

Sound and spirit

"In the beginning was the word; And the word was Braidstream," keyboardist Danny Ellis comments with a chuckle, as flutist Rita Hayes finishes relating the origin of the name of their eclectic musical group.

Hayes, co-founder (with Jeff Johnson) of the Asheville group, says the name was given to her by a friend in 1976. "At the time, I was living on top of a mountain, being an Earth Mama in a cabin with no electricity or running water," she remembers. "Jeff would visit me, and we would sit on the front porch and play flute duets. One day, a friend came to visit. When he left, walking down the mountain along a stream, he could hear the flute notes wafting on the breeze. He said the word "Braidstream" came to him as he was lulled by the music of the flutes mixing and mingling with the sound of the flowing stream."

Hopelessly romantic, yes -- but Hayes figured it was a great name for a group. To her, the term represented the confluence of musical energies -- an eclectic mix of sound and spirit. She held the name in her memory for nine years -- till 1985, when she and Johnson officially launched a musical group.

Over the years, the band members have changed, but Braidstream's distinctive sound has remained true to a richly textured tapestry of influences: classical, jazz, Celtic, Native American, progressive folk and world music. *The latest incarnation of the group (holding steady for two years now) has Hayes on flute, Johnson on guitar, Ellis on keyboards, Paul Ghost Horse on cello, and Allison Gore on harp.* But band members are far from limited to these instruments: The trombone, didjeridoo, sitar and hammered dulcimer are among the other instruments included in their bag of musical magic.

For most Braidstream members, the journey into music began with classical training. Both Hayes (who also plays in the Asheville Symphony Orchestra) and Johnson also have jazz in their musical backgrounds. Ghost Horse's musical pedigree is imbued with the Native American sounds and teachings absorbed while traveling for 10 years with his father, a Native American elder who lectured on the university circuit. Ellis, an Englishman and longtime rock 'n' roller, unearths his Celtic roots in the songs he writes and sings. And though Gore won a scholarship to study piano, developed a fondness for harp while in college and studied with a series well-known harp masters.

"The possibilities of what we can do is what compels us," says Hayes, speaking about the diverse styles, instruments and life experiences each band member brings to the group.

And while music is the reason these individuals came together, how and why the group *stays* together is quite another matter. All the players see their mutual endeavor as a spiritual growth experience. "Where we live with one another comes from a very deep place; That's where the music comes from, and it's a very intimate place," affirms Hayes.

And coming together, the group agrees, has compelled them to work through lots of personal issues to strengthen their collective relationship, so that the music can not only survive, but *thrive*. Members recall rehearsal sessions where not a note was played; rather, they felt it more important simply to talk. Once, they spent the whole session just dancing, so they could feel the beat and rhythm together. On other occasions, they've sat in a circle to chant and tone together -- to feel the resonance of all their voices mixing and meshing. "It's a very ancient spiritual practice, a very powerful experience," explains Hayes.

Busy performing at private events, Braidstream plays few public concerts, these days. But their First Night performance this year in Asheville drew a standing-room-only crowd in St. Lawrence's Basilica.

But for Braidstream, it's not just about playing gigs and making money. Creating music that they believe the planet needs is this band's true driving force. "There's something healing about music that is a salve for the wounds of today," muses Hayes. "It can sometimes touch us in ways that we wouldn't even know that that's where the wound was."

Comments