

NO TIE, NO NO PRO



Photo by Liz Linder

NO JACKET PROBLEM

BY AMY DUNN WILLIAMS



The Loomers performing for Café 939's Executive Sessions series. On stage (L to R) are Tom Simons, Jack Cavalier, and Michael Cahill.

■ Music has always been a big part of Tom Simons's life. The 55-year-old Boston resident has been playing guitar since he was in fifth grade, and practices four or five times a week. His band, The Loomers, was a 2004 finalist in Fortune's Battle of the Corporate Bands. And as the president of marketing communications firm Partners+simons, he's learned a lot balancing between work and play.

When Berklee College of Music in Boston approached Simons about putting together a concert series to open their new café and music venue, Café 939, he was happy to lend a hand. The college was interested in featuring bands whose members included CEOs and company executives, and Simons was asked to help recruit them. Altogether, five other bands were brought on board, and The Loomers opened the series April 17.

Inside Executive Sessions

Café 939 is a student-run venue on the Berklee campus that holds about 200 people. It's dedicated to showcasing student artists, as well as local and national acts. Says Simons, "It's a great venue to play, kind of an intimate, club-like environment. Plus, they don't serve alcohol, so there's no beer spilled all over the floor!"

As an on-campus establishment, Café 939 is somewhat unique as a live concert venue. Simons says this made it a fitting location for the equally-unique concert series. Recreational musicians, with day jobs that fall outside the realm of music making, rarely get this kind of platform for their talents, and the reputation of Berklee College made the experience even more special.

"Berklee is the epicenter of contemporary music; they're in the business of creating the best musicians," he says. "There is a different kind of air breathed on that campus. Being able to set up my guitar on that stage, knowing the caliber of musicians who would be there after me, was a real thrill."

Getting to meet so many people who share his passion was another perk of participating in the series. "It's very enriching personally to meet so many other people who have made music such a big part of their lives, even though they've gone on to have careers that have nothing to do with music," he says.

Ernie Boch, Jr., 50, of the band Ernie and the Automatics agrees. The Berklee graduate, who is now president and CEO of Subaru New England and lives in the Boston area, says, "When I first heard the idea, I thought it was great. It's been a really good opportunity to connect the college with the community."

All of the bands were responsible for promoting their own shows, and the club was consistently filled throughout the series, which ended June 25. Proceeds from each show went to benefit the college's scholarship funds. The bands featured ranged from the semi-professional, like The Loomers and Ernie and the Automat-

ics, to the entirely amateur, like the band SIX, marking its first-ever public gig.

Balancing it All

Like most recreational musicians, both Boch and Simons say that finding a balance between career, the responsibilities of home life, and making music can be a challenge. Simons lives in a condo, and uses headphones when he practices his guitar so that he won't disturb his neighbors. Boch, who has two small children, also finds himself plugging in for silent practices.

Simons first joined the Loomers when the group decided to audition for the Battle of the Corporate Bands. The group had four members at the time, two of whom were employees at Simons's firm. To be eligible for entry in the contest, a band had to have more than 50% of its membership coming from the same company. The group invited Simons to join them, and he's been playing with them ever since.

"It's so important to me that I keep a hand in the world of music, and this band has allowed me to do that," Simons says. "For that, I'm grateful. When I first joined, I just wanted to help them fill out the band, and my only goal was to not suck! Since then I've played on two albums, and perform with them about five times a year."

The rest of The Loomers play more often, but are flexible where Simons's career is concerned. "I can't dedicate the time to the band that I'd like," he explains. "But the time I spend with them is great."

Returning to the Stage

As for Boch, the formation of Ernie and the Automatics marked an end to a 15-year hiatus from playing guitar. Though he'd graduated from Berklee College, he'd chosen to enter the family tradition of working in the automotive industry, and had allowed his musical pursuits to stall. "I enjoyed my time at Berklee, but eventually I started to realize how many talented students there were, and how many of them were better than me. I thought that making a career as a professional musician would be really difficult."

His return to the stage was intimidating at first, especially because the other members of The Automatics have professional music backgrounds, playing with groups that include The Beaver Brown Band and RTZ, among others. "I was pretty frightened to be playing with these guys," he says. "I was just trying to keep up."

Today the group plays often, and Boch says they have 80 gigs booked for the coming year. They've opened for acts as diverse as

B.B. King and Godsmack, and made their Executive Sessions debut May 15. Most of the band's gigs are at night, so Boch is able to find time for both his professional life and his band life. "I'm fortunate that I have the kind of career that allows me to do this. Aside from occasionally making my wife mad, it all works out," he laughs.

What the Future Holds

The future looks bright for both The Loomers and Ernie and the Automatics. The Loomers have a new album available on iTunes called *Tomorrow Today* and have gigs scheduled into the new year. Ernie and the Automatics' new album, *Low Expectations*, was released in August.

Both Simons and Boch continue to search for ways to balance their music with the rest of their busy lives, and say that, while it isn't always easy to do, the joy they get from playing makes it all worthwhile. "For me, playing is an adrenaline rush," says Boch. "I have kids now, so I can't take risks. I can't be bungee jumping or skydiving, or picking up and heading to Katmandu. This is my big thrill in life."

As for the Executive Sessions series, Simons says that plans are underway to make the series an annual event. "Personally, I'd do it in a heart beat," he says.



Photo by: Phil Farnsworth

Members of Ernie and the Automatics (L to R) Barry Goodreau, Ernie Boch, and Tim Archibald perform at the Berklee College of Music's on campus Café 939 during its Executive Sessions series.