



# the evolution of groove

by Jennifer Gritt

*The local band, the Groove Hogs, makes music that may defy description but nonetheless hooks fans here and elsewhere.*

**T**he band is only as good as its light show," lead singer Adam Enevoldsen jokes, as fellow members of the Groove Hogs set up for a gig in Green Bay. But for long-time Hogs fans, it wasn't the flashing lights that got them hooked on one of the most unique bands in the Fox River Valley area. Unique not only in that it is a ten-member band with a complete horn section, but also because the members have spent the last ten years pulling from and transcending several genres of music to develop their own original sound. And it's a sound that's hard to categorize.

"I think the official version is bluesy rock and soul," trombone player Tom Vanden Avond says when asked how the Groove Hogs is usually described.

"We do some blues, funk — I am a funk man," tenor sax player Steve Cooper emphasizes.

"Everybody says something different," Doug Daniels, who plays alto sax, points out.

In fact, the band has been categorized as rhythm & blues, soul, and a blues-type band with horns.

Daniels disagrees with the latter description, however, stressing that "We're not a blues band."

One thing the Groove Hogs can agree on is that the band is not about staying within the boundaries of any given genre. Instead, this group strives to break out of traditional molds and to create something that is bold, lively, and smothered in a healthy mix of rhythm, blues, funk, rock, and soul. But that wasn't always the case.

When drummer John Stelzer and guitar player Pat Kiel decided to form a band in 1994, they had one goal in mind — shed the corporate image and have fun. Comprised of four members, the original Groove Hogs was nothing more than a cover band.

"We didn't really care," Stelzer says. "We were all younger... [and] doing this because we wanted to." In 1996, however, Stelzer and company began compiling a four-piece horn section and made the precarious decision to start writing their own songs. The result of their labors was the 1997 release of their self-titled CD, "The Groove Hogs," which —

although a great effort — could not conceal the very audible struggle of a group of musicians trying to capture the sound within themselves and mold it into the singular sound of a band.

All that began to change, however, with the release of their next CD, "No Small Feat," in 2000. Personnel changes that included Vanden Avond on trombone and Steve Johnson on tenor sax provided an additional platform for the entrance of Ron Hanson as lead singer. And while the songwriting process has always been a collaborative effort in this band, the songs on "No Small Feat" mark a clear growth in the writing talents of Kiel, keyboardist Brian Gruselle, and tenor sax man Chris Anderson (who is no longer with the band). But it is the inclusion of Hanson on lead vocals that set this second album apart.

"Ron is a fabulous, fabulous singer," baritone sax player Adam Platmann stresses. "He's unlike any other musician I've known. He's got this history [and] knows a lot about music." And with Hanson's

talent and influence, the band was ready to start making its mark.

In 2002, the Groove Hogs released its third CD entitled "Wrong Side of the Street." Produced by the renowned Jim Gaines (who has worked with Santana and Stevie Ray Vaughn), "Wrong Side of the Street" is by far the Groove Hogs most solid collection of songs to date.



Photo by Jennifer Grant

The Groove Hogs' new CD, "Blue Rhythms White Lies," has been released nationally.

"His [Gaines's] job when we got into the studio was to pull the best out of every guy," Stelzer says. And Gaines succeeded. In addition to featuring the bluesy rasp of Hanson's voice, "Wrong Side of the Street" marks the return of the young sax player Steve Cooper, who had worked with the band early on.

Signature titles for the group, such as "Blues is my Business," "Baby's Gone," and "The Real Love," started to take root within the blues scene. After selling more than 20,000 copies of "Wrong Side of the Street," the band appeared to be well on its way to attaining a wider audience. But in order to reach that audience, the Groove Hogs had to tour aggressively, playing as many venues as it could.

While most people who glamorize the "rock star" lifestyle might find touring to be the most fascinating part of being a musician, in reality, it is probably the hardest — especially for those who have a family.

"You start to look at things a whole lot differently when you have children," stresses Stelzer, who's wife Nicole is expecting their second child in November. "No one is getting rich on this,"

he continues, emphasizing that many sacrifices have to be made to "support this habit we call the Groove Hog."

Half of the band members are married. Those who are single also struggle with touring, however, commenting on the difficulties of establishing long-term relationships while on the road. And as Cooper and Daniels point out, relying on an inconsistent paycheck and being able to pay bills on time proves challenging as well. So while all the band members are dedicated to their music, there are times when the tough schedule proves to be too much. And in 2003, lead singer Ron Hanson announced his retirement.

"I felt it coming," Stelzer says. "Ron was one of the last guys holding down a [full-time] job and playing."

With Hanson gone, Stelzer now faced the problem of finding his replacement. "I was worried because Ron was a kick\*\*\* singer.... How do you replace that? Where do you find guys who could sing like that?"

Plamann agrees that it was difficult to know what was in store for the band. "I didn't know what to expect," he admits. But Stelzer was optimistic. "Every time we've made a change in this band, it's always been for the better," he stresses.

Enter Adam Enevoldsen. Fresh out of the University of Oklahoma with a degree in sociology, Enevoldsen moved to Chicago in 2003 with hopes of breaking into the music scene. The closest he got was a clerk job at Tower Records. Through word of mouth, however, Enevoldsen learned that the Groove Hogs was looking for a lead singer.

"I was familiar with the name," he points out, "because I was pushing their records in my store."

So he sent Stelzer a demo tape that, according to both, was nothing short of bad. Not one to mince words, Stelzer says "The demo he sent sucked."

Enevoldsen admits "[It was] horribly recorded."

Despite this, Stelzer could hear the power of Enevoldsen's voice and had a hard time believing it at first. "This kid is 23!" Stelzer remembers saying to himself. "This has got to be a joke."

Lucky for him, it wasn't. "I called Pat [Kiel]," Stelzer continues, "and I said we have to get this kid up here." So Enevoldsen took a bus up from Chicago and auditioned with the band. Upon hearing him sing, sax man Cooper summed up the impact Enevoldsen usually makes on people who hear him for the first time: "Where's that voice coming outta this little white boy?"

Enevoldsen admits that he didn't always think he had what it takes to front a band. Although he sang as a child and throughout high school, he decided in college that he didn't want to sing anymore. "I was going through this transitional period, and I didn't think I had what it took to front a group," he says. "I was not in a happy place with my voice at the time."

Enevoldsen explains that it was then that he started listening to different kinds of music, especially old-school blues and soul. And through exploring these types of music, Enevoldsen soon discovered the depths of his own talent. "I kind of found myself," he recalls. "My voice was maturing... I was discovering new influences and new styles. I was developing into my own voice."

And for the Groove Hogs, Enevoldsen's pipes add a whole new dimension to the band's music. With him on board, the Groove Hogs went back into the studio with Gaines in January to produce its fourth and best collection of songs to date. "Blue Rhythms White Lies" was released nationwide in August, and the band has been touring hard to promote it — because that's what it takes. Despite the personal hardships of leaving families, despite the long hours and roads that stretch before these musicians, they know that in order to continue doing what they do best, touring is essential. And the energy the Groove Hogs brings to each show proves that these musicians know what it is going to take to find that one person who has yet to hear them and to hook them for life.

As for the unsolved problem of describing what type of music they play? Perhaps the best way to answer the question is to simply say, "groove — baby!"

They play groove.



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