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Blast from the past

Last hurrah for reunited Mouse, the Boys & Brass?

By CHARLIE PATTON, The Times-Union


Standing side-by-side on the rehearsal stage, microphones in hand, Maurice Samples and Pete Rowland did what they had done almost nightly in the late '60s and early '70s.



Mouse, the Boys & Brass reunited: Maurice "Mouse" Samples (foreground from left), Pete Rowland, Billy Harden (partially hidden) and Ted Vaughn.
BOB MACK/The Times-Union

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They sang the words to *Soul Man*, the 1967 Sam and Dave hit, while behind them guitars, drums, a keyboard and horns performed the familiar notes.

"I'm a soul man," Sam and Dave sang in the original.

But now, Samples and Rowland were in a playful mood, so they improvised new lyrics as the reunited Mouse, the Boys & Brass, played behind them.

"We are old men," they sang, laughing as they did. "We are old men."

It's a line they'll sing this weekend at the Ramona Pavilion, when Mouse, the Boys & Brass play in public for the third, and possibly last, time since the band dissolved more than 33 years ago.

Mouse and the Boys got its start in 1965 with the merger of two bands, the Yo-Yos from Forrest High School and the Vikings, from Jackson High. When a horn section was added in 1967, the band was renamed Mouse, the Boys & Brass.

The group's leader was Samples, known as Mouse, a versatile and ambitious musician who could play any instrument -- he played bass violin with the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra while earning a music degree from Jacksonville University in the

IN CONCERT

When: 8 p.m. Saturday.

Where: Ramona Pavilion,
7166 Ramona Blvd.

Tickets: \$25, and they can be purchased from Scott Alarm in Mandarin, 9543 Sunbeam Center Drive; at the Venetia Barber Shop, 5535 Roosevelt Blvd.; or by going to the group's Web site, www.mouseandtheboys.com

late 1960s.

The end for the band came abruptly on New Year's Day 1972 when Samples arrived uncharacteristically late for a rehearsal, handed out copies of the Bible and announced he was quitting.

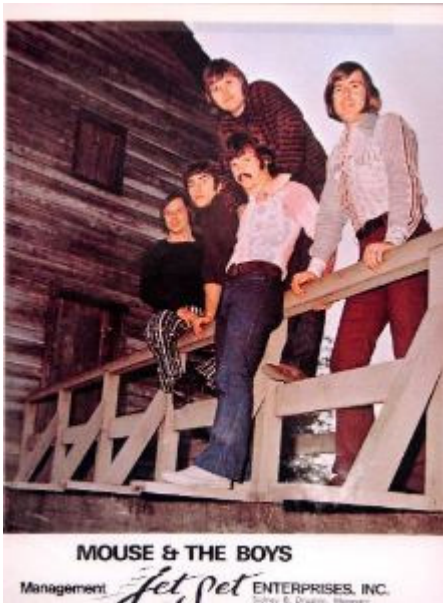
He had found God and wanted to go in another musical direction.

At its peak, the group had come tantalizingly close to the big time. But as 1972 dawned, Mouse told them the dream was over.

"They were extremely talented, very, very good," said Sidney Drashin, a retired Jacksonville music promoter who was manager for the band. "They were as successful as you would want to them to be on a regional basis."

'Heeey Baby'

Like most bands of its era, Mouse, the Boys & Brass played a lot of cover songs. The Beatles were an influence. So was James Brown.



Before breaking up in 1972, Mouse, the Boys & Brass was on the possible verge of hitting it big. Special to the Times-Union

Greg Haynes, who booked the band to play at his prom at Waycross (Ga.) High School in 1968 and writes about them in his



In this publicity photo from 1968, taken behind the Woman's Club of Jacksonville, the band members are wearing zany outfits -- long-sleeve shirts, shorts, big bow ties, knee-high socks and all -- they occasionally performed in. BOB MACK/The Times-Union

upcoming book, *The Heeey Baby Days of Beach Music*, said that Mouse, the Boys & Brass represented a particularly good example of what he calls "rock and soul," a rock band with a heavy rhythm and blues influence.

But the goal was always to be more than a good cover band.

"They were going to go all the way," said Bruce Scott, who sometimes traveled with the band to provide security. "They had the talent, they had the presence, there was just absolutely nothing to stop them."

Mouse, the Boys & Brass recorded several original songs, including *Love is Free*, *Dance to the Beat* and *Tears in Your Eyes*, as well as *Excedrin Headache #9*, influenced by the psychedelic sound coming out of San Francisco in the late 1960s.

At the time, Jacksonville radio station WAPE-AM had a signal that could be heard throughout Georgia and the Carolinas. With the station giving lots of airplay to Mouse, the Boys & Brass, the group's songs became regional hits.

