



The members of Phat Mark are, from left, Derek Fong, Clark Harrell, Casey Smith, Chris Cortez, Mitch Vereen and Andrew Wischer.

COURTESY/PHAT MARK

Brass tactics

Phat Mark

Together for a little over a year, Reno band Phat Mark has three frontmen—although only one of them sings. That’s because it’s the three-man horn section that is the true center of this group: trumpeter and singer Casey Smith, sax player Derek Fong and trombonist Andrew Wischer.

Not that the other three members of Phat Mark—Clark Harrell on keyboards, Mitch Vereen on bass and Chris Cortez on drums—are shy and retiring. The band truly works as a six-headed beast, intersecting the lines between jazz, funk and hip-hop for its own vibe on the scene.

“I think because it’s so unique and different, it gets people’s attention,” Fong said. “We do it in such a way where it still feels accessible and fun. At our last gig, people were just dancing all night long. It was fantastic. It was right there in front of me, and I couldn’t stop watching. But I never feel like we are sacrificing our artistry or musicianship. It still feels very authentic.”

Wischer said at first even he was wondering if a horn-led band would do well in Reno. “But, even from our first week of playing, we’ve had really receptive nights,” he said. “At one show, the crowd was chanting, ‘10 more songs!’ I was thinking, ‘Is this really happening?’”

The band also has a distinctive origin story to go with its sound. Most band members were a part of the pit orchestra for Good Luck Macbeth’s production of *Young Frankenstein* in 2018. Once they launched, the bandmates started to get local gigs around town. Yet, they arrived at their debut at St. James Infirmary in an unusual, and slightly improvised, way.

“About a week after we started jamming for fun to keep this going, I was at the gym talking to a buddy and told him I was putting a band together,” Smith said. “And, this guy comes up and says, ‘Hey, I need a band to play this weekend.’ So I said, ‘Sure, we’ll take the gig.’”

The band didn’t have many fully developed songs by that point, but they went ahead and took the leap with covers and jams for those first shows. It’s led to a full repertoire of originals and some basement recordings that were recently featured on local radio station KWNK 97.7. They plan to record in a studio and play their first shows outside of Reno-Tahoe sometime in 2020.

The bandmates write in different ways each time, although several songs stem from Smith’s cell-phone-recorded ideas—mostly melodies sung to Harrell—which get worked up with each band member chiming in. Smith said he writes all of the lyrics, though many songs are instrumental.

The horn players of Phat Mark agreed that finding their own space in the songs is a fun challenge. “A lot of what we write is to find the different harmonies and textures you get with three horns,” Smith said. “We intentionally try to find the right chords that we can make between us.”

“Also, the sound, the timbre, the tone quality of the horns, and the way we blend . . . I think that’s a big part of it, too,” Fong said.

As it evolves, Phat Mark is letting things happen naturally instead of forcing itself too hard into a jazz/funk box. “That was something that we said when we first started: we didn’t want to get stuck into one thing,” Wischer said. “We want to do whatever is creative and fun.” □

Phat Mark is playing with Montana electro-soul duo Dash at 8 p.m. Jan. 3 at Jub Jub’s Thirst Parlor, 71 S. Wells Ave., and with locals the R. Cade Daddies on Jan. 23 at Bibb Coffee Co., West Street Market, 148 West Street. Learn more about the band at facebook.com/phatmarkmusic.org.

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