

MEET THE BAND: Nicole Pignatelli, Rafael Calderon, Mike Crisp (of Dead End Kids), Dan Bangs (of Dead End Kids), Joe Crispiano, Bill Levay, Paul Buschmann, Mike Levay.

PHOTO COURTESY/DANIELLE MARIE WARD



BY BEN JOHNSON

After more than a year's worth of observation, the results are in and a diagnosis is possible. The Bandulos have a severe case of musical ADD. How else could one explain this unique group of Staten Island musicians, who seem to pop up everywhere from local cover band stomping grounds and open mic nights to reggae showcases and b-boy competitions?

The Bandulos wear so many hats, you'd think they rehearse in a haberdashery.

"We don't want to limit ourselves, and we try and be as versatile as we can," says singer/vocalist Bill Levay, 27, of Annadale, who formed the band a few years ago with some friends and his younger brother Mike. "That's why we're doing the backing band thing. We're trying to challenge ourselves by playing certain styles and stretching out."

The Bandulos' method of "stretching out" is quickly earning them a title as one of the most unique and ubiquitous groups in the local music scene, with a varied set of covers that includes hipster guilty pleasures like Ace of Bass's "All That She Wants" and choice cuts from Snoop Dog and Dr. Dre, and the skills to back some of the Island's original artists and events.

Need examples? Recent nights of breakdancing at Martini Red and St. Joseph Girl's High School saw the sextet producing live beats for the performers to break to, they've played with local hip-hop acts big and small, from the South Shore's Dead End Kids to Wu-Tang's RZA, and they're performing at Notes by Digi in Stapleton this weekend, as part of a semi-regular gig with underground reggae musician Milton Henry (see sidebar).

"Music is a language we all speak — it doesn't matter who plays as long as it's well played," says Henry, whose Saturday gig at Notes will double as

a release party for his new CD. "I was impressed with the way these guys did their thing, and people who have come to see me perform with them have been surprised and impressed as well. They have a lot of talent."

A mix of that talent and some luck has earned The Bandulos their diverse gig schedule. Walking to their rehearsal space on Sands Street one night, members of the band were approached by someone from Bobby Digi's club, Notes, who offered them a slot at an open mic, which led to them meeting Milton Henry.

The band's break-beat show at Martini Red put them in touch with a DJ who showed up to a rehearsal one night and miraculously produced mysterious Wu-Tang Clan leader RZA, who watched the band jam and even stepped up to the mic.

"He introduced himself as 'Bobby,' and mostly just watched us play a bit," says Bill. "But we pulled out this reggae song 'No No No,' and he had actually written something for that, so he jumped up on the mic. It was a pretty amazing experience."

The band's beginnings can be traced to a high school graduation party for Mike Levay, 21. A sort of impromptu jam started up, with Bill and Mike's Dad on bass, his younger son on guitar, his older son on vocals and trumpet, and family friend Paul Buschmann on drums.

"They asked me if I knew that Cake song, 'Short Skirt/Long Jacket,'" says trumpeter Rafael Calderon, 27, of Pleasant Plains, who had played trumpet with Bill in various bands at Tottenville High School.

"I hadn't ever played it but I knew I could, so we got up there and played it for the first time, and actually just killed it. That's when we sort of decided to start doing something."

After being named The Bandulos by Bill (after the Jamaican slang word for bandit), the band started playing cover songs and a few wedding and private party gigs here and there. Mike moved to bass, and Nicole Pignatelli, a long time friend of the band

members, introduced them to her boyfriend Joe Crispiano, who played guitar.

"I came from rock, like The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, that stuff," says Crispiano, 22, of Pleasant Plains.

"But the other guys got me listening to James Brown and a bunch of other stuff. It just sort of all came together."

Even Pignatelli was eventually asked to lend her soulful vocal to the band, and now the senior music major at the College of Staten Island is a full-time member, belting out fan favorites like the Aretha Franklin jam "Respect."

"I think they're all awesome musicians, so it's kind of an honor to play with them," says Pignatelli, 21, who composes her own solo acoustic material outside of the band as well. "But it's a lot of fun, too. We have a following now, and people really love to come and see us."

Thus far the band has stuck mostly to just live stuff: About half cover shows, weddings and parties, and half performances with original artists like Henry and Dead End Kids, a member of which is actually Crispiano's little brother.

