

Newman plays a comeback tune

'Blasted' star quit scene 18 years ago

By Wendy Killeen
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EVERETT - When Howie Newman takes the stage at Jacob's Ladder Coffeehouse in Malden Saturday, he'll be performing for two special audience members - his kids, Jen, 14, and Keith, 10.

"They hadn't been born when I retired from the music business in 1983," said Newman, who had a full-time career playing guitar and singing original comic and satiric tunes in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Now, after an 18-year hiatus from music, during which he worked as a sportswriter for several newspapers, Newman is back. He released a compact disc, "Here We Go Again," in June. And he's performing in coffeehouses as part of his "No Heavy Lifting Tour."

"It's exciting," said Newman, 51, of Everett. "Not too many people get a chance to do it again. And I feel I'm much better than the first time around."

Newman still plays the old tunes he became known for such as "Blasted in the Bleachers," about Fenway Park, and "Mustang Mania," the football song he wrote for Southern Methodist University.

But now things are different, in his life and in his act. "Plenty of material comes from my kids, especially the teenager, he said. "Do they mind? They don't have a choice. But they have heard it and think it's pretty funny."

He has a job in communications with the Consortium for Energy Efficiency. In his spare time he runs Northeast Publicity, which he formed to promote folk and acoustic musicians, including himself.

"Because I have a full-time job, there's no pressure. I'm not depending on [music] to my living," Newman said. "I play the places I want to play."

He's appeared at the Common Seasons in Chelmsford, the Dessert Club in Taunton, and Java Hut in Worcester. Upcoming gigs include Jacob's Ladder in Malden, Javawocky Coffeehouse in Brockton, the Junction Coffeehouse in Burlington, River Street Grille in Hyde Park, and Gladly's in Jamaica Plain.

"It's just fun to be on stage," Newman said. "The creative juices get flowing. And I have something to look forward to. There is nothing like the energy on stage when you are playing well and the audience is good and everyone is laughing. It's a very unique experience."

A native of New York, Newman came to Boston to attend Northeastern University in 1968. Although he always liked music, he

didn't play an instrument until he picked up a dorm mate's guitar. "I tried it out, liked it, and stuck with it," Newman said.

He bought his first guitar in 1970 and three years later was performing at open mike nights at Northeastern's coffeehouse. After graduating in 1973 with a degree in psychology, he worked with emotionally disturbed adolescents at Boston State Hospital.

Two years later, Newman began performing music and comedy full time, mostly at local colleges. He put out his first record, a 45-rpm single called "Blasted in the Bleachers," a parody of Fenway Park fans, that year.

He was commissioned to write a football song for Southern Methodist University in Dallas in 1978 and came up with "Mustang Mania," a rockabilly song that was often played at the Cotton Bowl.

The next year he combined "Blasted in the Bleachers" with four other original songs about baseball on a recording called "Baseball's Greatest Hits." His last recording, until the CD produced this year, was a 1980 country-rock version of "Blasted."

"I lost money on almost all of them," Newman said. "When he told his friend Steve Goodman, the singer-songwriter, he was out \$700 on one of the records, Goodman replied, 'You didn't lose \$700, you paid \$700 to get an education.'"

And Newman found that to be true. The marketing and promotional skills he developed are used in his public relations job.

Eventually, Newman tired of working as a full-time performer. "It wore me out and I wasn't making any money," he said. "A lot of gigs were in bars and people weren't listening. I decided it was time to do something else."

Out of the blue, he got a call from a man who had seen a magazine advertisement for "Baseball's Greatest Hits."

He was the editor of a monthly newspaper in Dorchester and he asked me if I'd like to write sports. He was desperate for a sports writer," Newman recalled. "I had never done it before but I said, 'All right, I'll try.'"

Newman's third career was born. For the next 18 years he worked as a sportswriter for a string of newspapers including the Middlesex News, Lynn Item, the Patriot Ledger in Quincy, the Malden Observer, and the Lowell Sun.

He covered two World Series, five NBA finals, and four Stanley Cup finals.

But after almost two decades of working nights and weekends, and with the feeling "I had done everything I had wanted to do in sportswriting," he decided it was time for another change.

He wanted to get into public relations work and figured he would start with a group he knows, folk musicians. He established

Northeast Publicity and picked up several clients.

"It brought me back in the loop, going to concerts talking to other musicians, and reading folk music magazines," Newman said. "And, after many years of not picking up his guitar, he started playing again."

One night he was at a party for a friend attended by many musicians. "They all got up and did a song, but I was too chicken," Newman said. "I went home and said 'You are going to do this or not.' And from that point I pushed myself."

He began calling coffeehouses and promoting his act. He made a CD of his old songs and had a big release party. The bookings followed. And now Newman is writing new songs and comedy bits.

"I write songs that are easy to understand," he said. "That's why I'm calling it the 'No Heavy Lifting tour.'"

When a radio station in Belgium was the first to show interest in his CD, Newman found it "so off the wall" he was inspired to write a song called "Big in Belgium." Another new song is "Please Buy My CD."

"It really has worked out as well as I could have hoped," Newman said. "You set a goal and work hard at it and when things happen, it's gratifying."

Rich Ham, who runs the Common Seasons coffeehouse in Chelmsford, said Newman "did an exceptionally good job" when he performed there. "He has fun while he's on stage," Ham said. "I thoroughly enjoyed watching him and so did everyone else."

Janet Feld, also a musician and performer, said Newman "is very shy but when he gets on stage you wouldn't know it. In his understated way he is hilarious."

Laura May, who works with Newman at his day job, said she was surprised to learn of his musical and comedy pursuits. But when she saw him perform, she said, "I was really impressed. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, someone I work with has all this musical talent.' It's interesting the things people are into."

She said Newman "has so much personality and the ability to energize and turn an audience on to his music. It's a very fun performance and you walk away feeling good and happy."

Feld added that Newman's life experience - he's been divorced, remarried, and has children - is perfect for the coffeehouse set. "His audience is living it," she said. "There is nothing better than going to a show and thinking, 'This guy is singing about me.'"

As for Saturday's performance, Newman said, "I'm looking forward to having my kids there. I've seen them perform, now it's their turn."