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To the beat of a very different drum

MarchFourth celebrates 10 years as a Portland original with international chops

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MarchFourth Marching Band was born on Alberta Street 10 years ago this week. Since that time, the band's 22 members have become ambassadors of joy and funk, taking a piece of Portlandia with them as they tour the country with their off-beat brand of circus-tent pageantry.

Bandleader John Averil and four friends living in the Alberta Arts District hatched the idea for the raucous troupe, naming it after its first Fat Tuesday performance on March 4. You can catch the 10-year anniversary spectacle extraordinaire at the Crystal Ballroom March 3 with shows at 4 p.m. and 8:30 p.m., and March 4 at 9 p.m.

S.Z.: *M4 is kind of a social experiment. You guys turn the marching band paradigm on its head, but you are much more than a marching band. How do you explain what you do?*

J.A.: Aside from being a band, this is very much a social experiment. I describe it as a high energy big band with performance, circus elements that integrates with the audience. A celebration, really, that's what it is. We've considered dropping the marching band from our name. We really aren't a marching band anymore. We look like one. We have five drummers instead of a drum kit player. We have electric bass, guitar. We have vocals, we write all of our own music. We have stilt walkers. We're like a traveling rock and roll circus, if anything.

S.Z.: *MarchFourth played its first show 10 years ago at what is now the Star Theater.*

J.A.: Yes. At the time, it was called Level.

When MarchFourth played our very first show, it was to a packed crowd. That wasn't because we promoted it that well. The untold story is the history that led up to that.

S.Z.: *Tell me some of that backstory.*

J.A.: I came (to Portland) in 1997. I was a stop motion animator making really good money with health benefits, working four days a week. It was a dream job. Our producer gathered us all one day and said Fox decided to cancel the show. I looked around the room and I saw what had become my family over the last three years. It made me angry and frustrated that an entity outside of my creative family could just say, "Oh, this is over." It really pissed me off. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew I wanted to stay in Portland and I thought that maybe this was a time for me to give music a shot.

S.Z.: *Had you considered a music career before that point?*

J.A.: Music had always been my first love, but I had never taken it seriously as a profession at all. Growing up, a message I got from society was, "You can't make it as an artist." You have to find some commercial aspect to make art.

I hadn't considered a career in music as a serious venture because it's a lot of risk and there is no road map for it. Any other job I had was very much career oriented where you learn a skill and then you trade this time for money and it's a very linear equation. With music, it's a crap shoot. You

don't know where your money is coming from.

I contemplated all of this stuff, and I just said, screw it. I want to give it a shot. What I decided to do was to build a scene, an audience. I wanted to build an event and then insert a band into that scene. I started doing these underground parties.

In 2000, there wasn't this fusion of DJs and live music and performance art like we see everywhere now. Every single show I did, I changed the name of the band and the set list would be within the theme (of the party). All the other bands that I put together were four or six piece rock bands, so I thought it would be fun to do a marching band as an idea.

I birthed a band by doing the party first. MarchFourth was a party, it was a band named for that day (Fat Tuesday, Mardi Gras) and there was a built in audience. I haven't heard of anybody who used that model. Our success came because of our numbers and the whole sheer mass of music and spectacle that comes together.

S.Z.: *Can you provide a quick sketch of your current line up? When you tour, do you take the whole flock?*

J.A.: We tour with 14 musicians; four dancers; we have two bus drivers; we have a merch person and we have an all-purpose roadie, tech guy. We still at this point don't travel with a lighting person or a sound person, but I'm really hoping that will change sometime, but we just can't afford it right now. But there are about 22 people on

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