

Local rock band helps rake in \$2 million for charity

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Yorklyn, Del. — The melancholy, opening strains of Procol Harum's "Whiter Shade of Pale" echo throughout the lower level of Fred Dawson's Yorklyn home.

Seated at a Hammond B3 Organ, Dawson continues playing the soft melody as the remaining six members of his band, Club Phred, join in for the first verse of the classic tune.

In a little more than two weeks, Club Pred will be performing with the iconic 60's band, Procol Harum, for The Grand Opera House's 2010 Grand Gala fundraiser.

Not bad for a band that got started eight years ago as a friendly jam session.

"We thought, for sure, it would be over in two months," said Dawson, the bandleader.

The seven friends, many of whom have played in bands since they were teenagers, never really expected to become part of a rock group.

They were drawn together by a love of classic rock and play a wide array of tunes from the 1960s and 1970s – the kinds of songs are too much a part of America's musical history to ever go away, said Mark Sisk, rhythm guitar player.

"But we are not a cover band. We put our own spin on classic rock," he said.

They never expected to carry their love of classic rock as far as they have, Sisk said. Club Phred played the last show at the Stone Balloon in Newark before the infamous bar closed, Grand Funk Railroad lead singer Mark Farner has jammed with them at Dawson's home and they've even opened for Pete Best, the would-be drummer for the Beatles, Dawson said.

But what makes Club Phred unique is the kinds of gigs they gravitate toward, particularly events for charities across the First State. The band has helped raise \$2 million for charity, he said. They've played at benefits for the Delaware Breast Cancer Coalition, Wellness Community, March of Dimes, Boys and Girls Club and the AIDS Walk, just to name a few.

"We bring a sense of fun to the event, a sense of lightheartedness, which counters the very serious work many of these charities do," Dawson said.

Plus, many of the people who attend these kinds of charity events are big classic rock fans, so Club Phred is typically very well received, he said.

But classic rock can also reach across the generation gap, Sisk said, as evidenced by the age range of Club Pred's members, which spans 27 to 72.

Yet despite the success of the band, it remains a hobby for its members. Dawson is a wealth manager by day, Sisk is an attorney and drummer Ron Wintersgill manages a division at a major helicopter manufacturer.

Playing together is a huge stress relief for the band members, Wintersgill said, and to be able to help raise money for charities makes the whole thing a very rewarding hobby. For true musicians, not playing is not an option, he said.

"It's a passion for musicians," he said. "The whole band takes pride in its musicianship."

Club Phred, which performs about eight major gigs a year, has no intention of slowing down, Dawson said.

Though it may not pay the bills, being in a rock band is all that it's cracked up to be and more, Sisk said.

"When you talk to these guys who have been to the mountaintop, they have the same inner 13- and 14-year-old who wanted to play music, they just took it a bit farther than we did," he said. "But they don't have more fun than we do."

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