

Bourbon St. signs off

Camp Zama jazz band says farewell

By Esther Dacanay
Torii Editor

Good food, good company and good music is what the patrons enjoyed at Mike's Tex Mex Restaurant on Saturday. It was the last time the *Bourbon St.* jazz band played at the restaurant after a yearlong partnership. The final performance for the band will be Friday at the cocktail lounge of Camp Zama's Veterans of Foreign Wars post.

"Playing and singing on *Bourbon St.* has been a blast," said Spc. Casey Walker, horn player and singer. "I would never hang out with some of these guys in my hometown, but we've learned from each other during our time in the band and we've made some of our best friends here."

Bourbon St. was first conceived in the mind of Sgt. 1st Class Leon Baker, an accomplished musician currently with the 296th Army Band of U.S. Army Japan.

"A bunch of the guys from the Army band wanted to get together for jam sessions, so we just started a band," said Baker, who started side gig bands at just about every Army base he's been stationed at. "All our jazz band members can read music. They're fantastic musicians and it's humbling for me to be working with them."

In addition, Baker said, many of them hold bachelor's degrees and have taught music classes around the world.

"Any one of them could charge \$40 per hour for a lesson," he said, "but they've all chosen to come out and volunteer to play

for free community entertainment."

Baker, who first joined the Army fifteen years ago after running out of money for college, constantly tells himself, "I'm the luckiest guy I know."

Baker was a ward of the court as a minor until he was emancipated at 16 years of age. His original plan was to go to college on a wrestling scholarship with no degree in mind, but then his high school band director steered him toward music. After years of performing band gigs at amusement parks and cruise ships, Baker finally answered an ad stating the need for military musicians.

"Of all the branches, the Army offered the best deal," he said. "Music saved my life, but the Army was able to offer me the stability that music couldn't always give."

Winnie Gonzalez, the former VFW lounge manager, says the band will be missed.

"I really enjoy listening to their music," she said. "We made more money on the nights they played at the VFW. It was always like a big party over there."

In addition to offering free community entertainment, *Bourbon St.* supports causes such as the Children's Cleft Palate Foundation in the Philippines.

Although *Bourbon St.* will soon be disbanded due to inevitable permanent change of duty stations for some members, the few remaining plan to continue the legacy.

"We don't want it to end," Walker said. "We're going to try to keep playing so we can continue to sharpen our skills."



Photos by Esther Dacanay



Members from the Bourbon St. jazz band give it all they've got during their last performance Dec. 8 at Mike's Tex-Mex Restaurant located near the Higashi Rinkan station on the Odakyu Line.

Baker bangs it out on the drum set at the Camp Zama Army band hall.

MWR to revive community theater program

By Esther Dacanay
Torii Editor

What's a community without a theatre program? That's a question the folks at Morale, Welfare & Recreation are working to answer.

After more than ten years without a community theatre program, "*The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*" made its debut at the Community Cultural Center with five performances which began on Nov. 30 and ran through Saturday. The production was the first of what is hoped to be many more productions by Camp Zama community volunteers.

The *Pageant*, directed by Kathy Foote, a thespian with more than 20 years of experience working with *Off Broadway* shows and Army community theatre, took the lead when MWR first announced the need for theatre volunteers during a monthly Community Information Exchange meeting.

Eight weeks, nearly 40 cast and crew members, and more than 1,000 volunteer hours later, a production was born. Judging from audiences averaging 75 attendees per performance, it was a hit. But the actual work involved wasn't as easy as it might have looked.

"I was very grateful for the people who did come through to help volunteer," said Foote. "I hope the community enjoyed what they saw and will support the theatre program so it can grow."

Camp Zama MWR director Jeffrey Wertz's vision for the theatre program entails three productions per year with an end-of-the-year community theatre academy awards ceremony. However, every vision needs help from people to make them a reality.

"It's amazing the talent we probably have here that we're not aware of," Wertz said. "I'm sure people here have done plays in the U.S. and have musical talent, but

currently, there is no creative outlet for them. My expectation is that by our second production, once word gets out, we will even have people coming out from Atsugi, Yokota or Yokosuka."

Although this first production was a hit, the more than 1,000 volunteer hours also came from MWR staff who worked overtime to help as backstage hands due to lack of community volunteers.

"We helped build and paint the stage sets and we had to recruit more help from Soldiers from the 441st Military Intelligence Battalion who came in to work the sound and lights," said Trish Cooper, MWR events coordinator. "Many evenings and weekends were spent here. We simply need more community volunteers to help make this happen."

The next community theatre production is planned for April 2008. For more information or to volunteer, call 263-3939.



Photos by Esther Dacanay

A few cast members from "*The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*" strike a pose after a matinee performance on Dec. 2 at the Community Cultural Center. An average of 75 guests attended the performance each night during the five separate shows presented.