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Society needs an outlet where it can relax and enjoy the music.

The Great Gig in the School

Music guides German 'sound Freak' to rock century old Comstock school house

Ryan OConnell, Rice Lake Chronotype

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Manfred Schonauer adjusts a mixer during a Sights and Sounds show at his convert venue and home The Pipe Dream Center in Comstock. Manfred and a shifting ensemble of musicians perform free-will donation shows throughout the year, and the Sights and Sounds concerts are designed for meditation and positivity.

Photo by Ryan OConnell

The scent of Nag Champa incense swells from the wooden floorboards' century old scuffs to the 20-foot-high tin ceiling stylized with intricate cream moulding.

Projected on the interior wall of the dark, 105-year-old Pipe Lake School are ice-blue concentric circles, rotating oppositely and endlessly.

Smoky blue morphs to lime green revolving around a bottomless darkness bored into the center.

Keyboard and electric guitar notes pour from speakers strung in the room's corners and begin to pad the room with layers of sound.

Then the electronic loop kicks in. It's a bassy and urgent Siren, threatening to drag you through hoops of changing light, into the dark center.

And if you let it, it will.



The light show and music changes with each Sights and Sounds show.
Photo by Ryan OConnell

Manfred Schonauer, 70, has gone from sneaking into music clubs at age 10 to touring Europe in a crowded Volkswagen to playing a 1969 German rock festival in front of 20,000 fans ("You're gonna pee your pants, man"). He's toured the Midwest, played the Twin Cities supper club circuit and rocked hard enough to shed his last name. Now the music that drove his dream drives the audience.

"Forget about everything else in the world," Manfred said, "and come to The Pipe Dream Center."

Pipedreams

Manfred and his wife, Truan, met while he was performing at Twin Cities supper clubs where she cooked. At one show Manfred asked her, "Don't I know you?"

"Ahh, yeah," she said.

Hit fast-forward from that first midnight coffee date to last Saturday, 3 decades later, when he dedicated Warren Zevon's "Keep Me in Your Heart" to Truan for putting up with years of his noise.

"It's been wonderful," she said.

Refurbishment on the remote Pipe Lake School began in 1987 by removing sand, and adding flooring, plumbing and a furnace, painting walls and building a sun room.

"I love this building," Truan said.

The result is a cozy downstairs living area, and an upstairs anteroom that's wall papered with news clippings, photographs and mementos that splits into two concert halls.

The Boogie Nights area has keyboards backed by a mirror with "MANFRED" etched into its glass and space for guitarists, a standing bass, harmonica players and vocalists.

The Sights and Sounds room is where Manfred, Dustin DeGolier and Chris Bergland engineer a unique sensory experience every week using a projector, piano, Moog machine, mixers, guitar, amps, speakers and keyboards—including a tri-stack.

"Each keyboard has a different purpose, combining them is my art," Manfred said.

The Pipe Dream Center's first concert took place in June, 1988. The audience arrived expecting Beethoven or Mozart. They got Manfred's blend of Krautrock, a genre of experimental electronic music represented by Kraftwerk or Klaus Schulze and Tangerine Dream. If you're into Pink Floyd or Radiohead's "Kid A," it's your new jam.



Chris Bergland, Manfred Schonauer and Dustin DeGolier.
Photo by Ryan OConnell

Stanza of the artist as a young man

Manfred started accordion at 6, piano at 7, adhering to his violinist father's strict practice schedule.

He scratched the washboard in his first band, a skiffle group that played music with an American folk twang. His first paid gig was at a Coca-Cola factory where each member received a sandwich, Coke and a tie.

Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley electrified West German air waves in the second half of the 50s, and the British Invasion had Manfred drumming in a band that mirrored The Beatles, The Yardbirds and Swinging Blue Jeans. By the mid-60s, Manfred was playing soul in local clubs.

At his father's urging, he apprenticed as a clerk, handling paper work during the week and the keys over the weekend. "I would come in Monday morning pretty tired," he said.

A wild 1970 recording exists of Manfred absolutely destroying his L-100 Hammond organ in front of hundreds of students. It's known as "the Montezuma recording" and can be heard on the Mark Stary Music Podcast featuring Manfred.

"We were on, and I just wanted to go for the kill," he reflected.

"My goal in those days was to always join the band that traveled the furthest," Manfred said.

He caught a break in Spain when he heard that an America-bound band from Italy needed a keyboardist.

"I'm your man, I'm your man," Manfred remembers saying.

Six months later he celebrated his 23rd birthday while playing for passage aboard the S. S. Michelangelo from Genoa, Italy to New York City.

It was May, 1972. Manfred was in America.

Dancing Days, Boogie Nights

Dustin DeGolier started guitar lessons with Manfred nearly 20 years ago at age 11, and played his first Boogie Nights at age 12 and then every show after for the next 5 years. "That's where I really learned to play," he said. Now DeGolier's student, Evan Kamish, plays alongside both of them during the monthly jam.



Manfred Schonauer, Dustin DeGolier and Evan Kamish play during the March 7 Boogie Nights show at The Pipe Dream Center. Manfred taught DeGolier guitar nearly 20 years ago, and DeGolier has been teaching Kamish going on 6 years.

