

Published July 29, 2004

Talent lost reminds listeners to appreciate the music

As the shock of our losses wore off this week, we cried, jammed, mourned, smiled and tried to make some sense out of what has happened.

Don Shipps and Bill Brown are no longer with us. As someone said Friday night, after the two men died in a house fire that morning: The finality is so hard to take.

Nearly a week later, it is still difficult for me to believe we will never again see Don or Bill on stage. I know many others feel the same.

But I have taken solace in the outpouring we have seen from the community in the last few days.

The gathering Friday night at the Outland — where their Titanic Blues Band was supposed to record a live album — was the first step in a long healing process for the city.

An air of disbelief filled the place. But a sense of gratitude also existed because we were able to enjoy Bill and Don's talents and personalities for a time, even if it wasn't long enough.

Many questions remain.

How could this have happened?

Couldn't we have had one more night with them?

One last recording to remember them by?

A Monday night jam session at Harlow's celebrated the musicians' talents. Word of the gathering at one of the Titanic Band's favorite haunts spread quickly. Friends, fans and family showed up in droves.

So many, in fact, most were turned away at the door and the crowd spilled into the parking lot. A donation bucket at the door was stuffed with bills. Before the night ended, more than \$3,000 was collected for the families.

Inside I saw Bill's two teenage sons, Cooper and Dillon, playing a set with their band, and I was reminded that music is a gift. It's a gift Bill gave to his sons, and one that can never be taken away.

Seeing all the other musicians who came to play, I was reminded of how fortunate we are to have so many talented people in our city willing to share their gifts.

On Wednesday morning, hundreds attended the funeral Mass for Don at St. Joseph Catholic Church. The crowd overflowed onto the church steps, and for the first time there seemed to be a true outpouring of grief.

I saw many eyes welled up with tears through tears of my own. Being there was even harder than I thought it would be.

Don's brother, David, urged the mourners to replace their tears with smiles and their grief with joy because that's what Don would have wanted.

True to that sentiment, the best moments Wednesday were happy ones, and not surprisingly, musical



**MICHAEL
BROTHERS**
In the Groove

ones.

Guitarist and singer Norman Jackson, who played in the Titanic Band for several years and was among Don's closest friends, got everyone clapping and sang a spirited blues tune.

As we filed out of the church, we heard the song "Final Ride." It was recorded by Granny's Bathwater, the funk band for which Don played bass in the late '70s. Don wrote "Final Ride" in memory of Granny's bandmate Michael Bunge, who died in a car accident in 1975.

It's an upbeat affirmation, not a dirge, and it reflects Don's optimistic outlook and deep-rooted faith.

"When they lay me in that long black Cadillac, and all the boys say how good I look, and after all the women have cried / I'll have St. Peter 'round my shoulder and the Lord right by my side."

On the street, a small band of musicians led a traditional New Orleans-style funeral parade. We heard Dixieland renditions of "St. James Infirmary" and "When the Saints Go Marching In" as we walked down the street, clapping and nodding heads.

Once again we are left with questions. The one that sticks out most in my mind: What can we take away from this tragedy?

There is a different answer for every person who knew Bill or Don. Each of us will take away a different meaning from this loss.

But should we take one thing away from it, I would like it to be a sense of gratitude and appreciation for those who enrich our lives with music.

The people you find singing songs and playing instruments in venues across this city aren't doing it for a huge paycheck or for big-time recognition. They perform because they are passionate about music and about the response they get from us, the listeners.

And there is this: Please check your smoke detectors. Firefighters at the scene last week said they couldn't find any evidence of smoke detectors in the duplex the men shared.

If you don't have any, get some.

They are available for free through the Springfield Fire Department. For more information, call 864-1500.

If you do have detectors, be sure to check the batteries monthly and change them every six months. Do it when you set your clocks forward or backward an hour each spring and fall.

It's a such simple task, and it just might save your life.

Contact Michael A. Brothers at 836-1210 or at mbrothers@News-Leader.com.