

“Alternative Music”



By Brian Szaks

What do pots, pans, stop signs, PVC piping, blue latex and the kitchen sink all have in common? They amaze and amuse thousands of guests each night at some of the most popular shows on the entertainment scene. These two hit productions were initially cooked up without spending millions.

Blue Man Group Paints an Audible Picture

Universal Orlando Resort recently held the grand opening of its Sharp AQUOS Theater featuring the now internationally famous act Blue Man Group. To create the theater, portions of the Nickelodeon Studios in the Universal Studios park were renovated and repainted. The theater has also been made accessible from CityWalk as well as from inside the park. While the building is striking, it's not what is on the outside that is amazing, but what's on the inside that's making (sound)waves.

Blue Man Group is a unique, high energy theatrical audience-participation party replete with musical feats and visual stimulation. The troupe – aptly named for their distinctive blue latex headcoverings and gloves – was founded on talent, spunk and low-budget creativity by Chris Wink, Matt Goldman and Phil Stanton, in New York City in the 1980s. Currently, their live stage shows can be seen in New York, Boston, Chicago, Las Vegas, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Oberhausen and the company has a few touring shows as well.

The choice of entertainment seems a perfect fit for a theme park company that is known for pushing the

concepts of edgy and hip, and the park agrees. “Blue Man Group is a natural partner for us and complements the incredible offerings already in place at Universal Orlando Resort,” says Bill Davis, President and Chief Operating Officer for the Universal Orlando Resort.

During the troupe's formative stages, the trio spent time exploring New York's Canal Street, which in the 1980s was a unique marketplace of gadgets, household items, scraps and raw materials. On a budget of less than \$500, they fashioned musical instruments using materials and items they found there, creating the unique Blue Man Group harmony out of foam, wood, rubber and other products. Two of their better known instruments are created from household PVC pipe. The “Drumbone” (think drum and trombone) and “PVC instrument” are both created from cardboard, tape, wood and plumbing hardware. For the drumbone, sections of pipe attach to a cardboard tube. The tube acts as a slider. While rapidly drumming on the pipe, the tube can be slid up and down to raise or lower the pitch. When more than one drumbone is pieced together, a wider range of pitches can be created. With the assistance of the group's backup band, this cost effective instrument created dramatic sound.

The PVC instrument consists of an array of PVC pipes of varying lengths, set up vertically side by side. Held together with wood and glue, the musician hits the ends of the pipes at an angle with a foam paddle. The different sizes of pipe produce sounds of varying pitches.

Blue Man Group performs its own original songs, as well as covers of pop hits on their selection of one-of-a-kind instruments. For now, the schedule includes matinee and nighttime performances seven days a week without any dark days. And even though the group just began its long engagement at the Universal Orlando property, many upcoming shows are already sold out in the 1,000-seat theatre, proving an instant success for both the act and the host venue.

STOMP Creates a Household Noise

Sifting through a junkyard and making a ruckus with falling car doors and banging hubcaps is typically not considered a form of music - unless you are Luke Cresswell and Steve McNicholas. The duo, who met in 1981, are the original creators of STOMP. After 10 years of hard work building their act, STOMP previewed at London's Bloomsbury Theatre and premiered at the Assembly Rooms in Edinburgh where it gained high praise among critics and won numerous awards.

Blue Man Group performs on one of their instruments, while the members of STOMP use oil drums to carry the beat. (Photos courtesy of Universal Orlando Resort and STOMP)

Now leading into its 17th year, STOMP is still clearly successful in evoking thoughts and emotions from its audience through the use of sounds as it brings its audible exclamations to the Las Vegas Strip in the show STOMP OUT LOUD. Housed in a new theatre at the Aladdin Casino in Las Vegas, the troupe puts on nightly performances in their 1,500 seat custom theatre.

Even though the sounds are being produced by such objects as brooms, pots and even the kitchen sink, it's clear to the audience that music is all around them. From the opening and closing of a refrigerator to the jingling of house keys, harmony is everywhere and it is all produced without spending millions on expensive instruments.

Through the entire STOMP OUT LOUD performance not a single word is spoken. Emotions, thoughts and byplay with the audience are accomplished through body language, facial expressions and, of course, the unusual form of music. The energy fills the room as audience members are encouraged to clap along and otherwise assist in the production.

So many new venues opening across the industry will tend to spend millions on research and development alone.

Scouts scour the globe for the next great crowd pleaser. That makes acts such as Blue Man Group and STOMP all the more refreshing - and inspiring - because their ingenuity, talent and drive were the elements of their success. It is still possible to launch a great act and rise to the world stage without having millions in backing at the start. • • •



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