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Nintendo rocks!

And now for something completely different: The Minibosses, a band that plays nothing but tunes from old video games.

By Verne Becker



April 21, 2004 | The opening act has just finished at [Northsix](#), a Brooklyn, N.Y., hot spot, and the crowd of 300-plus is crying out for more. But as the next band, the [Minibosses](#), climbs onstage for its set, something seems a little odd. The players move all the vocal mikes off to the side. And once they're ready to begin, frontman Aaron Burke, 27, announces the first number, one that you're not likely to hear in your average club: a song from the video game "[Goonies 2.](#)"

From the very first crash of Burke's guitar, it is obvious that the "Bossies" -- rabid fans scattered among the crowd -- didn't need to be told where the song came from. They know the tune by heart, and they are screaming, bouncing and headbanging. The rest of the mob is not quite sure what's going on, but the band's energy and intensity pulls them in. The sound is turbo prog-rock with a tinge of metal. Burke and 27-year-old bass player Ben Baraldi, both 6-foot-6,

tower over the free-standing crowd, which presses in toward the stage. A second guitarist, Fred Johnson, 25, compensates for his comparative lack of height with dramatic moves, while Matt Wood, 27, attacks the drum kit.

There is no set list tonight, so after the first song Burke yells out, "OK, what are we doing next?"

The audience erupts into a shouting match with enough game requests to fill an arcade: "'Metroid!' 'Contra!' 'Punchout!' 'Ninja Gaiden!'"

The Minibosses launch into "MegaMan 2," and the pattern of instant audience recognition -- even identification -- continues throughout the set.

Their songs have no words. Their music comes from old Nintendo video games. And four of the tracks on their latest CD are under 20 seconds long. Named after a generic game character who must be repeatedly pummeled before a player can proceed, the Minibosses take all of their material from original Nintendo Entertainment System games, which they memorize note for note and perform live.

The Minibosses are a sign of the gamer times. Vid-kids of the 1980s have now grown up, and they want to bring gaming with them into mainstream culture. They want entertainment that connects to their life experience.

Raina Lee, 27, publisher of [1-Up](#), a zine about video game culture, says the shift in video game acceptance by the masses began in 1995 with the debut of the Sony PlayStation, but has accelerated over the past five years.

"It's only recently that [video] games have lost their stigma," Lee said. "Video games now are very mainstream ... People are finally identifying themselves as gamers -- they are viewing gaming as a lifestyle."

And with the games comes a subtle but powerful component: music.

Enter the Minibosses. Burke founded the band in 1999, along with bass player Baraldi and drummer Wood, who had met while they were students at the University of Massachusetts. Video game music was a natural choice for Burke, since he had used it to learn the guitar, and before that, he had played games throughout his elementary and junior high years.

"It was the first music I really listened to, and listened to deeply," he said. Baraldi and Wood were also longtime video addicts, and loved the idea of performing only Nintendo music.

When Baraldi landed a software programming position in Phoenix after graduation, Burke and Wood decided to join him so they could continue playing together. They did around 20 shows a year, mostly in small area clubs. Johnson, another guitar player obsessed with games, came onboard last year.

How do the Minibosses translate a trebly game tune into an aural assault? First, they listen to the four basic tracks of a Nintendo Sound File, or NSF, and identify who will be playing which part. Burke, Baraldi and Johnson adhere closely, even religiously, to the original. But drum tracks for video game tunes can be notoriously monotonous, so embellishment by Wood is practically required.

"We could bang out a song a week if we didn't have so much other stuff to do," Baraldi says, referring mostly to their day jobs. Burke works at a bank; Wood would only say he's in purchasing; and Johnson manages the kitchen at a Scottsdale cafe.

While the band sticks close to the melodies and structures of the original NES game music, its members' playing style and intensity betray their influences. For Baraldi, it's Led Zeppelin, early Metallica, Queen and "good Rush." For Johnson, it's '80s rock. Wood loves classic rock and the Beatles.

Burke prefers to list what they played in the rented black van they drove from last night's show in Boston: Hall & Oates, Lionel Richie, Peter Cetera of Chicago, and Curtis Mayfield. The direct musical influence may be a bit tenuous, he says, but "it influences our mood, so that affects the way we play. It's excellent drinking music."

