

Oganookie:

Working Things Out, Musically

By JAY SHORE
Sentinel Staff Writer

It happens every time Oganookie plays the Catalyst. And they play on weekend nights every two or three weeks.

What happens is that you have 200 people inside jumping around, heaving themselves into the electric rock-out bluegrass sounds, doing their thing as if their thing were staging the first Bacchanalian fest — the one that made history.

History? Who cares about history? Everyone is having the time of his life. It is one big party, and the people outside, with their eyes glued to sweat-stained windows, wish, oh, how they wish, they were old enough, or had the \$1 cover charge to enter.

Or they wish someone would leave so the doorman, who has his quota, could let them in. The doorman makes his quota, it appears, when he sees that a person can't walk two steps without bumping into someone else or a piece of furniture.

And these people, almost all of them, allow themselves to be jostled and bumped about for one reason — Oganookie. Sounds

like an American Indian pastry, no? Or a swamp in the South?

Actually it's a five-piece "high energy" band which took its name from another group called Olatungi and the Drums of Passion. Olatungi sounded just right so the fellas kicked around all sorts of similar sounding names until they arrived at Oganookie.

Their music could be called goodtime and different. It is goodtime because it makes people smile and jump about; it is fast and syncopated; it is very melodic and encourages the singalong.

Their music is different for several reasons, the most significant being that all the players are very competent. You can see this in Bob Stern's electric violin solos or George Havis plucking an electric banjo as if it were a guitar.

Electric violin and electric banjo can produce some odd sounds together, and when they're played with the elan brought to them by Stern and Havis, the harmonies and counterpoint are quite extraordinary, at least on the contemporary scene.

Bruce Frye, who plays mostly

rhythm and does the lead vocals, has a fairly strong voice that blends in well with the instrumentals. Tim Ackerman rocks steady on drums, but seldom solo; and Jack Bowers writes most of the songs.

Bowers, who also plays mandolin and electric piano, writes songs very much in the traditional bluegrass vein, and also some ballads.

You have to climb this ridiculously narrow, steep and winding road a half-mile in what better be a small, high powered car to get to Oganookie's Brookdale spread, The Plantation.

The band lives in several wooden dwellings on 6½ acres of land which also sports four gardens, a 2,300 degree kiln, four dogs, God knows how many cats and Peter Troxell, Oganookie's manager.

In a converted garage the band is getting ready to practice. Stern says, "George, haven't you got a new song?"

George says yes, he does, but he doesn't have any lyrics yet. The others say go ahead, play it. And he does. Everyone likes it. George asks if anyone wants

to help with the lyrics. No one answers.

"What about Jack?" He writes most of the songs.

"No, I've got enough to do," Jack said. He's about to play two new songs. The group has a repertoire of 40 songs, some of which are traditional, but most of them are original.

Finally, George says to Tim, how about it? Tim doesn't refuse.

Now, it's Jack's turn and he plays a new ballad on piano. "Far out," says Bob. George agrees. They say they'll work on it, but move on instead.

Bob picks up the bass and sings his new song. It is the most lyric, very catchy. It'll go. But not now.

In walks Peter and they discuss their calendar. Recently they went to Los Angeles and played 9 gigs (shows) in eight days. They did the Troubador, KPFF radio and a TV show called Head Shop.

Last year they played 150 gigs, a 100 of which were in the county. They've played virtually everywhere and could be

called the housebands at Town and Country and the Catalyst.

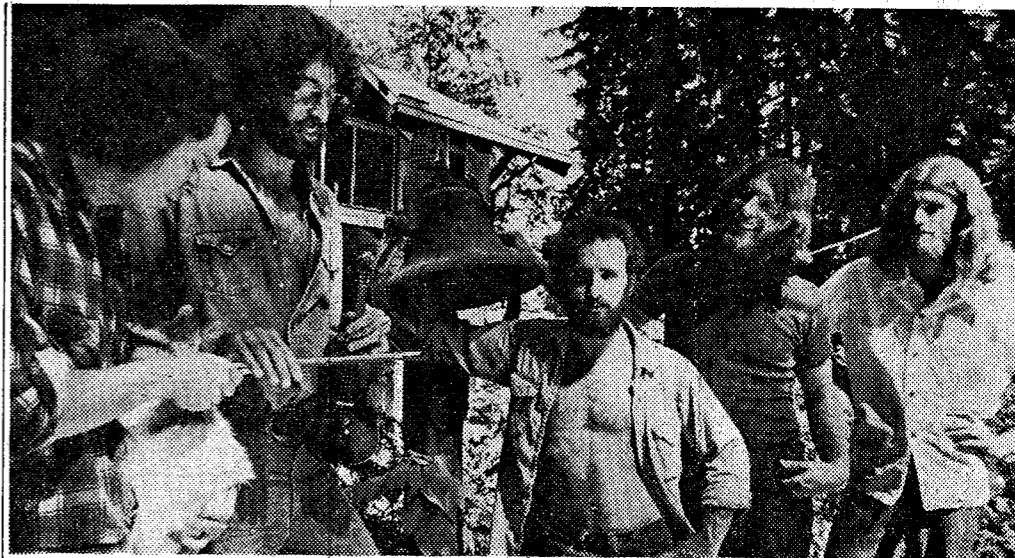
Playing also at UCSC once a month and for private parties, you could say they're the most active and highest name band in the county—that is, if you scratch Moby Grape, which appears to be scrapped.

Peter wants to know if the band will take a \$125 gig for a local party. There is some hesitancy because it means playing more than the fellas want to.

But Bob says, "Yeah, we'll have to take it if we're going to fix the cars." Oganookie has six vehicles, but they're not in the best of shape. They need work, and since George, who used to be the mechanic, no longer monkeys with wrenches, the auto work has to be farmed out. Which means the band needs money. So they take the gig.

Oganookie likes to practice twice a week, play three times a week (which they've been able to do) and rest one day. You're right about those figures adding up to six. On the other day, they all give lessons.

Peter has settled the calendar question, and it's time for Jack to play another new song. He



Oganookie: from left, pianist Jack Bowers, violinist Bob

Stern, drummer Tim Ackerman, banjo player George

Havis, and guitarist Bruce Frye.

picks up guitar, plays "The Leg Song."

It is a syncopated, Foot-Kicking number that quickly climbs pitch, then scuttles down, changing time. It is sure to be a big hit, and Oganookie senses it so they begin to work right away on its arrangement.

Tim is trying to figure out the rhythmic change in the scuttle down. It goes from the downbeat, suddenly to the upbeat, then back to the downbeat.

Such turns are typical of Oganookie songs. The musicians are intellectually sharp (all, except Bruce, met in the mid-sixties

at Haverford College in Pennsylvania), and they try not to play what bores them.

Bob says the rhythm "is like being assaulted by mosquitos." He plays a long, gaunt searing legato around the melody.

"You're playing too much on top," says Jack.

"What do you mean?" asks Bob. But Jack hems and haws. He means it too prominent, drowning out the others. But he doesn't say that because he doesn't want to offend Bob. Anyway, Bob knows what Jack means.

And so does George, who pla-

ates matters by saying, "Bob should be solo. The banjo and guitar are indispensable to the rhythm and melody."

Meanwhile, in walks two-year-old Beany, the daughter of Diana who lives with Peter, and Beany is trying to tap out the rhythm. But somehow she can't get it.

Tim is still having his troubles too. But neither he nor anyone else suggests a simpler rhythm. Tim will figure it out, and half the fun of the whole setup is throwing in the twists, the off patterns, and working them out.