

Next Great American Band' provides boost for musician Wagner and his group

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For some time, Cliff Wagner has gone back and forth between part-time and full-time as a bluegrass musician.

Over the years, the former Greenwood resident has worked in construction, carpentry, cabinetry, set building and other jobs to support himself.

But now that his band, Cliff Wagner and the Old No. 7, has received national attention through the Fox television show "The Next Great American Band," he can leave those "part-time" days behind.

His band was eliminated from the competition at the end of the Nov. 23 show, but he has been swamped with e-mails and requests for bookings. The band plans to start a tour in early 2008.

"It's fantastic," he said. "And that I can definitely thank the show for."

Wagner, 41, spent his early years in Chicago. While he was in elementary school, his family moved to Greenwood, where they lived through his high school years.

His father had played in big bands in Chicago, and Wagner began playing clarinet and saxophone when he was 8. He later took up banjo lessons and got his first banjo for his 11th birthday.

"It was a beat-up old \$50 job found at a pawn shop," he remembered. "It was barely playable - but playable enough."

He played in the junior high school band but gave up saxophone in high school because he didn't want to march.

He said he received a great deal of help from B.F. Mims, who played with him and his father. In fact, he said, he still plays some of the songs Mims taught him.

Wagner moved from Mississippi to Boston to attend Berklee College of Music. After about seven years in that city, he moved to New York City, where he spent 10 years playing part-time and working.

While there, he met his wife, Robin, and seven years ago, they moved to Los Angeles.

Why was it time to head west?

"We needed a yard," Wagner said with a laugh, adding, "We also needed the work."

Robin is a fashion designer, and he knew there would be opportunities in California for him to design scenery. He wasn't sure about the prospects for playing bluegrass there, but he soon found he could do the same work he'd been doing, own a house and make some money.

"There's a very vibrant bluegrass scene out here," he said.

Cliff Wagner and the Old No. 7 has been playing for about five years, although the lineup has changed several times. Wagner plays banjo, fiddle, guitar, dobro and bass.

Wagner's name is in the band's name for a reason: He runs the show. He writes the original songs, handles the booking and has final word on all decisions. And while he says he's "not a hard fellow to get along with," he makes sure anyone who joins knows who's boss.

This approach comes from experience. He said he had worked in bands that were "democracies," and it didn't go well.

"Usually someone would get miffed about something, or decisions wouldn't get made, and it just never worked," he said.

But he said he has a talented group now. Bassist Lucas Cheadle, who had played with him before, also made the video that was submitted to "The Next Great American Band." Drummer Stephen Aram Mugalian didn't join until the first week of the show, but he fit right in.

"We all got along really well and worked really well as a unit," Wagner said.

The band first saw ads for "The Next Great American Band" during "American Idol." The ads invited bands to submit videos, and more than 6,000 responded.

Wagner's band was selected for the initial group of 60 and then made the round of 22 after an audition in Las Vegas. From there, the producers picked the 12 groups that would compete on the show.

Wagner said the show was "really fun and really educational" but also nerve-wracking. It was daunting to get only one shot at performing each week and then wait to see whether they could collect enough viewer votes to make it to the next round.

"It pretty much makes every other gig I've ever done a cakewalk," Wagner said.

Each week the bands performed songs by a selected artist. For example, for the show devoted to Bob Dylan tunes, Wagner's band chose "Don't

Think Twice, It's Alright." Another week, the songs were all by Billy Joel, and the band performed "You May Be Right."

Wagner said the judges also gave them some useful advice - including Australian TV personality Ian "Dicko" Dickson, who is known for his pointed criticism.

"Despite what people think, he's a real nice guy," Wagner said. "He's a real smart guy, too."

Wagner said he last visited Greenwood last year for Thanksgiving and hoped to visit during the Christmas holiday this year. His mother, Joan Wagner, lives in Greenwood, and he has a brother in Atlanta and a sister in Colorado.

He's also eager to get out on the road and perform for all those people who voted for his group.

"This has definitely taken us to a new level, and we'll be able to attract a crowd anywhere in America," he said.

The tour schedule hasn't been finalized yet, but it should be done by January.

The band has produced two CDs - "Take Me Back to the Delta" and "My Native Land" - and a third one probably will be released in early 2008.

Wagner said the songs were assembled some time ago, but the recording was postponed after the band landed a spot on the show.

Years ago, he would have been satisfied just being a part-time musician. Last year, he was about 75 percent full-time as the band's membership changed. Then, he said, at the start of this year, he was "more or less full-time."

Now, even though the group came up short of winning the big prize on the show, he can devote all his attention to doing what he loves.

"I'm definitely happy with what we got and how it ended up," he said.

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