

MARIMBA FEVER

MUSIC

Rock 'n' roll, cool shoes and a dash of the blues

By EILEEN McCLELLAND
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Rock Romano hasn't had many birthdays. Why start now? His 62nd on Wednesday is shaping up to be as raucous as ever.

Doctor Rockit and the Sisters of Mercy, Romano's disbanded band, meets in Houston once a year for the Rock-N-Roll Valentine Ball. It's part rockers' reunion and part birthday bash for founder, guitarist and front-man Romano.

This year, there's more to celebrate. The band will be toasting the marriage of singer "Sister" Lisa Rolanda Williams and Wylie Hutchins, former drummer for Doctor Rockit as well as the Natives, and current drummer with Beans Barton and the Bi-Peds, another Houston rock band with a long history.

Williams, a film editor, and Hutchins, a nurse, had known each other for 29 years before eloping to St. Petersburg, Fla., in November, where they were married by a justice of the peace.

"It's a great love story," Williams said. "After I moved back to Houston after living in New York, we reconnected as friends and just found out we had a lot in common. 'We ran off and got married.'"

The bride wore inch red stilettos, purchased for a previous Dr. Rockit ball, added a dash of rock-star glam to the proceedings.

Doctor Rockit and the Sisters of Mercy's frenetic blend of rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll propelled the band from house-party performances to regional fame. Those glory days began around 1979 and culminated in a final show for Romano's 40th birthday on Feb. 14, 1985 at Fittzgerald's.

After that, Romano opened Rock Romano's Red Shack Recording studio in the Heights. "Sisters" Williams and Cindy Thrall moved to New York.

Romano and the Sisters will reunite with other original band members Kenneth "Screamin' Kenny" Blanchett on bass, Rick Layton on harmonica and Steve Schmitz on drums. Hutchins will be a special guest.

"I didn't really want to do the party again," Romano said. "We'd had good success three years in a row, but then they got married, so it became about something else besides my birthday. I wanted to do it for Lisa and Wylie."

The Sisters, as is the custom, have prepared by shoe shopping.

"There's a great story behind the shoes," Williams said. "Cindy was visiting her father in North Carolina and when she was driving to the airport

ROCK-N-ROLL VALENTINE BALL

■ **What:** Doctor Rockit and the Sisters of Mercy, with Romeo Dogs, Herschel Berry and Wylie Hutchins

■ **When:** 9 p.m. Continental Club, 3700 Main

■ **Admission:** Tickets are \$10; 713-529-9899



ERIN TRIEB PHOTOS: FOR THE CHRONICLE

HIGHLY SKILLED: Matthew McClung is principal percussionist of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, and he subs with the Houston Symphony and the

An instrument of note

By CHARLES WARD
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

FOR an instrument with a tiny classical-music pedigree, the marimba sure hogs Houston spotlights.

Several marimbists have won the Houston Symphony's annual young-artist competition. Tonight and Sunday, another, Matthew McClung, rolls his instrument out in front of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra.

He'll play *Fantasy on Japanese Woodprints* for solo marimba and orchestra by the prolific American composer Alan Hovhaness. Conductor Daniel Myssyk will also lead Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* (No. 6).

The marimba is one of several members of the percussion section known as "mallet" instruments, named after the sticks, or mallets, players use. Others are the xylophone (a relative), glockenspiel and vibraphone.

While the marimba is extremely popular in Latin America and well-ensconced in classical ensembles, its lineage remains cloudy.

The prevailing theory, says McClung, is that after Africans came to South America as slaves, they built instruments they knew at home, including small types of marimbas. The instruments then filtered into general society — to the point that the marimba is the national instrument of Guatemala.

A cousin to the xylophone

Like the xylophone, the marimba has wooden bars, usually rosewood, arranged in two rows like a piano keyboard. The ones for flat and sharp notes are raised for easier access. Under each bar is a resonator, usually a metal tube, that helps create the distinctive sound.

The player strikes the bars with mallets with knobs on one end. Their hardness,

which affects the quality of sound, depends on the material in the knob and whether it's wrapped with yarn or another material. Players normally use one or two mallets per hand; Hovhaness' piece requires one.

became a percussionist through a school band program. He detoured to an undergraduate degree in materials engineering at the University of Cincinnati before earning advanced degrees in music there and at Rice University.

"When you're 16 and have to choose a life path, you select something more practical," he says. He decided to study music so "I wouldn't turn 40 and regret not having tried it."

For his doctoral dissertation at Rice, McClung spent two months studying in Ghana. It's a journey many percussionists make, especially to small towns where the master drummers of the Ewe tribe live. In the capital city, Accra, he also studied the gyil, a small xylophone-type instrument with gourds as resonators.

He's a teacher, too

Like many highly skilled musicians, McClung of necessity has a career outside the world of full-time symphony orchestras (he spent three years playing in the part-time Honolulu Symphony). Only two or three full-time orchestra jobs open up each year, he says, and competition is fierce.

McClung has grown to like Houston. "It's a great place to teach," he says.

The highly competitive world of marching bands creates constant demand for private lessons. McClung currently teaches 10 students at an area high school and more at Texas A&M.

Besides being principal percussionist of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra, which offers a handful of concerts a year, McClung subs with the Houston Symphony and the Houston Grand Opera Orchestra. He also plays gigs with his ensemble Strike 3 Percussion.

While he's a movie buff and loves to read, he finds his life more and more energized by his music.

"Honestly, this is what I love doing."

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Generally, the marimba is mellower and lower-sounding than the xylophone (and the other mallet instruments). Low notes in particular can seem to lose their pitch when struck certain ways.

Not many solo works with orchestra exist for the marimba. Hovhaness wrote the *Fantasy* for xylophone, but marimbists appropriated it.

To create an exotic sound appropriate for the title, Hovhaness employs scales similar to Asian ones and asks the orchestra players to do nonstandard things such as "bending" notes to make the pitch slide.

McClung, like many marimbists,

chron.com

Listen to a clip from *Fantasy on Japanese Woodprints*. chron.com/arts

MARIMBA

Two performances by Matthew McClung with the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra

Today

■ **When:** 5 p.m.
■ **Where:** St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, Westheimer at River Oaks Boulevard

Sunday

■ **When:** 6:30 p.m.
■ **Where:** Congregation Emanu El, 1500 Sunset Blvd.

■ **Tickets:** \$25 at 713-665-2700

MUSIC

It's not American Idol, but it'll do for now

■ Mezzo-soprano from Connecticut takes first prize in annual contest

Eight became finalists.

Judges were mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade, also the master of cer-



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