At Northsix, the band is in a good mood, because the crowd seems to be connecting with the melodies and the games that long ago seeped into their psyches. "Visualization is key during a Minibosses concert," says Bobby Schweitzer, a student at the University of Virginia and a co-founder of [Virtual Fools](#), an informal think tank on video game culture. "It's that mental imaging of memories of playing games that really adds to the experience. I can just imagine myself playing the waterfall stage of 'Contra' or walking through Ridley's Lair in 'Metroid.'"

Kevin Flanagan, the other Virtual Fool co-founder, agrees. "The Minibosses unlock some past experience that then becomes livable in the moment," he says.

Baltimore video game music remixer Craig Jakubowski, 26, who calls himself [Shawn Phase](#), believes the effect of the band's performance is "something much more deep-rooted than nostalgia. It's a much more visceral, true feeling that takes one by surprise." (Schweitzer, Flanagan and Jakubowski were not present at this show, but all have seen the band perform.)

Even people who played games as a kid but haven't heard of the band find themselves mysteriously attracted to their music. Eric Arikian, 28, came to the Northsix show primarily to see the headliner act, [Eagles of Death Metal](#). He had planned to take a walk during the Minibosses' segment. But then something drew him in. "Every song was familiar, even though I didn't know exactly what they were," he said. He stayed for the entire set.

The band first sold a homegrown, self-titled CD on its Web site in 2000, but now feels the production was subpar, so it is rerecording much of that album, plus some new material, for a scheduled summer 2004 release. In the meantime, the Minibosses hope to keep fans happy with their recent EP, also self-titled, featuring tracks from "MegaMan 2" and "Castlevania 3." The 1,000-copy run of the disc has officially sold out; the final unit went for \$32 on eBay. Fans need not worry, however: Free MP3s from the EP can be downloaded from [Minibosses.com](#).

The group's exclusive focus on Nintendo raises an obvious question of rights and royalties. "We did try to contact Nintendo, Konami, Capcom and some others [who produced games for Nintendo]," Burke says. "No one ever replied or even tried to find the right person in the organization to talk to."

Indeed, Nintendo's public relations office, when contacted for this article, said via e-mail that officials were "not available this week" to respond. But several attorneys who specialize in entertainment law said that while music from '80s video games may fall into a gray area (because copyright laws had not been updated), in general anyone performing or recording music created by someone else must seek the proper licensing from the copyright holder.

Lawyers at Nintendo "either don't know what the answer's going to be [to the rights question], or they're waiting to see how it plays out," says Anthony Berman, an entertainment attorney in San Francisco.

"Honestly," Burke says, "no one is going to do anything about it until someone starts making some major money off of it."

At present, major money is not even on the radar for the Minibosses. Any income they make from gigs and the occasional road trip barely covers travel expenses, which band members bear themselves. Sales of T-shirts and CDs at shows and on the Web site help keep the band afloat, Johnson says.

That may change if the Minibosses continue to see their audiences and the number of Web site visitors grow. Johnson says that recent coverage on [Tech TV](#) and in [Wired](#) magazine was "huge for us," to the point that "we get better turnout [at shows] out of town than in town." Since moving to Arizona, the Minibosses have made about one trip to each coast each year. They have also performed at the [Defcon](#) hackers' convention in Las Vegas, the [Mid-Atlantic Gaming Festival](#) in Virginia, and in May they'll play at the [Atomix Gamers Choice Awards 2004](#) in Mexico City.

The current four-show road trip came about through power rockers Eagles of Death Metal, a musical diversion for Joshua Homme, frontman for the heavier rock act [Queens of the Stone Age](#). As luck would have it, prior to the Minibosses Burke had been Homme's guitar tech for a year, and Homme extended the tour invitation.

The Web has been the Minibosses' No. 1 promotional tool. "The Internet made this band," Johnson said. He says many teens stumbled onto their music through peer-to-peer file-sharing networks such as Kazaa. Band members contribute frequently to the group's raucous message board, and keep everyone posted on the details of shows and releases. Other video game fan and music-remixing sites also link to the Minibosses. Burke said that MP3 downloads can run as high as 5,000 a week.

"There are other people playing live game music," says remixer [Jake Kaufman](#), referring to groups such as the NESkimos, the OneUp Mushrooms, Everyone and Wave Theory. "But nobody puts on a show and gets the crowd going like they do."

How far can the Minibosses go?

"I have no idea," Burke said. "Our main focus is playing and having a good time doing it. When that stops, we stop."

And if the breakthrough doesn't happen? "I would say, 'Good. [Expletives deleted.] Awesome.' Then I would drink a beer and play a kick-ass show."

About the writer

[Verne Becker](#) teaches technology at Marymount School in New York City.

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