

Musicians Turn Poison Into Medicine
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When John, Leroy and Michael Payton make music together, they know they have changed poison into medicine. Forward Motion, their band, is such a successful lounge act it's solidly booked for the rest of 1997 and half of 1998, according to Leroy.

"We owe everything we have today to the SGI practice," he says. When they were living in San Diego in 1969, the three brothers began their music careers in the Brass Band. "I had been practicing Buddhism for many years and I thought it would be good for the boys to get involved in Brass Band," says their mother, Kumiko Payton.

John was 12 when he started in Brass Band. Leroy originally started on the drums when he was 10 or 11, but later switched to saxophone. Michael was 10 when he started.

John credits Brass Band and his high school music teacher for his success. In 1974, when he was a senior, he entered a drumming contest. "Our school was the last to be notified and I only had two weeks to prepare, while all the other contestants had been preparing for six months," he remembers. "But my teacher had such a strong determination — actually he had the SGI spirit — that I went against all odds to enter and win the contest." Another drummer was "supposed" to win first place, but John credits his teacher's full trust in his ability, plus his own determination to "never give up," to winning the contest.

When they were teenagers, because of their love of music and their enthusiasm, the brothers were invited to play weekend gigs at the enlisted men's clubs on the Navy base in San Diego. They were so young their mother had to accompany them to play dates. John and Leroy were in high school and Michael was in grade school.

"We never wanted to do anything except play music," John says. "We formed our first group with Gakkai members and started playing local clubs in San Diego." Their first club date was on Cinco de Mayo; the club owner said he had never seen this kind of spirit in a band, remembers Leroy.

Meanwhile, Michael, though involved with the band, kept running into trouble with drugs. Michael suffered from panic disorder syndrome and was often paralyzed with fear. He took drugs to overcome the fear but they did not help. He had a chance to go to Japan for four months to play in a band over there, but when he came back to the United States his drug use increased. He overdosed three times and almost died. "I kept trying to get back on track and after that third overdose I knew I had to change my life," he reflects. "Fortunately, I was still connected to the SGI."

By 1994, Michael had slowly gotten back on his feet and really begun to see himself. "I had to apologize to a lot of people," he says. "Purity started to come into my practice. My practice is not a formality, it's my life. I feel I'm in control of my life and I feel brand new. I made a fresh start and I'm married now. My brothers are the best — they have always been there for me."

John, 41, now plays drums; Leroy, 39, saxophone; and Michael, 33, originally a percussionist, plays bass guitar. The original band was called Peacemakers, but when they decided they needed a new name, Forward Motion came from an informal rap session one night. "We just threw around some names and it just popped out," Leroy explains. "I have no idea where it came from, but we all decided we liked it."

Their agent, in San Diego, booked them for a week at the Palace Station in Las Vegas in 1987. They drove from San Diego and played only one performance. "We didn't realize when we accepted the Las Vegas dates that we had a conflict in our schedule," Leroy says. "We had been double-booked and felt we had no choice but to go back to San Diego."

Title: Musicians Turn Poison Into Medicine
Subject: World Tribune 03/28/97 n.3132 p.12 WT970328p12 Las Vegas, Nevada
Author: Patty Jacobs
Keywords: Band Brass Career Experiences Medicine Musicians Nevada Poison Profiles Singers Turn Vegas Youth

The owner of the Las Vegas casino was thrilled with the group because they were instantly popular, but he was upset when they started back to San Diego. He threatened them by saying, "You will never be back here." John told him they would not only be back but that "we will *own* Las Vegas." Then he chanted for five hours, all the way back to San Diego.

They continued working in San Diego and were hired again by the Palace Station — now with a different owner — in 1990 and 1991, commuting all the time from San Diego. In 1992, they moved to Las Vegas and also started playing various other casino lounges. Success came quickly for the group, and soon they were "too successful." But how could that be? Lounge shows in Las Vegas are usually free and the object is to bring people into the casinos to enjoy the music and then stay to gamble. Yet Forward Motion had so much energy and their music was so upbeat that people would stand in line to get into their shows. At Maxim's, the club started charging a two-drink minimum and then a \$5 cover charge to thin out the crowds. "No matter what they did, every show we did it was standing room only," Leroy says. "And it all comes from the spirit we had when we were in Brass Band."

In 1993 their success became a serious problem. One particular night the crowd at a casino lounge got rowdy and a fight broke out. Even though none of the Forward Motion musicians were involved, the casino canceled their contract and branded them as a hard-core band that caused crowds to fight.

The band struggled to stay together. They couldn't get any local club dates, so they traveled all over the Western states playing whatever club dates their agent could get.

By the end of 1993, the rest of the band left and the three brothers were reduced to playing small clubs around Las Vegas as a threesome. John worked in a car wash and Leroy got a job moving furniture. "We knew we had been blackballed because of our energy, but we determined to keep fighting," Leroy says.

Finally, they got a break when their agent booked them for the Rio Hotel lounge. The brothers decided to change their act and focus on soft power, just like SGI President Ikeda had said. They mellowed out their act, broadening their music selections to include big band sounds and other low key elements.

They have been working steadily ever since. As soon as they got their first club date again, they reassembled their band and won over a bigger audience. Now Forward Motion can be heard at the Golden Nugget, the Stardust, the Palace Station, the Sahara and the Excalibur. They convinced their mother to move from San Diego to Las Vegas a year and a half ago.

"Once we got that date at the Rio our determined was to stay solidly booked up, and we have," Leroy says. "We have shown tremendous actual proof in our lives by being only one of a handful of groups who works in Las Vegas all year round." Next year the group is planning a tour; they are currently working on a CD.

"The Brass Band spirit is our mission," John says. "We have talked about this wherever we go and have introduced it all over the Western states and Canada." The Payton brothers have, for instance, introduced high school students to the Brass Band and seen the youngsters' lives change. "One year later, we have been back and heard their groups play," John says. "It affects the whole family. There is one family in Utah where the teenagers got involved in the Brass Band and now the whole family practices."

Forward Motion performs with other entertainers at the Spring Family Festival hosted by the SGI-USA Las Vegas Territory, on April 13. Recently, John, district chief of Sahara District, agreed to mentor the drum section of the new Music Corps in Las Vegas.

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