Written by Jeff Ignatius
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Bob Dorr has a self-effacing way, with something serious and true behind it. "I'm like all the dot-coms that are going under but on a much smaller scale," he said. One of his favorite lines is that the genius of The Blue Band is its persistence. That's another way of saying that it succeeds primarily by surviving.

But pegging himself a failure is a mistake. Dorr, a Quad Cities native, has fronted The Blue Band for 20 years and 17 albums with violinist Molly Nova. He's also been active in numerous side projects, has his own record label (Hot Fudge Records), and is familiar to many through his work with the band and on public television and radio. He is also a great champion of local and regional bands.

It's true that Dorr and the Cedar Rapids-based The Blue Band haven't collected the fame and fortune – or even record-deal stability – that they've sought, even when they've bent their sound and efforts toward those ends. But record contracts and sales are merely functions of commercial success, and for people who care about music, those are secondary.

Dorr calls himself "quite cynical" and is clearly ambivalent about his place in the music world, excited about the noise he's making with the Blue Band and yet frustrated by the group's difficulty in finding bigger things. "I don't do it for the money any longer," Dorr said, "but I don't give the money back."

That's Dorr's jaded side speaking, but the edge falls away when he talks about the band's music. The Blue Band released a self-titled album late last year (see "Comfortable as an Old Married Couple," River Cities' Reader, Issue 308, January 31-February 6, 2001), and Dorr's proud of it. "It really showcases the feeling we've been after for a long time," he said.

Unlike the band's other albums, *The Blue Band* was not recorded straight through over the course of a few days. Instead, it was tracked in between live performances. While regularly shifting gears (live to studio to live to studio) presented some challenges, it kept the memory of playing together before an audience fresh in the minds of band members.

The band has had difficulty capturing the "energy and spontaneity" of live performance on previous records, and the end results were frequently unsatisfying, Dorr said. While some groups tour to support studio records, The Blue Band is all about the live experience. "That's what we do," he noted. "We play live for a living. The newest one [record] has gotten closer to that than any of the others."

The Blue Band had two weeks of recording time for the album, also, so players were looser and not afraid to experiment and make mistakes. Because studio time is so precious, on previous outings band members often tried to make everything perfect the first time through. "It was a little more relaxed," Dorr said.

That things were different after 20 years is little surprise. Although The Blue Band still has three of its original members, it has rarely just stayed the course.

Dorr has regularly re-positioned the band to try to make some headway on his goal of

national exposure. Some of the strategies have been little more than pandering rather than focusing on the music. The two albums previous to *The Blue Band* showcased Dorr and Nova to the exclusion of the band's other members, as Dorr tried to land the band a record deal. He said that he was trying to craft records with a signature sound – with himself singing and Nova on her five-stringed electric violin – because that's what labels wanted.

It didn't work. Dorr said that he began to realize that "forty-somethings just don't get deals."

The group shifted to a more egalitarian approach for The Blue Band, with all members sharing songwriting and vocal duties. The new album has 12 songs and six different vocalists. "I really like that concept a lot," Dorr said. There's "a stronger bond between the people in the band. … You're stronger together than you are individually."

There's also a practical component to the strategy. Band members feel more like a team than hired guns when they get a chance in the spotlight.

Spreading responsibilities and making sure each member gets to shine does result in an album that's less cohesive than one dominated by Dorr and Nova. Those who treasure the fresh sound that Nova's squall brings to the blues will be disappointed that she only puts bow to string on three of The Blue Band's tracks. "You have six egos involved and only 12 songs," Dorr explained.

But the leader of The Blue Band seems happy to have ceded the spotlight and likes where his group is headed. He's especially happy that he's attracted some younger band members. Three people in the band have been playing together the full 20 years and a fourth has been around a long time, but two are mere children – 28 years old each.

Youth has made a difference. Dorr said that he feels The Blue Band has been "reinvented" since guitarist Bryce Janey joined in 1999. That process was both conscious and accidental; the addition of younger musicians was an attempt "to bring in some new blood," but changing personnel almost always alters sound and band dynamics. Dorr said he thinks The Blue Band has "a more contemporary blues sound" than it did before Janey joined.

The band has just begun playing locally again after a trip to play an Idaho music festival – geographically farther afield than The Blue Band had ever gone before, and outdoors in the middle of winter to boot.

Quad City fans of the band will get their first chance since last year to see Dorr, Nova, and Company on Saturday at O'Meara's. There might not seem to be an urgency to see a band that plays more than 100 dates a year and has already logged two decades of performance, but Dorr demands your attention. He's not going away anytime soon.

For more information about The Blue Band or Hot Fudge Records, visit (http://www.theblueband.com).