

## Living a legacy

Branson's first family of entertainment celebrates 50 years of music and laughter

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RURALMISSOURI.ORG

6/1/2009



Tokyo-born Mike Ito has performed with the Baldknobbers Jamboree since 1979. Fans enjoy watching Mike's fingers fly on the banjo, fiddle and mandolin during the show. Buy a print of this photo.

It's 7 p.m. and the Mabe (rhymes with "babe") family and other cast members begin to mosey into their dressing rooms to prepare for the show. Laughter and conversation quickly fill the air and no one seems the least bit stressed by the fact the curtain will go up in less than an hour. Other than tuning their instruments, there's no need for practice, as most of the cast has been performing together for years.

The door to one dressing room stands open. While you might think this room, where two comedians warm up, would be the loudest room in the place, it's surprisingly void of

laughter. Two of the show's comics, Stub Meadows and Hargus Marcel (aka Jeri Adams) have "American Idol" on a TV that hangs in the corner of the room.

"We never miss an episode," says Hargus, straightening his colorful 3-foot-long neck tie. "Yeah, never," says Stub, hooking a thumb into his overalls.

If the comedic duo is joking, you wouldn't know, because they're used to delivering straight lines in side-splitting comic performances every evening as part of the Baldknobbers Jamboree Show.

Back in 1959 when four brothers — Lyle, Jim, Bill and Bob Mabe from Christian County — started the Baldknobbers, there were no music shows in Branson. Today, Branson is a mecca of entertainment. Many shows have come and gone, but only a handful have had the staying power of the Baldknobbers.

This year, the Baldknobbers celebrate their 50th anniversary as Branson's first live music show. The current 19-member cast has expanded sizably from the quartet of brothers who began this entertaining Branson family enterprise in 1959, but the down home spirit remains.

The Mabe brothers opened their family variety show in downtown Branson in the old city hall. With 50 folding chairs, a banjo, dobro, wash tub bass, washboard and the jawbone of a mule for rhythm, their goal was to entertain the fishermen and families who visited Lake Taneycomo. Ticket signs back then read, "Big 'uns \$1, little 'uns, 50¢."



The Baldknobbers musical tribute to each branch of the military has become a signature segment at the end of each performance.

According to family historian and band leader Brent Mabe, if there weren't 12 people attending a show, his Uncle Jim (aka comedian Droopy Drawers Sr.) would go out and ask them if they'd come back the next night so they'd have a bigger crowd.

"We haven't had to do that for a long time," says Tim, Jim's son. Tim is the show's producer and also is known as comedian Droopy Drawers Jr. to fans these days.

The original group wanted a memorable name for their show, so the brothers settled on the Baldknobbers, after an Ozark vigilante group known for meeting on treeless hilltops or “bald knobs.” The regional name seemed a natural fit, so they adopted the catchy moniker.

“I think for a long time people thought they were going to see some kind of vigilante play when they came,” says Brent, “not a two-hour music and comedy show.”

It was only a few years later, in 1963, when the Baldknobbers popularity forced them to move to a bigger location. They bought an old skating rink and created Branson’s first live music theater. In 1968, the Baldknobbers built their current 1,500-seat theater, which is served by White River Valley Electric Cooperative, on Highway 76. They also added a motel and restaurant to the property at that time, so the audience could stay on-site while attending performances.

Mabe cousins Brent and Tim were invited to join the show in 1985, representing the second generation of Mabees to grace the Baldknobber’s stage. Both men say growing up around the show was all they knew.



The four brothers who started the Baldknobbers variety show in Branson in 1959 include, from left, Bill, Jim, Bob and Lyle Mabe.

“When I was a baby, my mom and dad would put me in a guitar case to sleep during the show,” says Brent, who plays bass and guitar. “I guess I can say I really have grown up in the business.”

Tim remembers earning 50 cents for putting bumper stickers on cars and free Cokes for helping clean up the auditorium. He says some fans recall watching him play ball in the parking lot with a crushed soda cup.

Some might think being a member of the Mabe family automatically gets you on the show, but that's not so.

"There will always be room for more Mables, but you have to earn your spot. You've got to try out just like anyone else," says Tim, who quickly adds that many family members work behind the scenes, handling the lighting, accounting or even snack and gift shop sales. Six of the current performers are second- or third-generation Mables.

"And if you're not a Mabe but you're part of the show, it doesn't mean you're not part of our family, because you are," Tim adds. "We don't have one star in the show — the show is our star and all of us put our mark on every performance."

According to Tim, the formula of today's show is nearly the same as it was in 1959. "Family comedy has always been a big part of the show," says Tim, who says he wanted to be a comedian since he was able to walk.

"Putting good, clean comedy around great country music was the formula they started with," he adds. "We may have fancier costumes, a bigger cast and a greater variety of music, but the formula's stayed pretty much the same."

Tim also thinks their best quality is that they entertain everyone from the age of 2 to 92. "We offer a good blend of country music and comedy everyone can enjoy." Some fans can't seem to get enough of the variety show.



Vocalist Joy Bilyeu, granddaughter of original member Bill Mabe, fixes her hair and makeup for a performance. Joy is part of the third generation of Mables who perform with the Baldknobbers.

“We’ve been coming to the Baldknobbers show for 18 years,” says Barbara Mathis of Marshfield. “We come every Saturday night, and if we’re not there, they’re looking for us.”

Barbara’s husband Alfred agrees. “Every time we go, we laugh like we’ve never been there before,” says the 72-year-old member of Webster Electric Cooperative. “To us, they’re the best in town.”

Vocalist Joy Bilyeu, granddaughter of original cast member Bill Mabe, sums the show up perfectly for anyone who hasn’t seen the Baldknobbers in action.

“We’re like the Grand Ole Opry on speed,” Joy says. “Our show has always been the fastest show on the strip. We give you two hours packed full of music and comedy that everyone in the family will enjoy.”

“If you get up and go to the restroom, you’re gonna miss something for sure. You never get the exact same show, even if we plan it,” says vocalist Denton Mabe. Denton is also a third generation Mabe.

Despite the popularity of the Baldknobbers show, the family bucks the Branson trend of offering matinee shows and continues to give only one show at 8 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Joy says while the family is happy with their many years of success, they aren’t greedy.



A fan poses with Tim Mabe, also known as Droopy Drawers Jr. The entire cast sits along the stage to visit with fans and sign autographs during intermission.

“Grandpa Bill used to say, ‘Well how much do you need?’” recalls Joy, putting emphasis on the word “need.” “He wanted all of us to have a good life and actually have time to live it. If you do two shows a day, the show basically becomes your life.

“I think Grandpa would be proud of the show today,” says Joy. “We’ve stayed true to their formula because it’s worked for 50 years, and we wouldn’t dream of changing it now.”

Long-time Baldknobber fans Alfred and Barbara Mathis agree.

“If the Mabe family hadn’t started this show, we don’t think Branson would be what it is today,” says Alfred, a faithful fan. “If you come to Branson and don’t come to see the Baldknobbers, you’ve missed something good.”

For more information or to order tickets, call 800-998-8908 or log on to <http://www.baldknobbers.com>.