

# In 'Tune,' despite mental illness

*Musicians show their stuff and break down stereotypes*

BY RYAN THOMPSON

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Looking like he just finished a tour with the Ramones, Mark Batten — with his long black-and-blond hair, cowboy boots and guitar — strolled up to the microphone for a sound check March 21.

"Hellllloo-o-o — Is anybody in there?" sang Batten, a mental health client, paying homage to musical group Pink Floyd.

He sounded good — better than most Floyd cover bands.

"Sometimes I come with a specific list; sometimes I just feel the mood," said Batten, explaining his play list to the crowd.

Around 50 people came to the Cambridge Senior Center last week to watch Batten, and the rest of Tunefoolery, play.

Tunefoolery is a music group composed of and run by Cambridge people who are receiving mental health services. It was formed in 1994 out of North Charles Inc.'s Cambridge/Somerville Social Club, a drop-in center for adults with psychiatric disabilities. Today, Tunefoolery has 32 musicians who perform in ensembles as well as solo acts, mostly for mental health and social service agency clients, but also for the general public. During its seven years of existence,



Tunefoolery has given almost 300 concerts, reaching more than 15,000 audience members.

The group's mission is to: give consumers of mental health services creative opportunities for healing and for vocational rehabilitation; provide underserved populations with greater access to the arts; empower the realization of musical talent; and promote awareness and increased understanding of mental illness among the general public.

The audience at the Senior Center seemed to love Batten's covers of the Doors' "Crystal Ship" and U2's "With or Without You." His fans applauded loudly when his set was over.

"OK. Let's hear it for you, too," Batten said with a smile.

And the music wasn't over. Batten

was the second of 16 performances that night.

"Our next performers are going to play the Native American flute and drums," said Paul Thompson, a patient, musician and the emcee for the night. "Step up and meet fame."

The evening was filled with a wide variety of instruments and musical styles: Mark Irwin and Gretel Munroe played recorders. Katherine Mazlish offered Billy Joel songs. Bill Abrams played Mozart music for the piano. Reda Bress played original music on the keyboard. Cathy Mullane sang Celtic ballads. Victor Ransom played clarinet.

But guitar seemed to be the most popular of Tunefoolery tools. Seven of the musicians picked the six-string as their musical weapon of choice.



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**At right, Bill Abrams offers a little piano music, Mozart-style. Above, Mark Batten sings a Doors song at the Cambridge Senior Center last week.**

Doug Goldberg, a patient, and Stack Kenny, a Social Club staff worker, teamed up on guitar for a Woody Guthrie tune. The strumming duo played at the Kendall Café the night before and "had the crowd practically roaring with enthusiasm," Thompson said. On March 20, several local bands played at the café to raise money for Tunefoolery. Matt Squire and Bill

MUSIC, page 16

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**MUSIC**, from page 13

Spear, two Social Club staff workers, played with their respective bands, Chubby and Naked Sams.

"It was our chance to see Matt and Bill as we don't at the Social Club," said Munroe, Tunefoolery's director of development.

Folks associated with Tunefoolery credit Squire and Spear with organizing last week's series of benefit concerts, which included gigs at the Middle East and T.T. the Bear's Place. The events show-

cased Aaron Perrino of The Sheila Divine, Steve Brodsky of Cave-in, and Six Going On Seven, among others.

"Matt has, through his connections, gotten a lot of clubs and musicians to support us," said Jens Rybo, artistic director of Tunefoolery.

Squire, also a guitarist, collaborated with several Tunefoolery musicians at the Senior Center show. He and Rybo joined forces with Thompson, a singer/guitarist,

for the concert finale.

"We're gonna' wrap it up this evening with a couple [of] rock 'n' roll songs," Thompson said.

The excited crowd cheered and the trio ended the show with music by The Beatles and Carl Perkins.

Last week's show wasn't a typical gig, however. Usually, only three or four Tunefoolery members play at each venue. The shows are usually held at mental-health day treatment centers, nursing homes and hospitals.

"We try to bring music to places where they don't get much music," Rybo said.

Tunefoolery also plays at schools to educate children about mental illness.

"To show the kids that people with mental illness can be creative and successful and wonderful people," Rybo explained. "To challenge the idea that people with mental illness are violent or dangerous."

This is too often the stereotype that is projected by the media, he said.

Rybo took over as artistic director of Tunefoolery a year ago, but has been working with the ensemble as a volunteer for about seven years. The musical ensemble was formed in 1994 by a Social Club staff worker and Irwin, a patient.

Irwin still plays flute for Tunefoolery and is now the project leader.

"Maybe I'm not John Lennon, but then who is?" Irwin said before his recorder performance.

Also performing were Michael Joyce, Rick Davenport and Steve "the Bobby Fisher of Blues" Bass, who sang rock vocals and played guitar. Also on the schedule were a

drummer, a folk singer and a flute player/keyboardist — but they preferred not to have their names published. Chris Yang, a staff worker, helped out Tunefoolery on a couple of occasions with his violin skills.

Tunefoolery is funded in part by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health. Although it's a successful program, Tunefoolery is struggling financially, Rybo said. To make a donation or find out more about Tunefoolery, contact the Cambridge/Somerville Social Club at (617)576-6570 or visit their Web site at [www.northcharles.org/tunefoolery.htm](http://www.northcharles.org/tunefoolery.htm).