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THE ARTS

Fourth Grade Dads and a mom rock the house

- Daedalus Howell, Special to The Chronicle
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For many people, getting the responsibilities of family and career to harmonize is a challenge. For a group of Peninsula parents with a penchant for rock 'n' roll, harmonizing -- literally -- is the challenge. Meet the Fourth Grade Dads, a cadre of professionals, four fathers and one mother, who rock.

The Fourth Grade Dads -- an architect, an environmental engineer, a doctor, a software producer and an educator -- all have daughters attending Our Lady of Mount Carmel, a Catholic elementary school in Redwood City. When each new school year begins, the band's name changes accordingly.

The band has upgraded its name every year since it formed at a backyard barbecue when the girls were in the first grade. Like the other members, architect Eric Rohlring had played in bands in his youth. When planning to attend the school-related barbecue, Rohlring decided to buck convention and transform the event into a sort of hootenanny for closet rock stars.

"I didn't want to sit around the house, eating hors d'oeuvres and trading war stories with all the other parents. I felt like going in the backyard, having a beer and playing some music," Rohlring recalls. He was convinced he wasn't alone in his thinking and invited others to bring their instruments. A jam session ensued and a proto-version of the band was born.

"We each came from different bands in our past and had this music background. We just seemed to find each other. I don't know how it worked," recalls guitarist Sean Kennedy, an environmental engineer.

The band's set list, composed mainly of covers, reads like a survey course in the popular music of the Baby Boom from which the bandmates all hail. They play tunes by artists ranging from Bob Dylan to Bob Marley, Van Morrison to Van Halen -- with a little Green Day and Flaming Lips thrown in for good measure.

"We play some borderline bluegrass stuff, some hard rock and everything in between. Whatever people bring in -- as long as it's a good song, we'll play it," says Mark Fassett, an audio and video producer for a software company who plays guitar, bass and drums.

The band's song selection process sounds like a case study from a political science class. As Fassett explains, "It's not democratic -- I'm not sure how you would describe it, but everyone has veto power. A single vote, and it's gone."

Rohlring attributes the Fourth Grade Dad's disparate catalog to the various interests of the members, all of whom boast both broad and eclectic tastes.

"All the people in the band are very unique individuals with careers and interests of their own and come from a variety of backgrounds, so the diversity of music is a reflection of that. Sometimes

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there are songs that maybe not everyone enjoys. Usually, the consensus is, if we don't all enjoy playing it, we won't do it," he says.

The Fourth Grade Dads' first gigs were at private parties and backyard barbecues, which soon gave way to block parties and eventually nightclubs, country clubs and art and wine festivals.

Physician and singer Sherry Perkins had played with educator and drummer Mike Claire at their church and was happy to be recruited as a backup vocalist by the dads a couple of years ago.

"I've known the guys in the band for a while. My daughter went to the same school that their children go to now," she recalls. "I sing, and they felt like it would be kind of nice to have a backup singer. I was very enthusiastic about joining them, so I did. One thing led to another, and now here I am, a permanent part of the band."

Perkins' permanence notwithstanding, the patriarchal moniker of the act persists, a fact not lost on the singer who shrugs it off with a wry, "Yeah, uh-huh, it does."

"It's their idea -- they are the dads, I think it's a very interesting concept they have, and I've never argued with it. I don't look like a guy so, of course, people realize I'm not when I'm onstage with them," she says with a laugh. "We just kind of go along with the program, so to speak."

The program includes Perkins lending her voice to classic numbers as "Ain't No Sunshine" and "Summertime" as well as the occasional Norah Jones cover.

"I'm kind of more of the slower ballads, jazz kind of singer, so I do leads on those," explains Perkins, who relishes the opportunity to regularly let her inner musician express itself. "It's something I always wanted to do and I love it. There are very few things that come close to it in my experience. I've done some fun things in my life, but music is such a wonderful outlet. To be up there, onstage surrounded by that sound is something I've dreamed about all my life, and in the past few years I've been able to do it, it's a dream come true for me. I consider myself very lucky."

Rohlfing suggests the musicians' commitment to the band comes from their collective need to work off the pressures of their day-to-day lives.

"It's a byproduct of stress, whether it's a personal thing, where our lives are complicated by children, careers, marriages and all these different things relative to something on a larger scale like a war or a great depression, or something like that. Great forms of art come out of those trying times, so maybe it's a way for us to release a little tension," Rohlfing dryly says.

When rehearsing, the band is all business -- a premium is put on honing the band's repertoire in the time allotted, given members' other responsibilities.

"We really look forward to it. Our lives are busy so we don't have a lot of spare time to sit around and just dwindle the time away," says Rohlfing. "When we get together, it's a great time. Once you're in that situation and just rehearsing, four or five hours can go by, and I won't remember what was going on in the world. I'm just completely absorbed by the momentum of the sound we're creating. It's like riding a wave and it just carries you along."

The band benefits from the fact that many of the players are multi-instrumentalists and will change gear throughout the set.

"Eric and I switch guitar and bass and Mike and I switch drums. I play drums on about 10 tunes," says Fassett, who credits his ability to play so many different instruments to a "totally short attention span."

"We just are out there to have fun. Playing different instruments to me makes it more interesting," he says. "Every two or three songs, we switch it."

Fassett is involved with a number of music projects that he considers more "serious" endeavors. That said, he enjoys his time with the Fourth Grade Dads, which has become something of a special artistic outlet for him.

"I have to honestly say that the snobby musician in me is kind of embarrassed about it," Fassett says, "but at the same time the truth is that we have a lot of fun."

Mama and the Papas

The Fourth Grade Dads perform 7-9 p.m. Sept. 23 at Micha's BBQ Restaurant, 1754 Laurel St. in San Carlos. To book the band, visit www.3rdgradedads.com.

E-mail comments to penfriday@sfgate.com

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Peter Lindley (from left), Sean Kennedy, Mike Claire, Mark Fassett and Eric Garcia of the Fourth Grade Dads play a mix of rock, reggae and bluegrass tunes. Chronicle photo by Kurt Rogers



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Four young girls listen to Fourth Grade Dads, who play the music of a somewhat older generation. Chronicle photo by Kurt Rogers



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Sherry Perkins sings in the band Fourth Grade Dads. Chronicle photo by Kurt Rogers



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