Photo by Ryan OConnell

Two bulbs spotlighted the band, one red over Manfred, the other teal blue over DeGolier and Kamish. The shades merged somewhere over the black and white keys of Manfred's FP-4 Roland.

***"E**ach keyboard has a different purpose, combining them is my art." - Manfred*

Boogie Nights has a café-club-cool vibe. The lighting highlights performers and a string of Skittles-colored lights runs the length of the windows.

The audience relaxes in an eclectic collection of white, black and red folding chairs (all with seat cushions), couch, director's chairs, camping chairs, high-back stuffed chairs. Wooden spools that were once wound with power cables

hold sodas and tea.

Robert and Jane Leech suspect that, at over 30 years, they may be the longest tenured audience members at The Pipe Dream Center. "We kept coming back," Jane said.

A fluid company of musicians play blues, jazz and rock 'n roll under a flying pig and backed by an enormous tapestry of "Toy Story" clouds.

Manfred stretches out songs for solos and improvs. If it's going well he may say "yeah!" and if it's really going well he may throw his head back and start laughing.

Only Manfred knows what song's next and by only a few measures.



The Pipe Dream Center's Boogie Nights set up is relaxed and low-key with stylized lighting and has featured a rotating contingent of musicians through the decades.

Photo by Ryan OConnell

A non-exhaustive list of players include Jennifer Wozniak, Steve Vogt, Stan Nosbush and Bill Gausman.

Wozniak has been crooning Sam Cooke and Sting at Boogie Nights for around 9 years and sings in The Pipe Dream Center's Christmas Shows.

Snow flakes were coming on like sixteenth notes one year, and the whole band played to an audience of two. Manfred doesn't cancel unless he's dying, Wozniak said. Literally.

The Spring the music died

Manfred was sitting underneath the Boogie Nights floorboards when his doctor confirmed the cancer. It was Nov. 3, 2017. He put down the phone, went upstairs and wrote his song "F Positive."

That spring's Sights and Sounds were canceled as he received treatment for colon cancer. In 2018, he battled prostate cancer.

"That was a trip and a half," he told a Boogie Nights audience, "I don't like dying."

A year of chemo left him with light neuropathy in his fingers and toes. He may stand up and stretch between pieces, which serves as an opportunity to grab a cup of tea and chat with the audience.

The Pink Floyd bassist and lyricist Roger Waters came up during a Boogie Nights break. Waters, 76, starts a 3-month tour in July.

"Music keeps you young, though," Nosbush said, holding his stand-up bass under the blue light.

Cancer aged him spiritually, Manfred said, but music is definitely the thing that keeps him alive.

He's become more prolific. "Lots of cancer patients are crying in their beer. Not me," he said.

Inspiration comes late at night, after 11, and he follows a 2-2 rule: bursts of 2 hours of work with two songs, the second as a backup if the first starts to grind.

He began recording and mailing out cassettes in the first half of the 80s. His first EP, recorded in 1983, prophetically included a B-side titled "Pipedreams."

The 1986 Contact List of Electronic Musicians, notes a cassette arrived from Manfred in Turtle Lake, and that it is fantastic. "He's very interested in live concerts so write him for more information," the author wrote.

Two years later, The Pipe Dream Center hosted its first show.

Last stop, Eden

"We're going to go on a journey," DeGolier tells the Sights and Sounds audience, as he explains the eerie tinges, half-step progressions and ambiguity of the second-to-last song of the night, "Edenbound."



DeGolier set to solo during a Sights and Sounds show.
Photo by Ryan OConnell

Sights and Sounds is meditative. It offers tranquility and a place to reflect on birth, death and the tangible in-between.

Manfred said it was during a similar quiet moment, 20 years ago, that as he looked around the woods surrounding his home, he realized, "This is heaven."

And after dropping the audience off in Eden, the credits begin to roll.

The Moog machine broadcasts wispy white noise, and Bergland's light show flips inside-out, to a bright, expanding light surrounded by darkness with pinpricks of stars in the deep blackness for "Roll the Credits." It's a Sights and Sounds show's only guarantee.

"Your life is a movie. At the end of your life, you roll the credits," Manfred said, describing the flash of every person, place, event scrolling by, like home movie clips.

In Manfred's credits, there will be a black-and-white photograph of a band on stage in Haugen, Germany.

"Skillies" is stenciled onto the bass drum—a Ludwig, like The Beatles'—and just out of frame a crowd sways to the soul music flowing from the speakers.

The only person aware of the photographer is the 17-year-old keyboardist, who stares into the camera lens.

He's in a shirt he will swear was vertically striped in yellow and blue and is wearing a tie. Always a tie back then.

From Day One he'd known he'd be a musician, but couldn't ever have imagined where it would all lead.

But the credits don't roll yet. The music drives on.

The Pipe Dream Center's Sights and Sounds shows continue on March 17, 24, 31 and April 7. Shows start at 7 p.m. and last about 2 hours.

Boogie Nights shows are the first Saturday of the month. Next show is April 4.

Positively no alcohol, no drugs, no smoking. Shows run on free-will donations.

The Pipe Dream Center is located at 2031 20th St. in Comstock. For more information, visit manfredsmusic.com.