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Walkin' Cane Band struts its stuff

By PEANUTS

How time flies when, musically, you're having a good time.

Seven years ago to the month, I wrote an article for Sun Newspapers on a disc called "And Then . . ." by a Rocky River-based fivesome, the SkyDogs. My dialogue for that feature was with drummer Fred Perez-Stable and guitarist Austin Charanghat.

While the band is gone, both still play locally, with Charanghat just releasing his second disc, "Radio Cafe," via his new project, the Walkin' Cane Band. A couple weeks ago, we sat down in a busy Lakewood coffeehouse to play catch-up.

In the beginning, "My mom, Premila, was into rock music of the 1960s," he said, adding she liked anything on the radio.

"I got my first guitar Christmas Eve 1985, and immediately formed a band called Crossroads that later evolved into Stone Free," Charanghat said. "When I first got the guitar, I had a broken left hand, so I was playing it with my thumb.

"Out of Stone Free came the SkyDogs, which ran from 1985-94," Charanghat said. "I formed the first Walkin' Cane Band then, with bassist Fred Tobey and keyboardist Greg Hurd and a parade of drummers. It was then I recorded the disc 'Help Yourself' and released it."

In 1996, Charanghat got his big break, but it wasn't the kind

he sought. He had the lower portion of his left leg amputated, due to being bom with an arterial venous infection.

"When I got laid up with the operation, I needed a break," he said. "The band was playing seven nights a week, starting in 1995. I released 'Help Yourself' right before the operation, because I knew I'd be laid up and needed to keep a cash flow coming in.

"It was about five or six months before I started playing again, and I had eight months off before putting together a second lineup of the band, with Luther Penn on bass and Yusef Endure on drums. That lineup went on for about 18 months."

Then into the picture came the latest lineup of the band, the Bad Boys of Blues — Cleveland guitarist Michael Bay, Old Brooklyn bassist Michael Barrick and Parma drummer Jim Wall — who play as a separate entity and as the Walkin' Cane Band.

Which brings us to how the band's name came up.

"I was down in New Orleans in 1994, and used a cane in those days," Charanghat said. "While walking down the street to check out a record store, some homeless guy said, 'Hey, walkin' cane, can you spare some money for a brother?' I was thinking that would be a good handle to use."

Recorded at Electrosound Studios in Mentor and mixed at Landmark Recording in Ohio City, "Radio Cafe" is for sale at www.walkincane.com on the Internet, and at My Generation and Borders in Westlake.

Charanghat also participated in many programs over the years at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, including the ones for Robert Johnson and Jimmy Rodgers. The highlight, though, may have been his audition at the Rock Hall.

"In 1998, I went to audition on dobro (a stringed musical instrument) for two or three people down there in a small room," he said. "I started singing and tapping on the instrument, and it broke- That audition lasted about a minute. They said, 'Don't worry about it, you got the gig just from what we heard.' I lucked out there."

Another highlight this year was playing Blossom Music Center's main stage, opening for Deep Purple, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Ted Nugent.

"It was hilarious," he said. "The crowd didn't know who I was. I played one tune, and the place erupted — about 5,000 people. I always wanted to play that stage, ever since I started. I had a bunch of e-mails off it, from people wanting to buy my disc."

The band is starting to play out of town more, including an August date at the prestigious Buddy Guy Club in Chicago.

There, they'll even throw a CD release party for the Walkin' Cane Band.

"We tried to get into the place for two years, and now we've played it a lot of times" Charanghat said. "It took three or four tries to get in. Finally the latest bar manager said to give him a promo pack, because they were having a contest for unsigned blues bands. "We wound up beating over 150-plus bands and made the top five, so now we're in there all the time," he said. "Also we're planning on doing some dates in New Orleans and winter dates in Florida, mixed with our local stuff at the Parkview and Great Lakes Brewing Co. in Cleveland, Savannah Westlake and McNamara's Pub in North Ridgeville."

Charanghat's advice to you players is, "Keep working at it. I decided 16 years ago that I was going to be in it for the long haul. If I'm not playing I get all ornery."

With the release of "Radio Cafe," it's obvious that the Walkin' Cane Band has a leg up on the competition.

Peanuts is a Fairview Park resident and longtime Cleveland area music critic and writer.

