Alum balances finance and foxtrots

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David Bode (MBA '14), standing rear center, plays saxophone, clarinet and flute with the New Leviathan Oriental Foxtrot Orchestra, the revival dance orchestra that's been entertainting New Orleans audiences for more than 50 years. Photo courtesy David Bode.

As director of finance for mobile game developer Atlas Reality, David Bode (MBA ’14) oversees financial operations for a pioneer in the futuristic world of augmented reality gaming.

But when Jazz Fest rolls around, Bode steps back in time, trading spreadsheets for sheet music as a member of the New Leviathan Oriental Foxtrot Orchestra, the 20-piece revival orchestra that’s been entertaining audiences with vintage American popular music for more than 50 years.

“We don’t play anything past 1934,” says Bode, who plays saxophone, clarinet and flute in the orchestra. “That’s the cutoff because that’s when popular music started

transitioning from string orchestras to big band swing.”

The band was founded in 1972 by a group of Tulane students and their friends as a tongue-in-cheek tribute to the Oriental foxtrot, a novelty genre of the 1920s that fused exotic musical and lyrical themes — titles like “Egyptian Ella,” “(Lena from) Palesteena,” and “Rebecca Came Back from Mecca” give you the idea — with the popular dance music of the day. While their original intent was to poke fun at the self-importance of jazz musicology, orchestra co-founders George Schmidt (A&S ’71, G ’73) and Jack Stewart approached the music with scholarly devotion, meticulously recreating the songs of the era from the original sheet music. Despite the nominal focus on foxtrots, the band performs a variety of styles from the 1890s to the 1930s, everything from rags, marches and waltzes to tangos, two-steps and Tin Pan Alley songs.

“The foxtrot is a style of playing a song, it’s not a song,” Bode explains. “You can play a song like “Under a Blanket of Blue” as a swing song or you can play it as a foxtrot. The defining things about foxtrots, or at least foxtrot orchestras like this one, is that there are strings. That’s one of the things that makes us different from a big band.”

Bode first joined the band in 2009 through his friend Emily Hildor, a fellow DJ at WTUL, Tulane’s student-run radio station, who was playing saxophone and clarinet in the band at the time. He took a break in 2011 to teach music in the Caribbean but rejoined permanently in 2012 when he returned to New Orleans to pursue his MBA at the Freeman School.

“I went to business school because I wanted to have a family,” says Bode, a father of three. “It’s very, very hard to do that just on music.”

A native of New Orleans, Bode started playing clarinet in fourth grade and took up saxophone in sixth grade. He holds a bachelor’s degree in music education from Loyola University and a master’s degree in jazz from the University of New Orleans, and his resume includes stints with bands in every conceivable genre. When he’s not performing with New Leviathan, Bode can be seen with a wide array of groups, including Soul Seduction Brass Band, the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, and James Andrews & the Crescent City All Stars. He also leads New Orleans High Society , a traditional jazz band, and the David Bode Big Band, which is releasing an album in August.

“A lot of gigs in New Orleans are improvising gigs — you know the songs in your head and then you improvise,” he says. “To play in New Leviathan, you have to be a good reader, first and foremost. This show has no improvisation. It’s all reading.”

While the band has recorded six albums and performed for audiences around the world (including an appearance on Saturday Night Live’s notorious “Live from Mardi Gras” episode in 1977), the logistics of coordinating the schedules of 20 musicians with day jobs has limited their activities in recent years. The band currently performs about six times a year, with regular appearances at Jazz Fest, the Vieux Carre Property Owners, Residents and Associates’ Mother’s Day concert in the French Quarter, and the New Orleans Ragtime Festival.

They also occasionally perform one-off events. In 2013, Bode conducted the orchestra in a live performance of the original score to the 1926 silent film *Beau Geste* for a showing at the Prytania Theater in New Orleans.

“That was a really fun experience,” Bode says. “I think I had to skip evaluations class for the performance, I want to say. But I still got an A in the class, thankfully.”

He got a lot of A’s, actually. When he graduated, Bode received the Freeman School’s Marta and Peter Bordeaux Scholastic Achievement Award for having the highest cumulative GPA in the MBA class, an accomplishment he credits in part to his musical training.

“Music teaches you discipline and work ethic and the ability to learn things," he says. "I think music is great preparation for whatever you want to do in life."

The New Leviathan Oriental Foxtrot Orchestra will perform at the 2025 New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival on Saturday, April 26, in the Economy Hall Tent.