

SMALL BUSINESS

MINDING YOUR BUSINESS

Musicians change tune for markets

As some audiences fade, performers are adapting their art to appeal to others

By Ann Meyer
Special to the Tribune

It was a passion for music that led guitarist Jim DiDomenico to form Underwater People, a hot Chicago rock band in the '90s.

But it was more than a decade of business experience that spurred him to add a country-music group, Country Sky Band, in 2004, to his roster while also pursuing weddings and corporate gigs for Underwater People.

"We've been smart enough to adapt," said DiDomenico, the lead vocalist of the six-piece band, noting that the bar scene isn't what it used to be for performance musicians of his genre.

Nowadays, he said, "the business of trying to make it as a professional performing musician is about the process of diversifying."

As in many artistic professions, making money in music requires more than the ability to create something catchy. Not only do you need to understand a basic balance sheet, you also must know your customer. When the market shifts, your business needs to move with it.

The same issues confront small businesses in any industry at one time or another, said Dean DeBiase, chairman of Startup Partners, a growth strategy group in Lake Forest.

"Businesses can shift in two different ways," DeBiase said. "They can reboot their business toward the next growth wave in their industry, or they can reboot the company into a new industry quite frankly."

Being able to spot new opportunities when you are focused on the business at hand is a common challenge, said DeBiase, who also is chief executive of Fathom Online, a marketing company.

What is more, knowing which new path to venture down can be confusing. Looking only at your current skill set and capabilities can be short-sighted, he said.

DeBiase recommends that individuals lean toward their personal interests by considering what's fun for you. To get started, "take an inventory of what's your passion," he said.

Then look into new opportunities by exploring industry associations, doing internet research on various businesses and talking to people outside of your industry who might bring a new perspective, he said.

Making a significant change in strategy can be frightening to business owners who have been doing the same thing for



Tribune photo by Warren Skalski

Underwater People had an audience widely varied in age at a recent performance at The Round Barn Winery in Baroda, Mich.

years. But consider the alternative, DeBiase said. The danger of doing nothing is that someone else is going to go and do it and then compete with you," he said. "If you ask yourself, 'Would I rather cannibalize my own business or have someone cannibalize it for me?' you'll always have a new business hat on."

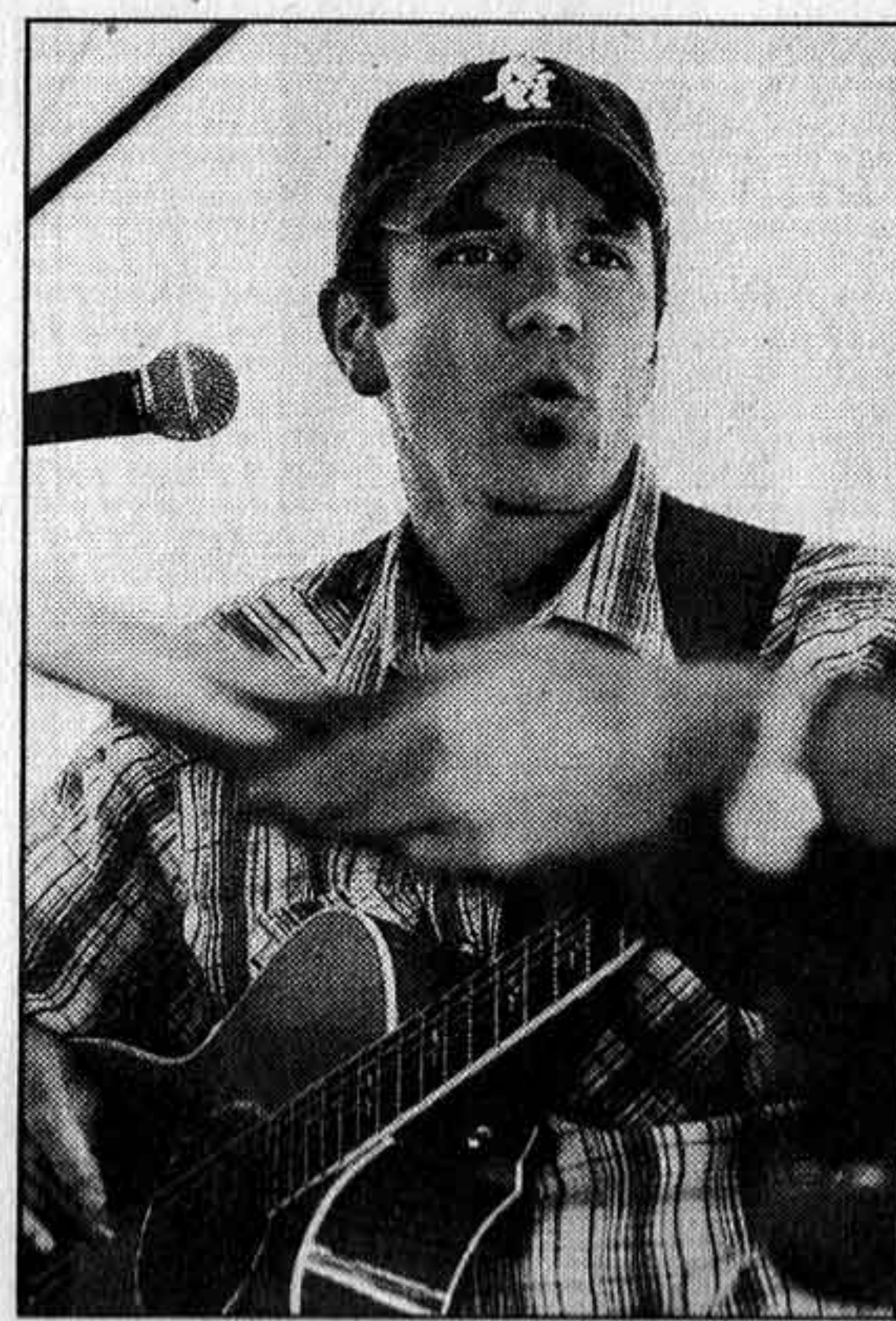
Shifting gears also means having an open mind. Back in 1992, when DiDomenico launched Underwater People, the last thought on his 28-year-old mind was performing Frank Sinatra at weddings.

