Plain Dealer Photographer