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Partying like it's 1968

*Local men live out their rock star dreams
in 'The Class of '68'*

BY ABBY SCALF
ascalf@dailyherald.com

If you were going to a high school dance in 1968, imagine what you would hear.

"The whole idea is to bring people back to that time and place where they were at a high school dance in 1968," Steve Wild said.

That is the focus for Wild and the five guys who make up The Class of '68, who all share a love for 1960s music.

"The irony of all things, we're both class of 1968," said band member Jim Bartholomew, also referring to band mate Woody Johnson.

By performing to all generations across the Chicago area and releasing two CDs, including "Reunion" earlier

this month, they bring back the decade's wide range of music and its high energy.

"What I enjoy most is it's fun, upbeat and leaves you feeling good," Wild said.

Wild recalls growing up in Chicago in the 1960s, when all he listened to was rock and roll. The sound of garage bands filled every alley, particularly after the Beatles arrived in 1963.

"Everybody picked up a guitar," said Wild, now of Lake Forest. "Everybody played."

For him, the desire to play stopped on June 25, 1970, when, riding his bike home from band practice, he got hit by a car.

But he never wanted to pick up the guitar again because he didn't like where music was

going. "It was sex, drugs and rock and roll, and it was a path I did not want to go down at that time," Wild said.

He instead pursued a career in professional tennis and athletic club management and now owns clubs in Lincolnshire, Libertyville and Racine, Wis., and two in Kenosha. He also devoted time to coach his daughter, Linda, who played professional tennis from 1987 to 2000, earning 12 career titles.

Then 32 years after stopping playing the guitar, and two months after his children bought him guitar lessons, Wild volunteered to play guitar at his friend Bob Ross' 60th birthday party.

With help, he lined up others to play, including his daughter's husband, Brian Secord, on keyboard.

Wild needed a singer, and he met Woody Johnson.

Wild said to Johnson, "You don't know me from Adam. I have not played in 32 years. Would you mind singing 10 tunes with me?"

Johnson thought, why not? He loves '60s music, calling the decade the best period of time for music ever.

"Every other day in the '60s someone broke out," Johnson said. "Everybody jumped out. Each artist was so different from the next one"

After the party, Wild started manufacturing gigs, his wife's birthday party or the club Christmas party.

"It was one of those things I never ever anticipated doing," Wild said. "And I've fallen in love with it and can't imagine living without it."

Bartholomew joined one year later, adding a new vocal dimension with Johnson. Added to the band are Dave Steffen on lead guitar and Dave Wisniewski on drums.

Wild said they take time to plan their song list. If it doesn't pass the feel-good test, they won't play it.



COURTESY OF CLASS OF '68

Bringing 1960s music to generations across the Chicago area are six men who make up a band called The Class of '68. They are, from left, Dave Steffen of Deerfield, Jim Bartholomew of Roselle, Dave Wisniewski of Wheaton, Brian Secord of Lincolnshire, Steve Wild of Lake Forest and Woody Johnson of Schaumburg.



COURTESY OF THE CLASS OF '68

Dave Steffen, left, and Steve Wild are among the varied backgrounds who make up the band. Steffen has performed with many bands through his life and shared the stage with artists such as Isaac Hayes, Randy Travis and Martina McBride. Wild developed his career in professional tennis and athletic club management.

"When you see a Class of '68 show, you want to leave there having a good time," he said. "If we can't get somebody on the dance floor, we feel it hasn't been a successful night."

If one song defines the band, it is "Devil with a Blue Dress." They end most shows with it. And they start with a medley of "Bend Me, Shake Me" and "Wooly, Bully."

"We rock the '60s. We love the rock, the drive," Johnson said.

They also like "Mony, Mony," by Tommy James and the Shondells, and "Alright Now," by Free, which was recorded Dec. 30, 1969.

Bartholomew said they also play one-hit wonders like "Black is Black" by Los Bravos

or "Lies" by Buddy Randall.

Two of their favorite bands are Paul Revere and the Raiders and the Monkees, neither in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Bartholomew said.

"We try to bring the under-appreciated songs out front and make people see how good they are. There are so many good things that get forgotten in the '60s," he said.

The band created their first CD to sell and use as promotional material to earn more gigs. Wild adds that they hand out CDs at most shows.

"We want them to take a little bit of the band home with them because they had a good time," Wild said.

One big difference from the first CD and the second, "Reunion," is that Johnson and

Bartholomew now share lead vocals. Another is the music that Steffen adds to "Reunion."

"He loves to rip. You'll hear him all over that thing. I think he is one of the best lead guitarists in Chicago," Wild said.

There is no question they will record more CDs. Wild said they only have scratched the surface so far.

"It is more of a question of picking the (songs) we want to do than trying to find some," Bartholomew said.

Wild said the band is a fantasy come true. They simply want to keep playing and enjoy it.

"So many kids in the '60s grew up wanting to be rock stars," Wild said. "Of course, we're not really rock stars, but we're the next best thing."