

MORE THAN MUSIC



Panda poses with some of the guys from Teddy Bear Band (from left to right: Ron Gustafson, Donny Paulson and Richard Erickson).



The Teddy Bear Band encourages child participation through the use of teddy bears and music. • By Demrie Margo Alonzo

When Richard Erickson's daughter was 2½ years old, his wife found an article in a local community education magazine about a workshop on early childhood family education in their area. It sounded interesting, so the Erickson family signed up along with another friend and family. That's where they met Ron Gustafson, the instructor. He combined fun learning with music, which was right up Erickson's alley, since he himself is a musician. Erickson and his musician friend would often bring their own instruments and add to the fun for the next few years. Then, after his daughter had grown out of the program, Erickson received a phone call from Gustafson asking if he'd be interested in helping out with a fundraiser. The program's funding was being cut so they wanted to raise money to keep it going.

A couple of other dads, who also happened to be musicians, got together and called themselves the "Teddy Bear Band" for that first show. Erickson played bass, Gustafson was on acoustic guitar, another

guy played the banjo and yet another played the clarinet and some piano. Though it was designed to be only a one-time event, the dads had such a blast they decided to keep it going.

"Our name comes from the belief that teddy bears are powerful symbols of a healthy early childhood experience," Erickson explains of how easily the name of the band came to be. "In the mid-'80s, the Cabbage Patch doll was big, but for some kids it became a lesson in the 'have and have not.' Ron Gustafson went so far as to ban the dolls from his early childhood classes and encourage parents to send teddy bears if their child wanted a 'playmate' during the day. When the band was formed, it was only natural that it would be called the Teddy Bear Band."

That first show took place in 1985. Now, 24 years later, the Teddy Bear Band performs throughout the year, mostly in Minnesota, but also in the five surrounding regional states, though they've gone as far west as Anaheim, Calif., and as far east as Greenwich, Conn.

Entertain and Engage

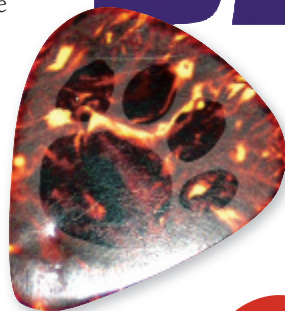
Before the Teddy Bear Band, Erickson made a living playing bass in a jazz band for upscale dinner and dance clubs on the 494 Strip in Bloomington, Minn. He used these very contacts to get their first Teddy Bear Band gigs.

"We started with traditional children's music, adding our own flare to the songs," he says. "The idea was to engage the children, encouraging them to participate through the use of their teddy bears and other stuffed animals."

"Ron wanted to implement objects of interaction so that all children, from the gregarious to incredibly shy, could find a way to participate," Erickson continues.



TEDDY BEAR BAND



"Sometimes the child didn't need the use of their teddy bear to interact, but many of them would start with their teddy bears (clapping the bear's hands together, tapping the bear's feet on the ground) to interacting themselves."

For the first few years, it was usually just Erickson and Gustafson performing along with the banjo player. The more they performed, the more gigs they got. At first they stuck with traditional songs in a more traditional style, but then they saw an opportunity to do something more contemporary with the music. "We played with the tunes and made them dancy and fun for the kids. After that, we started writing our own music," Erickson says of the music they play and sing today.

Some of their early performances took place in city parks. "Back in the '80s, the 'arts in the park' programs were popular," Erickson says. "It was the perfect venue for getting kids up and moving."

The focus for the band back then—and today—is to create energy with music, appealing to children in the music and lyrics. Their popularity grew and they started to get national and international attention.

"Some music attorneys had come up with a couple of clients interested in



Teddy Bear Band has just finished their first DVD, *The Teddy Bear Band Show*. Here is a shot taken from the filming of the DVD at Lakeside Park in Forest Lake, Minn.

doing some international, big multimedia stuff with us; when it came down to it, these people just wanted to take what we did and make it their own," Erickson says. "They just didn't get the idea behind what we do."

