

3 guys, 30 instruments and 30 years with 1 band

By Burt Constable | Daily Herald Columnist

Rock bands break up, egos get out of hand, musicians burn out, and a new study says band members are much more likely to die early.

That makes the consistency and longevity of the New Odyssey band even more of an oddity. For 30 years, the band with roots in the suburbs has been on the road, playing gigs, telling jokes and making music nationwide.

"It's very much like a marriage," says Michael Jay, 55, a vocalist, guitarist and composer. "You fight, but you are committed. Your goals are the same."

The band's numbers range from classic rock to classical music, and from bluegrass to dance music.

"We've probably forgotten more songs than I know," says Gary Polkow, 53, the group's musical director, keyboard player and master of a dozen instruments.

Everyone in the band plays multiple instruments -- sometimes at the same time.

At a recent practice in the basement of Polkow's modest Warrenville home, drummer Gary Todd, 53, learns the trumpet part by ear for the Chicago classic "25 or 6 to 4."

"Now, I've got to play the horn part while playing the drums," Todd explains, with one hand on the horn.

"I'm adding a slide trombone as we speak," Polkow says. "It's a constant change."

Except when it comes to the band's members.

Todd, the group's main comedian, joined an existing group in 1977. Polkow was added a few months later. Jay, who lives in Roselle, is the newest member of the trio, having joined in 1978. At times New Odyssey has had four members, but it's been the three of them for ages.

A 1969 graduate of Wheeling High School, Jay sang and played rhythm guitar for school dances and in clubs with his band "The Other Side."

Polkow, a five-time Illinois state accordion champion, switched to piano and organ as a teenager when he joined a band called Strapperjak, which played Chicago clubs.

As part of a traveling act with his parents and brothers called "Harry Todd and the Toddlers," Todd began his showbiz career at age 2.

"We were acrobats with trained dogs," says Todd, a regular on TV's old "Bozo Show." "Trained kids and trained dogs."

In an industry known for chewing up young talent and forcing musicians to seek side jobs in the "real world," New Odyssey has carved out a stable career playing everything from county fairs and suburban church festivals to massive trade shows and corporate outings. They've gotten repeat gigs playing before 25,000 people at RV rallies, national conventions and festivals.

The www.newodyssey.net Web site lists dozens of testimonials and upcoming public appearances across the suburbs and beyond.

"We've even played for weddings and then their kid's wedding," Todd says. "We should start a promotion: Hire us for your wedding and your kid's wedding, and we'll do your grandkids free."

The trio caters their show to their audience.

"That's the difference between us and musicians who don't make a living," says Todd, who lives in Johnsbury. "We want to make our house payments and send our kids to college."

All three guys have longtime, stable marriages and kids. While Polkow has composed music for video games such as "Halo," and Jay has written and performed commercial jingles, the band members split all New Odyssey profits and expenses. They save money by driving home immediately after far-flung shows, taking turns driving the New Odyssey truck, which has a couple of sleeping bunks.

"We are the roadies," Todd says, noting the guys pack up quickly so they can get back to their families. "It's not like Gary meets a girl in the audience and wants to hang around."

They are suburban dads who have overcome the rock music odds.

"It's amazing that we've stayed together, stayed married and managed to make all of it work," Jay says. "It's a good thing."