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Blue Moon Big Band

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Story: Jeff Royer

Photo: Press photo

If you're a righteous hepcat who thinks cutting rugs with a ripe tomato is a real killer diller, then grab your ring-ding woman, get togged to the bricks, and check out the swinging sounds of Baltimore's Blue Moon Big Band. (Or, if you're not hip to the 1940s swing lingo and have no idea what I just said, visit the band's Web site at www.bluemoonbigband.com for a quick tutorial.)

The Blue Moon Big Band has been rocking around the Eastern U.S. for six years under the leadership of original gasser Rob Leonard (and his barbecue of a wife, vocalist Teresa Leonard). The 19-piece orchestra has carried the torch of big band music into the new millennium with integrity, precision, and, most importantly, style. "It's a traditional 1930s, 1940s big band lineup - five saxes, four trombones, four trumpets, four-piece rhythm, which is bass, piano, guitar, drums," Rob Leonard explains. "Then there's the vocalist, and I'm the band leader, and I also play trumpet with the group, too." Managing a 19-piece band certainly isn't an easy task, but Leonard is adamant about producing an authentic sound on-stage, and, he says, there's only one way to go about it. "If you want to pay real tribute to the original orchestras from the '30s and the '40s, you know, Glenn Miller and the Dorsey Brothers, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman - I guess all the greats, if you want to use that term - the music they wrote was for that type of a group, for the full orchestra," he states. "You can play this music as a small ensemble, but it's not a big band. You're losing all that orchestration and the full sound, and we wanted to be authentic as much as possible and yet still have our sound to it."

While the Blue Moon Big Band gang may be sticklers for the traditional sound, they also possess a certain amount of energy that helps to draw Gap commercial-inspired swing dancers to their live sets. "We have people who listen to music and say, 'It's so great to hear this music again.' And these people are 70 or 80 years old, and that to me in itself is a tribute to say we must be doing something right," Leonard says. "But then you see these people in their late teens and 20s and 30s, and they're flipping each other around and throwing, and they love the jump and jive. It's amazing!" "We have youth and energy," Leonard continues. "We play the music with emotion and we put a little of ourselves into everything we play, and we try to deliver entertainment to the audience rather than just going up and playing a set of music."

The band will head into the studio this month to begin work on its fourth album, a double-CD collection of Christmas tunes set for release in the fall. Beyond that, Leonard's goal is to expand the band's turf, albeit moderately. "We're branching out to different places in Pennsylvania and D.C., and getting a little stretched out from the Baltimore area exclusively. We want to just keep playing as much as we can without the guys being away from their homes so much that they stop loving it," Leonard explains. "None of us do this to pay the rent, that's for sure. We do this because it's just something we enjoy."