

KEEP ON ROCKIN'

Local Southern rock band triumphs over tragedy and returns to the stage with a new lineup.

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Frostbit Blue never really went away.

The southern rock band now sporting two members from the Binghamton area returns for two gigs in upcoming weeks. Since January, the band members have done everything from hanging out with the family to checking out their local music scenes. But even with family, the burn to play music returned and here they are.

The band recently opened for the Marshall Tucker band in Rochester, and that marks just the beginning.

"That finally brought back a good feeling that I haven't had in a long time. We just haven't played in a while," said bassist Benny Fiacco, of Endwell. Fiacco, who owns Music City in Binghamton, took over the bass duties after Tim Smith, one of the band's founding members, passed away after an eight-year fight with skin cancer. The band's also recruited Oswego drummer John Hoey to replace John "Vulture" Blech.

The five-man outfit, formed as a college band in 1987, attacks with original southern rock tunes and has been packing bars and clubs around Central and Southern New York for more than 10 years. In a region where original tunes usually fall flatter than a Vanilla Ice tour, Frostbit Blue managed to carve out quite a niche. Ten years after their inception, they took home the 1997 Sammy (Syracuse Area Music Award) for best rock band.

Their debut CD, *Ice Breaker*, was a hot-selling regional work, followed by *Just What the Doctor Ordered*. CD sales topped 10,000 and the band's Web site has seen about 47,000 hits.

The band also received four Sammy nominations in 1999 and was the first band to play the west stage at Woodstock '99—even though that festival might be known more for its fire and fury than its music.

"Frostbit really hasn't changed their sound despite a new rhythm section," Fiacco said over the phone Friday.

"There's always new genres of music. Out of Binghamton, blues is predominant along with jazz. You don't have to travel far for that. It would be nice if we had a venue around here that would support the other types of music. Frostbit Blue has been pretty lucky as far as people being open to original music. It's all about the types of songs you write. Before I was a member of the band, I was a fan, I was very impressed by the people who come to see them because they know their songs. These guys were writing some good songs."

Fiacco embraced "the rock thing" early on and on the side, he's played a few gigs with Dan Fluegel in an acoustic act and Brothers of the Road, who play covers similar to Frostbit Blue.

Even though Frostbit caught on in the area years ago, Southern rock isn't too taboo when it comes to the



bigger cities these days. Frostbit Blue forges its sounds with a two-guitar delivery—typical of Southern rock bands—featuring the electric and slide guitars of Nick Gravelding and the electric/acoustic combo of Tom McCaffrey.

Folks who'd be champing at the bit over Wilco or Nelly are dabbling in the guitar solos, honest lyricism and down home values that make the Southern Rock canon unique.

Chalk it up to Kid Rock to bring bands like the Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Marshall Tucker Band back up on the cool meter. Maybe it's no coincidence that folks have recently begun to sport trucker hats, huge belt buckles and 70s shades cut right out of CHiPs.

Gravelding, who also resides in Endwell, started the band and is the only original member left. While he teaches technology education at the middle school during the day, he tries to fit playing music in at night—even if it is a little harder with a family. He said it's harder to put in the hours with a band as you get older, but he hasn't lost the passion.

"When you're in years of trying to make it, sometimes the music business can be frustrating. You feel like you have great songs and lots of albums. The music biz has always been more about who you know than what," he said Sunday.

"I've seen the bar business and live music end of things change quite a bit. People aren't going out as much as they were unfortunately. I don't know if that's just something I've witnessed," Gravelding said. "As a band, we've been super fortunate to retain a strong following amid the recent changes and work stoppages."

Frostbit always embellishes its fans while staying true to its sonic course. While other bands or artists might change to suit the current musical landscape (yes, Jewel, that means you) the boys in blue stick to their proverbial guns.



Photo Courtesy of Frostbit Blue
Newly re-formed band Frostbit Blue continues its tradition of Southern rock with a local flair.

Gravelding said the band always listens to themselves in terms of what they put out creatively and steers away from following the trends. Mix in a few thousand loyal fans and you've got a small army.

"We have a sound that you don't hear on contemporary radio. We have kind of said 'Hey, if it isn't real in terms of what we're writing about, if it's not right for music industry than so be it,'" he said.

"Our fans have been so supportive through various turmoils. I've seen so many local bands come and go. It's hard to keep together. It's a lot of work. It's like siblings and siblings are gonna fight. We're all just good guys. We do kind of make each other laugh which is good. There's always that kind of democracy of sorts where you try and let everyone have an equal voice as much as you can. Try to settle any kind of differences in a way because there's always issues when you're being creative."

Meanwhile, Fiacco said he hopes the band finishes its third album—with all original tunes—soon. Also take into account that 120 miles separates the two band members in the Binghamton area and the other three in Oswego. Add a few mid-winter snow squalls to the mix and it might not be too fun to make the trek to lay down a few tracks.

All the members have penned some ideas and tunes but it was put on hold when Smith got sick. Fiacco said the band plans to include studio and live music on the album.

"There's two cuts that Tim Smith is on, and work on the album should be resuming very shortly. Some of the songs we've been playing for quite a while. They're tested and fans know about it," he said about "Angel," "Mother," and "West Seneca Street Theme."

"One thing I have to say is that we've kept the sound true to the sound we originated from. Our styles [mine and Tim Smith's] did mesh quite a bit. It was an easy transition to play with Frostbit Blue. At Tim's request, the band continued. We did it for him."

A growing fan base blessed the band with strong CD sales for their first two efforts. When Fiacco first played with the band in Syracuse, he was amazed that people knew all the songs, he said. Nevertheless, he said it's great to come back home.

"The home crowd, these are our friends. It's always special to play here. Even though the band originated in Oswego, this is my hometown," he said.

"Our goal is just to play because we like it; not to get a record deal. We don't over-pressure ourselves. We enjoy playing music and playing for people."

The band will play at the Holiday Inn's Party on the Patio at 7 p.m. Friday. See the events calendar for more information. They will also play again at 7 p.m., Friday, Aug. 27.