

Belladonna not prima donna - West Hawaii Today, September 2008

By Ma'ata Tukuafu

It seems that in every small town, people wonder why geniuses, especially music geniuses choose to live in their town. With such talent, why aren't they living in the big cities of Los Angeles, New York or Memphis, where such talent could be showcased or make them famous?

The four members of the newly-formed band Belladonna all agree, they've chosen to live in Kailua-Kona because they love it here. All of them have lived in various big cities and find the trade off is just not worth it. "Living on the mainland doesn't appeal to me," said Cayce Borden, bass player of the group. "Yes, it's a bigger pool and there are more places to play, but there's also lots of competition, cut throat business, and insincere people. I can't imagine living there."

Practicing together for just about a year now, Belladonna was formed by guitarist Dylan Kai who was born and raised in Hilo. Kai, who said he's lived at least two years in every major city in the U.S., has toured with Jesse Colin Young. He also passed on a five year contract with Sony because of what he said was bad timing. "I'm used to being in a decent rock and roll scene," said Kai, "It's music I love to play."

The music scene is fairly small on the Big Island, and musicians learn pretty quickly about each other's skills. A couple of years ago, Kai ran into Chris Bellah and asked if he'd like to sing lead vocals in a band he wanted to create. While Bellah agreed, it would take Kai another year to find their fellow band members, bass player Cayce Borden and John Reiner for their drummer.

"I knew John since he moved here and good drummers are hard to come by in this town," said Kai. "There are probably twenty good guitar players to one drummer."

Bellah said he knew Kai from playing together in a band called the Haole Mackerel. "We played pop tunes, and they were fun but we wanted to play classic rock," said Bellah. "When he asked me about forming a band, I said sure, because he's so good and I'm used to playing with high-caliber musicians." Bellah should know about excellent musicianship, having lived in Los Angeles for years playing guitar and singing vocals in several bands, ultimately opening for such famous acts as Warrant, Lover Boy, Cheap Trick and Kiss.

Drummer Reiner said he first met Kai at the former Durty Jakes, sitting in as a drummer with a band called Blue Manchu. Moving here in 2002, Reiner said he worked as a dive instructor, but always found a way to play music. "I auditioned with the Kona Gold Blues Band in 2002," Reiner said. "Things were hot then! We had regular gigs at Durty Jakes, Hard Rock Café, the Korner Pocket and the Blue Dolphin." But Reiner also wanted to play classic rock and has found it with Belladonna.

Borden said he moved to the Big Island from Fresno, California, to join his father in the computer business. Playing a few gigs as a guitarist, he felt he was moving backwards and picked up the bass again. He played in jazz bands; the James South Band and the Low Brow Jazz Band. "I started meeting more Kona musicians and Dylan was one of them," said Borden. "Now in this band we've been working on really figuring out what we want."

There are three ingredients to a successful band, Borden believes. One is to have fun. "If we're not having fun, then we're doing something wrong," he said. "It's called playing music, not working music." The second ingredient he said, is keeping busy, practicing together and adding new songs to their repertoire. "The third thing is the tough side, getting gigs," said Borden.

With the economy slump, many of Kailua town's restaurants that used to be band venues have closed; Rio's, Cassandra's, Paleo's and Hard Rock Café. One venue still open and promoting rock music is Rockstarz Nightclub on Kaiwi Street, where Belladonna has played. "It's good to have all kinds of music, but Kona needs a rock scene," said Kai.

"After only a few months of playing together, we opened for Everclear at Rockstarz on July fourth," said Bellah. After listening to Belladonna practice together, one can see why they were chosen to open. The band is solid in their musicianship creating a good blend of classic rock ranging from Led Zeppelin songs to their own version of "Eleanor" by the Beatles. All band members know their parts without requiring sheet music, although Borden said it takes a while to get to the point of not needing a "cheat sheet."

"If I don't hear [the song] in my head, I can't play it very well," said Borden, adding that he can sing any of the parts of a song whether it's the guitar, bass or vocals. He grew up playing the trumpet among other instruments, from elementary school through college. And all of Belladonna's members are multi-talented, each able to play several instruments. Bellah plays guitar, but said he doesn't play unless Kai really needs a second guitarist. Reiner said he started out playing a trumpet but was addicted to the drum set by the age of eight.

"But having Dylan as our main man makes me feel confident," said Bellah.

One last but major ingredient to a successful band is the camaraderie the band mates feel. Cayce said he's been in many bands, where three out of four of the guys get along but one ruins it for the rest. "In this band, we aren't arguing or being at each others throats. We can all say what's on our mind and we are equals on the project. We have chemistry together," said Cayce. About his band mates Reiner added, "They are a great bunch of musicians. They inspire me to be better by making music that is harder to play, and I'm growing as a musician."

Belladonna's vision is to revive the Kona rock music scene, play the music they love and hopefully venture into writing their own music. They hope to be part of the community, sharing the classic rock they all love to play. "If it's memorable to us, it's memorable to others, that's why we like playing what we do," said Cayce.

“I think we might do something!” said Bellah.

On the web: myspace.com/belladonnakona