

LIVE IN THE CLUBS

Three Quarter North likes to be busy

BY BRIAN McELHINEY
Gazette Reporter

Saturday will be a busy day for Three Quarter North.

The local acoustic band is scheduled to play a 1:15 p.m. indoor set on the Lodge Stage at the Maple Ski Ridge in Rotterdam as part of the second annual Rhythm on the Ridge festival. Then the group will head to the Downtown Emack & Bolio's in Albany for its monthly second Saturday set at the venue, which begins at 7 p.m. It doesn't leave much time for the group to enjoy the rest of the festival or to prepare.

"Two gigs in one day is one thing when you're 25 years old," said banjo player Jim Atkins, sitting down with four of the band's five members, and their soundman, Peter Houghton, for lunch at a local diner. "When you're 56 or 57, it's something else."

"Hey, speak for yourself, old timer," vocalist and guitarist Mark Smith quipped.

The group certainly doesn't shy away from gigging, with two monthly shows built into the band's schedule (the other is at The Perfect Blend in Delmar on first Fridays). And as Rhythm on the Ridge is working to become a musical tradition in the region, Three Quarter North is falling in as regulars at the festival as well.

"Didn't we do two gigs that same day last year?" Atkins said. "I think we did Emack & Bolio's in the evening."

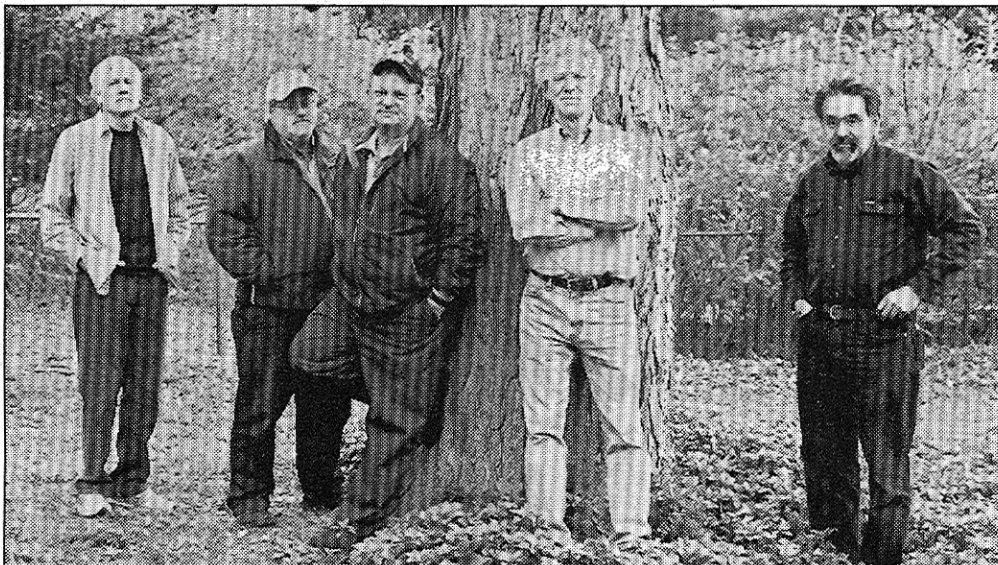
"It's becoming an annual tradition," Smith said.

GOOD FIT AT FESTIVAL

Three Quarter North first became involved with last year's Rhythm on the Ridge after festival founders J. Peter Yakel and his band The Flood Road Boys invited Three Quarter North's former mandolinist Dan Johnson to perform. The band's mix of bluegrass, roots rock, folk and jug band is a perfect fit with the other acoustic roots groups involved in the festival.

"It was the first year of the festival, and you could tell it was newborn," Atkins said. "But you have to start somewhere. It's a great place for an outdoor concert, I gotta say that."

This year, 19 local acts are scheduled to perform on three different stages throughout the day Saturday, including Ramblin Jug Stompers, The Bentwood Rockers and Happy Bally and the Good Livin', among others. And the festival has been expanded with camping and a "Pickin' with Pancakes" open mike breakfast hosted by Cavanaugh & Cavanaugh on Sunday morning. Like last year, canned food donations to the Regional Food Bank



PETER HOUGHTON

Dave Rhodes, left, Mark Smith, Jim Atkins, Mark Bagdon and Nelson Gage are the members of Three Quarter North.

Three Quarter North

WHEN: 7 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Emack & Bolio's Downtown, 366 Delaware Ave., Albany

HOW MUCH: Free

MORE INFO: 512-5100, www.ebalbany.com/art&music.php

will get you \$2 off admission. See Your Weekend, page D6, for a full schedule.

Three Quarter North, which since January has included Smith, Atkins, bassist David Rhodes, mandolinist Nelson Gage and fiddler Mark Bagdon, have actually been performing more festival-type dates of late, including an appearance at the January Old Songs sampler concert in Voorheesville and an appearance at the Dance Flurry in Saratoga Springs in February. The band has also previously been a regular at the Moon & River Cafe in Schenectady and performed once a month on WRPI's "Mostly Folk."

Smith, Atkins, Rhodes and Johnson first began playing together about four years ago, taking their name from a Leo Kottke song. "Because it sounded vaguely somewhere between folk and bluegrass," Atkins said.

That lineup recorded an album, "North by Northeast," which was released in the summer of last year and features songs by The Grateful Dead, Greg Brown and originals by Rhodes (who, along with Smith, is the band's main songwriter). When Johnson left the group, Bagdon and Gage came aboard.

"These two fellows are bringing in all kinds of stuff that we're really having an absolute ball learning to play as a group," Atkins said. "I think we're a source of some consternation to them with the strange way that we go about putting our own songs and stuff together."

MIXED BACKGROUNDS

The group members' varied musical backgrounds come into play in the band's musical mix. Bagdon is a classically trained violinist and the concert master of the Delmar Community Orchestra, while Atkins "can't read a note of music." The band's two songwriters also bring different flavors to the group — while Rhodes often tackles historical subjects in songs about the Wright Brothers and Niagara Falls, Smith goes for the more personal, singer-songwriter approach.

"It blends well, and I think it keeps our shows interesting," Smith said. "We have a lot of repeating fans that come to see us, and we have a pretty large well of material to draw from, and we always throw a lot of surprises in. Like I say, in a given night, you can hear anything from The Beatles to Loudon Wainwright III."

"It's kind of like what you might have heard ... if you walked into a coffee house circa 1968," Atkins added.

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