It looks like their first real recording project will be with Dead End Kids, whose beats and production the band has learned to recreate with live instrumentation. But no matter what they're doing, one thing seems certain: The group isn't interested in focusing their efforts on just one thing.

"What I like most about what we're doing right now with all of these different avenues open is that it doesn't get stale," says Bill.

"If we were playing the same bar and songs week after week it would stop being fun for me and the other guys as well. Every rehearsal, we have to practice a different thing — cover songs, Milton songs, break beats. That's what keeps us fresh."

BACK TALK: AWE Music writer Ben Johnson can be reached at bjohnson@siadvance.com.

>> See the band live ...

Milton Henry & The Bandulos, 11 p.m. Saturday, Notes, 33 Water St., Stapleton. \$5 Admission

The Bandulos Cinco De Mayo party, 10 p.m. Monday, Big Nose Kate's, 2484 Arthur Kill Rd., Rossville.

The Bandulos cover set, 10:30 p.m. May 9, Dugout Pub, 1614 Forest Ave., Port Richmond Center.

Sample the sound: Bandulos.com, MySpace.com/bandulos

MILTON HENRY THE GREAT

Underground reggae legend Milton Henry is always lending his musical talents to the projects of others.

Hailing from Kingstons, Jamaica, the singer and musician has been part of vocal groups like the Leaders and the Emotions, worked with wacko genius Lee "Scratch" Perry and recorded many albums and songs, including 1985's well-regarded "Who Do You Think I Am," and a great version of Curtis Mayfield's "Gypsy Woman."

"I've always had a solo career, but I get calls to support, and it always pays well, so it's hard to say no," said the ultra-chill musician, scratching his gray and black beard during our interview last Thursday. "But recently I decided it's time to strengthen my solo career. It's been a long time since my last album, so it's time to go out on my own again."

It would be hard to hold the musician's new focus against him. Despite an impressive resume, Henry appears to be humble and mild-mannered. This may be why he's had plenty of help for his new solo project, not only from local band The Bandulos, whose in-the-pocket musicianship has backed the reggae songwriter at gigs from Bay Street to The Knitting Factory in Manhattan, but also from Bobby Digi, the international promoter who owns the club Notes by Digi on Water Street in Stapleton. Digi's Thello Entertainment company and its in-house studio aided Henry in taking sessions he'd recorded in Paris, Kingston and the States, and bringing them all together in one place.

"I've had attempts with different producers that haven't come to fruition," said Henry, who was spending time in the sandy patio out behind Digi's club, where the sun's rays could almost be likened to his original Island home. "But Bobby has a lot of energy; he isn't intending to stop, and that's the kind of organization I want to be with."

Raised in the rich tradition of reggae, Henry has always been a guy who is open to experimentation with other genres. His new CD deals not only with Caribbean music but also world music and other alternative influences like Afrobeat. When it is finally mixed and put out this summer, Henry has planned gigs in Japan, Hawaii, Denmark, Sweden, France and his native land of Jamaica.

But first comes this Saturday's gig at Notes with The Bandulos. Even though he's been all over, Henry likes working in the U.S. best, having moved here some 20 years ago to expand his musical horizons.

"There are more opportunities in the States than the Islands — better equipment and better venues," he says. If there's one thing Henry's learned in his more than four-decade career, though, it's that you never know where and how you'll find something that inspires a new direction.

"I was watching this band on the late show, Radiohead," he says. "I'd heard of them before but I'd never seen them perform, and I have to say I was really quite impressed with what they were doing. It was very interesting. I like things like that, when you see someone doing something that's so unique, it compels you to really pay attention."

— Ben Johnson, AWE

LIVE MUSIC: Milton Henry (backed by The Bandulos) plays at 9 p.m. Saturday at Notes by Digi, 33 Water St., Stapleton. Cover: \$5. Info: 212-714-6024, MySpace.com/miltonhenry50, notesbydigi.com.

INSET: Milton Henry during rehearsals at Notes by Digi. AWE/JAN SOMMA-HAMEL

One of the scene's busiest live bands keeps it fresh by juggling rock covers, b-boy competitions & reggae showcases

THE BANDULOS



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