

Down and dirty

by **Brian J. Bowe**
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Vision thing: DDBB blows into Detroit Saturday.

When the Dirty Dozen Brass Band was founded in 1977, co-founder and baritone saxophonist Roger Lewis says he had a premonition. "I saw a vision: If we kept on doing what we were doing that we would be going all over the world with this band."

That vision has come to pass. The Dirty Dozen Brass Band has played shows in 30 countries on five continents. They've also played on records by everyone from David Bowie and Elvis Costello to the Black Crowes and Modest Mouse. In the process, they expanded the musical vocabulary of New Orleans-style brass ensembles everywhere.

A retrospective of the band's career — titled *This is the Dirty Dozen Brass Band Collection* — was just released on Shout! Factory, and the band hits Detroit June 25.

Dirty Dozen is known for combining traditional second-line New Orleans brass repertoire with funk and jazz into a novel blend. With Dirty Dozen's music, Lewis says you get all three bases covered — the intellectual, the spiritual and the physical. "The body can't keep still once the music starts running around inside you. It feels so good inside your body."

And that effect is global, he says. Lewis has been all over the world playing this music for the most uptight, intellectual, highbrow crowds. And after the first two songs, feet get to tapping. By the end of the show, folks are dancing. "You can't deny how you feel when you hear this music," he says.

Much of that effect has to do with the spiritual genesis of New Orleans music, which has roots in sanctified gospel churches and traditional African music.

"It's got so much feeling, it's got so much in it that you feel all these things," Lewis says.

Most stories about the Dirty Dozen assert that when the band got together, this kind of brass band music was a dying form. It's an assertion that Lewis calls patently false.

"That's not true," Lewis says. "They always had brass bands and they already had second-line parades. I don't know where the people get that. It wasn't dying out."

That's not to say Dirty Dozen didn't bring something fresh to the music. "When we came along, we came along with a different feel, a different beat, a different sound."

And there's a whole crop of new bands continuing the tradition — groups like the Treme Brass Band, the Olympia Brass Band and the New Orleans Nightcrawlers. There are even bands like Cool Bone who combine hip hop with brass band music. "There's no two brass bands in New Orleans that sound the same," Lewis says, adding that each band brings something distinctive to the music, from hip-hop to Caribbean flavors.

"Dirty Dozen came along at a time when all this stuff wasn't happening," the saxist says. "Those cats was listening to us. You can always hear your influence in that music because we had the newest sound that was happening. When I hear a lot of brass bands, I hear a lot of influence from our music."

It's easy to see why Dirty Dozen would be influential. They augment traditional material with works by artists as diverse as Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, Horace Silver, Michael Jackson and James Brown. They also play original music composed by various band members.

"We put in a lot of time in the beginning," Lewis says. "We used to rehearse 16 hours a day almost — maybe take a little break to get some chicken or drink a beer."

That obsessive rehearsing is why the band members were able to complement each other musically. In the band's early days, it was a strictly acoustic affair. "We played a gig one time with the Neville Brothers and the generator went out," Lewis says. "We just got off the stage, got a little closer to the people and played the gig."

The current Dirty Dozen lineup includes founders Lewis, Efreem Towns (trumpet) and Kevin Harris (tenor sax). Rounding out the lineup is Julius McKee (sousaphone), Terence Higgins (drums), Jamie Mclean (guitar) and Revert Andrews (trombone).

Appears Saturday, June 25, at the Jazzin' On Jefferson festival (Jefferson Avenue at Chalmers Street, Detroit; 313-331-7939). The free festival runs from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Also performing will be Eddie Burns, Chris Codish, Straight Ahead, In the Pocket and Miss Odessa Harris w/ drummer R.J. Spangler and others.