

Ordinary guys make extraordinary music

BY DAN WEST
STAFF WRITER
dwest@oe.homecomm.net

It can be a challenge for Richard McMullan to grab the attention of students in his French classes at Birmingham Groves High School.

This is not a problem, however, for audiences of McMullan's celtic band, Blackthorn, a quartet that has a growing following throughout metro Detroit with traditional Irish tunes they perform at area pubs, college campuses, community events and concert halls.

"The best thing about it all is looking out into the audience and seeing people sing along," said McMullan, a Belfast native who started the band in 1984. "Then you realize they would've never known those songs if it wasn't for Blackthorn."

The band's repertoire ranges from pub sing-alongs like *When the Boys Come Rolling Home*, to mellow ballads like *The Parting Glass*. Occasionally, they'll add a classic rock and bluegrass tune.

Grabbing audiences the most, band members said, is their lively interaction with crowds.

Their camaraderie and close friendships are visible in the way they tease each other on stage, which is no different from the way the foursome

jokes on the golf course.

"People tell us they enjoy the fun we have on stage," said Fred Klein, who plays keyboard and accordion. "Also, Richard does a great job telling stories about the songs that gives background so people understand."

Adult crowds regularly fill Cowley's Old Village Inn in downtown Farmington for Blackthorn's weekend performances, which occur every other month.

With St. Patrick's Day celebrations, Blackthorn is in the midst of many community shows, such as their performances Wednesday at the Farmington Civic Theater and Friday at Detroit's Fisher Building for radio station WJR-AM (760). The shows draw audiences that include grandmothers and young children.

"What's neat is people in their 50s and 60s come and see us, then bring their children, and they come and see us regularly," Klein said. "And it's vice versa. Younger people will bring their parents, then they start seeing us regularly."

Blackthorn's song selection is rooted in Ireland's rich heritage. Growing up in Belfast,



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLYNSKY

Sounds of Ireland: *The band consists of (from left) Dennis Green, Richard McMullan, Gary McMullen and Fred Klein. Blackthorn performed its Celtic sounds Friday at the Fisher Building for a St. Patrick's Day program on WJR radio. They can be seen all over Oakland County.*

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McMullan was raised on the band's collection of songs, many of which are two and three centuries old. She started playing them when he learned to play drums as a teenager.

"Everyone over there knew these songs," McMullan said.

In 1976, McMullen and his wife, Sandra, left Ireland and moved to her native metro Detroit. He occasionally performed Irish songs until a steady gig surfaced in 1984.

An acquaintance called McMullan, looking for an Irish band to perform at The Old Shillegagh in Detroit. McMullan assembled a trio to play Irish tunes and Blackthorn was born.

Since that time, a steady schedule of pub and small concert performances built a following which included people that would later join the band.

Klein started play for Blackthorn in 1986 when the band wanted to add keyboards to the band's then-all-string harmonies.

In 1988, guitarist Gary McMullen, then performing for another band that shared venues with Blackthorn, replaced an original member. Bassist Dennis Green, McMullen's former mate in another band, did the same in 1993.

Since then, the quartet has combined their extensive musical backgrounds in folk, bluegrass, rock and country to form today's Blackthorn sound.

"They're all very good," McMullan said. "Their vocals and harmony are great. This current configuration is the best."

This foursome, who are between 38 and 55 years old, plays 70 shows a year and sells several CDs with live and studio songs. The group balances time with the band and their full-time jobs and families.

"Our families are very supportive," Green said. "They love the band. Our kids will come with us sometimes and sell CDs for us."

Beat goes on

Despite their attempts to bring fresh songs to their shows, audiences demand they continue to play staple songs, such as *Tonight's the Night for Drinking and Hey Wife*.

"We can't touch at least one-third of the songs in our reper-

■ This foursome, who are between 38 and 55 years old, plays 70 shows a year and sells several CDs with live and studio songs.

toire or we'll catch hell because we'd abandon the others," McMullan said.

Audiences want to hear these catchy Irish tunes over and over again, Gary McMullen said, because they are hard to find.

"We're different, unique and offer a refreshing change to what we get on the radio," McMullen said. "Where else can you hear the banjo and accordion together?"

While many Blackthorn songs may be the same, they do carry a range of emotions. The happy-go-lucky songs tend to get the whole audience involved.

"The way they get the crowd into the music is great," said Farmington Hills resident Aaron Brunke, who added he sees the band perform at least a half-dozen times a year. "You want to go out and buy their CDs because the music is so catchy."

"Also, it's a great band to have a Guinness with."

Then there's the other extreme. Last month, the family of recently slain Detroit Police Officer Michael Scanlan asked Blackthorn to perform *Oh Danny Boy* in remembrance. Band members said the emotions were so strong, it was difficult to finish the song.

"I've never performed that song for something like that," McMullan said. "That was something else."

In the end, Blackthorn is a group of ordinary guys who are enjoying opportunities to entertain crowds with their celtic sounds.

And they said they don't see any end in sight.

Blackthorn has two Oakland County performances this week. Today, from noon and 4 p.m., the band performs at Cowley's Old Village Inn, Farmington. Friday, starting at 8 p.m., the band plays at the Highland Lakes Campus of Oakland Community College, Waterford.