Back then, the band routinely filled the Cubby Bear, Joe's Bar and the Skyline Stage at Navy Pier, he said. "When you pack the Cubby Bear, all the other venues start calling you," said DiDomenico, 43, and still principal of the band, which has had mostly the same musicians since the get-go. "It sort of took off from there."

But a lot can change in 15 years. By 2001, the economy was wavering, most Baby Boomers had outgrown the club scene and more economical deejays began taking the place of five-piece bands, he said.

When fans began asking, "Do you do weddings?" DiDomenico began saying yes. "It wasn't our thing, but we did it," he said. Performing at corporate parties also gained appeal.

The band grew to like the private parties, in part for the more manageable hours. "We're done by 11 p.m. or mid-



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night, and you're in a better environment," DiDomenico said.

DiDomenico soon figured out what brides want: A clean-cut band with a wide repertoire and the ability to engage the audience. It's a perfect fit because many brides getting married today enjoyed the band when it played in the bars, said event planner Susan Cordogan, owner of Big City Bride, who also used to book Underwater People in the bars for mixers.

"There's a real fear of booking a cheesy wedding band," she said. "With Underwater People, it's more of a party vibe than a stiff orchestra. They play the things people want to hear," from Dave Matthews, Jack Johnson and John Mayer to Paul Simon, Aretha Franklin and Frank Sinatra.

While word of mouth grew about Underwater People's wedding business, a quick market review suggested a need for a band that could play country music in the Chicago area, and DiDomenico embraced the idea, starting Country Sky Band in 2004.

With the new band, DiDomenico added about 20 performances last year at suburban music festivals looking for an alternative to the usual pop-classical or rock 'n' roll. The band now does about 30 weddings a year, to the tune of \$5,500 for a three-hour Saturday-night wedding gig. "Diversifying between the two bands has filled up our schedule," he said.

Band members say they appreciate the steady work and enjoy playing a variety of music. "I'm just really happy to be able to make a living as a musician and provide entertainment to people," said Jacob Sweet, a guitarist and vocalist who has been with the band since 1996 and also teaches guitar at Old Town School of Folk Music. "A really good wedding is every bit as fun for us to play as a really good club show in the '90s. Sometimes I even en-

joy it even more because we know they're going to remember this night the rest of their lives."

The Underwater People aren't the only musicians to be re-energized by a new market opportunity. James Dague, leader of the five-piece Scribble Monster band for children formed in 2002, also got his start in a rock 'n' roll band about 20 years ago. His band, the Shysters, is still around but has only played about five gigs in recent years, he said.

Now playing for children and families is his passion, Dague said.

"There's not a whole lot of difference between what we're doing now and what we were doing before. A lot of our audience from the past is now the same audience but with their kids," he said.

What is more, as a 41-year-old Homewood father of three school-age children, Dague appreciates the daytime hours that come with performing at schools and libraries. Besides sharing his original children's tunes, such as "The Bedtime March," Dague, a former preschool teacher, often encourages students to help write new songs with him.

Although business is strong, including a dozen shows in the month of July, Dague admits he isn't getting rich. But that's not the point. "There is something that seems inherently right with what we're doing," he said. "As crazy as it seems, it's almost like a ministry to me."