But none of the records broke through nationally.

"They remind me of several bands in my book that were good enough to be national successes but never had the big hit they needed," Haynes said. "A lot of that has to do with the breaks. You had to get the DJs to play your songs. ... Sometimes it's just luck. Sometimes it's timing."

Finding God

Samples wasn't the first band member to leave -- drummer Ted Vaughn was drafted in 1968, keyboardist Lester Langdale left later than year, then trumpet player Jimmy Moore followed in early 1970.

"It was just time," Moore said. "I had a vision of being middle-aged and playing in some bar somewhere."

But the big blow was Samples' defection on Jan. 1, 1972.

Frank Crumpler, the other horn player, quit within a week.

"It just didn't seem right," Crumpler said. "We'd lost the leader of our group."

Renaming themselves The Boys, Rowland, Larry Dreggors and Billy Harden kept playing music. They landed a regular gig at Sonny's Forest Lounge, located in an old A&P supermarket on Lem Turner Road, and stayed through most of the 1970s.

"We were the three holdouts who did not want to grow up," Rowland said.

But eventually, they all got real jobs as well.

For a long time, Mouse, the Boys & the Brass was not a happy subject for Samples.

He felt guilty about breaking up the band. And he wasn't happy about the lifestyle he had led before breaking up the band.

"I was a whore," he said. "I chased everybody. You did not want your daughter with me. And I loved the limelight."

At the time he experienced his spiritual epiphany, he was high on marijuana, he said.

He said he remembers picking up a copy of the New Testament and thinking he ought to read the story of Jesus.

"He's cool," Samples said he remembers thinking. "He must have been a hippie. I wonder if he smoked dope?"

But something profound began happening as he read.

"I was flabbergasted by the words of Jesus," he said.

When he reached Matthew 16:26 -- "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" -- Samples felt his life change.

"I had wanted to be like John Lennon or Elvis," he said. "Now I asked myself, 'What if I had that and lost my soul?'"

At that moment, Mouse died, and Maurice was reborn.

For a long time after that, Samples didn't even like being called Mouse. Today, he said, "it doesn't bother me anymore."

But most of his old bandmates now call him Mo or Maurice.

When he left Mouse, the Boys & Brass, Samples joined a new Christian rock band, Israel. When it became clear Israel wasn't going to be successful, Samples left the band and went to work as a carpenter and a music minister.

Reunited and it feels so good



Mouse, the Boys & Brass during a recent rehearsal (counterclockwise from the bottom): Ted Vaughn (on drums), Billy Harden (on bass), Maurice "Mouse" Samples (with microphone), Pete Rowland (also with microphone), Lester Langdale (on keyboards) and Larry Dreggors (on guitar).
BOB MACK/The Times-Union

Although they went their separate ways, various band members stayed in touch. In the mid-'90s, they began getting together every Christmas at Billy Harden's house.

Eventually, they began talking about playing together again.

Samples was the hardest to convince. But he finally agreed to a rehearsal; if they didn't sound good, they would drop the idea, they agreed.

They sounded good. So they rented the Woman's Club of Jacksonville, one of the venues they'd played regularly back in the '60s.

On May 3, 2003, they played in public for the first time in more than 30 years. Though they'd done no advertising, about 400 people came, Moore estimated.

Old fans, many of whom hadn't even known there was going to be a reunion concert, began asking for another. Feelings were mixed within the band. They decided to set a price of \$5,000 as a way of discouraging the people who kept asking.

That's when Bruce Scott stepped in. As a young police officer, Scott had often traveled with the band to provide security. Scott, who went on to found Scott Alarm, wanted the band to play at the 40th reunion of Englewood High School's class of '65. And he was willing to meet their price.

On July 16, Mouse, the Boys & Brass performed for the second time in more than 33 years.

"They were awesome," Scott said.

Once they knew they were going to play the Englewood reunion, band members decided to do another public concert. It'll take place Saturday at the Ramona Pavilion, and it just might be the band's last stand.

Samples remains ambivalent. He has nine grandchildren with whom he wants to spend time. Besides, performing the old songs isn't entirely comfortable, he said.

"I still struggle with a little bit of the morals, even of the songs that I wrote," he said. "Some of them kind of glorify what I would call the loose side of life. But that's who we were."

But he's doing it at least one more time, because, while he doesn't love what they were, he does love the old men they've become.

"The fellowship, getting to know the guys again, just being buds again, that, to me, has been the best part," he said. "It's much more fun to me than the actual playing."



The "brass": Jimmy Moore (from left), Mel Fannin and Frank Crumpler. Fannin wasn't an original member of the band, but he'll play with them Saturday.
BOB MACK/The Times-Union

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