

STILL ON THE BEAT | HOT PURSUIT

Former members of police band think message still relevant



FILE PHOTO

Members of Hot Pursuit, circa 1991, from left: Keith Ankrom, Rick Gillilan, Mike Wilson, Mike Finks and Randy Moon

By **Kevin Joy**

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In their heyday, the musicians of Hot Pursuit were rock stars of an unlikely sort.

Onstage and on the streets of central Ohio, they sported work attire: police uniforms, shiny badges, loaded guns secured in holsters.

Children in their audiences sang along with simple songs covering deeper messages of self-esteem and tough choices.

The band, formed in 1986, soon became a musical complement to area Drug Abuse Resistance Education, or D.A.R.E. The musician cops traversed Columbus as full-time artistic ambassadors for a national curriculum detailing the hazards of narcotics and alcohol.

“For them, to see a policeman on the guitar or playing a drum solo, it said: ‘They’re human; I can talk to them,’” said singer and bass player David Larrison, 42, a Columbus Police Division patrol officer assigned to the Downtown area.

Tonight, a new group featuring Hot Pursuit alumni will perform in public for the first time since 2001, when former Police Chief James G. Jackson eliminated the \$300,000 in city wages and benefits sustaining the band and its mission.

More than a decade later, the cut still stings.

“His philosophy was: Teachers teach; police officers lock ‘em up,” said Grove City singer-guitarist Jeff Gillilan, 60, a retired Columbus officer who remains critical of Jackson’s decision.

Four Hot Pursuit players — Gillilan and older brother Rick; Larrison; and the former group’s lone civilian, Mike Finks — reunited in 2011 as a rock and oldies-revival act dubbed Danny and the Linders (named after new drummer Dan Lind).

Completing the lineup is Orient singer-guitarist Homer Creasap, 63.

Tonight's show in the former Salesian Boys & Girls Club will raise money for the Serenity Street Foundation, a South Side "sober house" for men in recovery.

Given the concert's charitable focus, "They've got the same target," said Bill Taylor, a longtime WSNY (94.7 FM) traffic reporter and retired Columbus sergeant who supervised Hot Pursuit for almost a decade.

"And they sound pretty good."

Central Ohioans of a certain age might recall Hot Pursuit, whose pinnacle 1990 concert took place in St. John Arena — with 88 area elementary schools busing in youngsters for the performance.

"The kids knew all the words," Gillilan said. "They were drowning us out."

First championed by then-Police Chief Dwight Joseph, Hot Pursuit became a regular at pep rallies and community events. Smoke machines and a light show marked twice-yearly D.A.R.E. graduation events for fifth-graders at Veterans Memorial.

"All you had to do was look in the eyes of young kids; you knew it was connecting," said former Columbus Mayor Greg Lashutka, who once deemed the band a "risky" idea but later battled to keep it afloat.

A 1987 story about Hot Pursuit on *CBS Sunday Morning* drew national buzz. The White House sent kudos.

"We were getting requests from all over the country," said Finks, 63, a keyboardist from the Northwest Side. "We went everywhere."

As the group's itinerary grew from 80 to 200 annual dates, so did travel time.

That didn't sit well with Jackson, who, in a 1993 compromise, put the brakes on performances beyond Franklin County.

Amid retirements and shifting personnel, Hot Pursuit eventually went cold when Jackson just said "no" to the costly expense during tough financial times.

Gillilan, who co-wrote songs about the dangers of firearms and cocaine, has no regrets. Former D.A.R.E. students, he said, still recognize him and share personal stories of success.

"I think it's needed now more than ever."

Columbus police severed ties with D.A.R.E. in 2003. Franklin County deputy sheriffs now teach D.A.R.E. to seventh-

graders in Columbus schools; no program is offered for fifth-grade students.

Several surrounding districts have eliminated it entirely in favor of in-house programs.

Schools and police departments have "had to make some hard decisions," said Kari Parsons, executive director for D.A.R.E. of Ohio, noting that 200 trained D.A.R.E. officers now operate statewide compared with 600-plus at the program's peak.

Studies of D.A.R.E., meanwhile, have shown varied levels of effectiveness.

But would today's kids — arguably more savvy and sarcastic — embrace such

melodies as bingeing celebrities pepper the news and a hit song by ex-Disney star Miley Cyrus employs slang for cocaine and Ecstasy?

Do the once-popular players still have what it takes?

“You don't need old guys like me to do this,” Gillilan joked.

Larrison, who, still on the police beat, is most concerned about the spread of heroin use among youths, would welcome new public servants in the spotlight — a Hot Pursuit 2.0, perhaps.

“If you have even a few songs that were updated and current, I think it would work today,” he said.

“The message is always the same.”

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