What they do is entertain and engage children. Erickson writes most of their original songs, with Gustafson and lead guitarist Donny Paulson writing some as well. Even Scott Bolin, the Teddy Bear Band's keyboard player, has written a few.

Panda, the dancing panda bear, was originally created by Gustafson's wife. "She sewed the first Panda," Erickson says of the popular mascot. Panda is part of their ala cart menu, as they offer different configurations of the band. "We can do two-man performances on up to seven and Panda."

Panda also has a cousin from Chicago named Itchy. "It's this really ratty costume wearing a nice fedora," Erickson laughs. "One of our saxophone-playing friends will wear the Itchy costume while playing," he says. "The kids just love it."

"Our shows are designed for preschool through third grade, though we've played for all kinds of groups and all ages," Erickson says of their performance schedules. "We often play for school groups up to grade six, so we work to make it age-appropriate."

As the group's current manager, Erickson admits at first they were just having fun and didn't expect it to last long. "When it really started taking off, we were just along for the ride," he admits. "Up until 1987, we didn't really anticipate it going on for that long."

In 1988, the band was approached by a local promoter: "How would you guys like to go in a studio and do a professional recording?" They went into Prince's Paisley Park Studio in Minneapolis and recorded their first album.

"It was a great experience," Erickson says. "But he thought he had enough contacts to get some things going. His real intent was to get it going and sell us to a large record label."

More than Music

It's not just about the music for the Teddy Bear Band. "We've presented at the National Association for the Education of Young Children's huge annual convention. That event attracts about 30,000 people nationally and internationally," Erickson explains.



Teddy Bear Band performs all over the country, putting on shows for all group sizes and ages. This photo is from a show at Coons Rapids Dam in Coon Rapids, Minn.

"We often go in and do presentations to adults followed by a performance for the kids," he points out. "We talk about doing age appropriate activities and creating developmentally appropriate participation."

The Teddy Bear Band has played for groups as big as 10,000 and as small as two kids and a mom. "We were on a library tour and we were booked at a library on a day it was normally closed," Erickson shares. "We had a mom and two kids show up, but we had a great time, and so did those kids and that mom. That's what matters."

The band has even done the Minnesota State Fair. "Back when Barney first got popular, we were the supplemental entertainment," Erickson says. "We performed outside the Grand Stand to keep people interested before and after the Barney show."

One of their biggest performances took place at the Best Buy Rotunda at the Mall of America. Thousands upon thousands of people passed through that day.

The Teddy Bear Band has also won awards and honors. In 2005, the state of Minnesota named Sept. 10, 2005, "Teddy Bear Band Day." The group has also been presented with the "Family Favorite Award" from *Minnesota Parent* magazine every year since 1988, and they won the Minnesota Music award for "Best Children's Music Artist."

This past February, Teddy Bear Band came out with their first DVD called *The*

Teddy Bear Band Show. Before the DVD, they had five cassette recordings and one CD. "We are so excited about the DVD," Erickson says. "It's just another positive step for the band."

Booking a Show

The cost to have the band perform depends on the number of musicians requested (with or without Panda) and where the band is going. The band offers funding, collaboration and sponsorship opportunities.

"We encourage sponsorship and collaboration between agencies, organizations and businesses," Erickson shares. "We can help to develop a cost-effective Teddy Bear Band tour for presenters out of our area and offer ideas to lower travel costs."

"There's funding available through local government and foundation grants," he adds. "We have lots of information on making it possible—with any budget or no budget—to bring the Teddy Bear Band to your town and your kids."

In addition to information about the band, the website teddybearband.com includes ideas for the types of performances the band can provide, depending on the needs of an organization or a community group. "It's about the kids...and their teddy bears," Erickson says. 🐻

Teddy Bear Band, teddybearband.com, (612) 861-3570