

Long Live the BoDeans?

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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When The BoDeans close the opening day of the River Roots Live festival on Friday, August 19, it might be your last chance to see the group. And the guys could certainly use your support.

Five days after the band's appearance at the Davenport festival, the band has a court date, at which it will ask a judge to reconsider his ruling that portions of the band's lawsuit with its ex-manager must be re-tried. In May, a jury awarded the BoDeans more than \$200,000, finding that former friend and manager Mark McCraw breached his contract with the band.

The verdict was liberating, and band members thought it was the end of a conflict that had nearly paralyzed the BoDeans for the better part of a decade. "We were free of it all of a sudden," singer, songwriter, and guitarist Kurt Neumann told the *River Cities' Reader*. "You feel like you're alive again."

But when the judge in late July ordered that portions of the lawsuit be re-tried, the BoDeans were crestfallen. "It was a big surprise," Neumann said. "Judges almost never go in and change a jury's verdict."

The band owes several hundred thousand dollars in legal bills, and they're considering shutting down the BoDeans for good. "It's not about money anymore," Neumann said. "It's about someone trying to kill the band. All you can do is say it's not worth it anymore."

If the judge denies the motion to reconsider, Neumann said, the band will be at a crossroads. He wouldn't definitively say whether the BoDeans would break up, but he said it would likely be the end. "It certainly feels like it is," he said. "It doesn't seem like the legal process is on our side."

The band recorded its most recent New Year's Eve show, and the resultant CD and DVD sets (called *Homebrewed*) were anticipated as a celebration of the BoDeans' freedom from its legal quagmire. "We were moving forward toward this big celebration," Neumann said.

Now the live set, due in stores on August 16, is looking more like a swan song.

This certainly shouldn't be the way the BoDeans say goodbye. The band formed in Wisconsin

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in 1984 with Neumann and fellow singer-songwriter-guitarist Sammy Llanas. The group's 1986 debut, *Love & Hope & Sex & Dreams*, was an immediate critical success, and *Rolling Stone* dubbed the quartet its best new band of the year. As the magazine gushed when it reviewed that album: "So few roots-oriented bands manage to be accessible that there's a danger of going overboard when one comes into sight. But the BoDeans, out of Wisconsin, are one of the few – so let's go overboard a bit. Guitarists Sammy Llanas and Kurt Neumann write tight, snappy pop songs that acknowledge tradition and then expand on it – this is no mere revivalism or wistful nostalgia."

Rolling Stone

has also called the band's sound "starry-eyed heartland pop."

A commercial highlight for the band came in 1996, when its 1993 song "Closer to Free" was selected as the theme song for the hit show *Party of Five*. But that was also about the time that issues started to crop up in the contract between the band and McCraw, who had managed the BoDeans for two decades. The manager went "on strike," in Neumann's words, and as a result the band severed his contract before it expired. The issue of whether McCraw's actions represented an effective resignation is at the heart of the current legal dispute.

With legal issues hanging over it, the band was in limbo, unable to get a manager. Between 1996 and 2004's ironically titled *Resolution*, the band didn't release a new studio disc. Neumann said the group was active, but "we were in a place where we couldn't get anything done."

While the prospect of a re-trial is "nagging" at Neumann, on stage the band is able to get away from the problems that have dogged it for nearly 10 years. Members can feed off the crowd energy, and remember that they play songs and became a band for the *music*, not the bullshit that goes along with the business end. "The band is playing better than ever," Neumann said, and in concert the group can get away from the "undercurrent of negativity."

Neumann said he and Llanas have about 15 tracks demoed for the BoDean's next album, a quieter disc that they want to release in the spring. But with the looming court date, that's been put on hold. Neumann said he hopes it gets finished.

"Everything you do lately is, 'Maybe this is the last thing we put out,'" Neumann said.