

LAVIDA

ARTS & LEISURE

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These cats can really wail

Special Orchestra takes you from Elvis to Michael Martin Murphy in their big beat music

By T.S. LAST

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RIO COMMUNITIES

Both the temperature and the band were hot. But the band was ready to turn up the heat a little further.

"Let's give 'em 'Jailhouse Rock,'" said Gair Linhart, the band's organizer.

Danny Luna set down his guitar, grabbed the microphone and stepped to center stage. There, he was joined by guitar player David Storey and along with the band, New Mexico's Special Orchestra, they began to wail.

"Going to party at the county jail..."

Only this party was held at the Olympic Village set up near the University of New Mexico Track and Soccer Complex, the site of last weekend's New Mexico Special Olympics Summer Games. An appreciative crowd watched as Luna bellowed out the lyrics and Storey wowed them with dazzling guitar work.

"Let's rock. Everybody, let's rock..."

The orchestra is made up of 20 or so musicians, predominately from Valencia County. It is sponsored by



Special Orchestra, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to assisting children with disabilities to share in the joy of making music.

The New Mexico Special Orchestra was formed a little more than a year ago. But the concept was a decade in development.

The orchestra's origins date back to 1989 when founder Gair Linhart joined the staff of the education department at the former Los Lunas Hospital and Training School. "I started bringing my guitar and playing for the individuals who lived there," he said. "Little by little I realized that many of these individuals could play themselves and were interested in playing."

When the hospital was closed, the New Mexico Department of Health established the Los Lunas Community Program at the site. New Mexico Special Orchestra, Inc. grew out of the Los Lunas Community Program. Adelante Development Center, Inc. also served as sponsor of the orchestra.

Linhart plays guitar and the others follow his lead. "We tune all string instruments to open C chord so people who couldn't change chords could strum along and blend in," he explained. "Some people like to sing and some people just like to listen."

Linhart and his father have developed a special music prompter to assist the musicians. A string of lights serve as indicators for guitar and keyboards. By following the lights, the musicians know which chords to play.

The Linharts have earned a patent on the device. They hope market the music prompter and promote the concept of Special Orchestra to a mass audience in the future.

Linhart said he hopes status as a non-profit organization Special



The Special Orchestra recently performed a concert at the New Mexico Special Olympics Summer Games. Band members that day were (from left) Andre Thompson, Brian Castleberry, Gair Linhart, Brynn Tilton, Danny Luna, Melinda Benitez and David Storey.



New Mexico's Special Orchestra cool lead singer Brian Castleberry cooled down an appreciative crowd with his rendition of "Wildfire."



Danny Luna took over lead vocals and David Storey excited the crowd with his showmanship during a recent performance by New Mexico's Special Orchestra.

T.S. Last-News-Bulletin photos

Orchestra

Continued from page 1C

Orchestra, Inc. recently obtained will expand its popularity to a world-wide audience.

"That's hopefully going to enable us to get some grants and tax-free contributions that will help us to publish a Special Orchestra method and song book so these techniques will be available to people all around the world," he said.

But the guitar techniques Storey learned didn't come from any song book. "I got it from Elvis!" said the 28-year-old rocker, who said he likes to electrify the crowd with his antics on stage.

"Every body in the whole cell block, was dancing to the jail-house rock... dancing to the jail-house rock..."

After Luna's vocals and Storey's theatrics had whipped the crowd into a hot frenzy, the band decided to cool them down with a mellow love ballad. And there's no one cooler to perform the task than lead singer Brian Castleberry.

The 24-year-old fits the role of lead singer. He is blind so the sunglasses he wore under the shade of the stage tent weren't just for show.

Following an introduction by Linhart, Castleberry crooned out an impressive rendition of Michael Martin Murphy's "Wildfire."

"I've been singing ever since I was a little kid," the rock star said in an exclusive interview between sets. Castleberry said he has previous musical experience having played with an Adelante-sponsored band three or four years ago. He said he jumped at the chance when the opportunity came to play with the New Mexico Special Orchestra. "I get to learn to play all kinds of songs and music," he said.

The orchestra has played gigs in front of about 300 people at the Sheraton Hotel in Albuquerque, entertaining those in attendance for an Adelante awards banquet. They also per-

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Gair Linhart
Orchestra leader

formed locally at their spring show at the Valencia County Sheriff's Posse arena.

Between performances, the Special Orchestra holds jam sessions from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. every Friday. The band is taking a break from making its music, but will resume informal practice sessions Friday, July 14, in suite 371 at Rio Valley Plaza in Rio Communities. "There's no cost, just show up," Linhart said.

To learn more about New Mexico's Special Orchestra, or to book the band for a concert date, contact Linhart at 864-3749.