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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Welcome to *The Commons*, Sheryl. This is so well written. (You'll find I know shockingly little about music but am just as game to learn.) All the best, Jeff

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

'This music is 100% danceable'

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Valley Moonstompers Society brings Jamaican ska music
to Brattleboro in monthly concerts at Marigold

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TEXT BODY:

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When the Valley Moonstompers Society takes the stage
at Marigold in Brattleboro on Friday, Nov. 7, at 8 p.m., the band's
leader and founder, Dan Thomas, said the night will be "a
celebration of Jamaican music."

The band, which primarily plays a Jamaican genre of
music know as ska, holds a monthly residency at the Main Street

11 venue on the first Friday of every month, coinciding with the
12 town's Gallery Walk.

13 Ska originated in Jamaica in the late 1950s and gained
14 popularity through bands like the Skatalites. A precursor to
15 rocksteady and reggae, ska combines Jamaican and Caribbean
16 rhythms with American rhythm and blues and jazz and is defined
17 by its vibrant horns and infectious rhythms. Simply put, Ska is
18 upbeat music made for dancing.

19 In addition to playing ska, the Valley Moonstompers
20 Society likes to mix it up at their shows, incorporating dub,
21 rocksteady, and reggae into their sets.

22 "It's all Jamaican music, but we like to focus on the
23 origins, which would be the ska music that came out in the '60s
24 from the Skatalites and Prince Buster," said Thomas in a recent
25 phone interview.

26 Thomas has played various musical styles, including
27 reggae, in numerous bands over the years, but did not come to
28 playing ska until he played in a Western Massachusetts-based
29 band, Green Island, which formed in 2016.

30 "I have been digging into reggae and Jamaican music for
31 the last 10 years, learning about the culture and its lineage,"
32 Thomas said. "But when I first played ska, and I'm talking about
33 the old-school Jamaican ska, it was such an infectious feeling that
34 it was like a eureka moment for me. Ska is just great music."

35 He explained that old-school ska refers to the original
36 ska that came out of Jamaica. There would later be a ska
37 resurgence in the '80s with bands like The Specials and Madness
38 out of the U.K. that was known as second wave or 2-tone.

39 A third-wave ska came out of America in the '90s, also
40 known as ska-punk, was played by such bands as Reel Big Fish
41 and Sublime.

Putting a band together

Thomas moved to Easthampton, Massachusetts, a couple of years ago, around the same time Marigold Theater opened its doors in the western Massachusetts town.

“I was no longer playing ska with Green Island, and I missed it, so I was talking to Glenn Alper, owner at the Marigold, and said, ‘How about I put a group together and focus on this style of music and play once a month?’” Thomas recalled.

Thus began the Valley Moonstompers Society, an eight-piece collective from the Valley and beyond. The Moonstompers consist of some core members, but it is primarily a group of rotating musicians.

The monthly residency in Easthampton proved a success, providing the band with the chance to hone their sound and build their audience.

“When Glenn talked about opening the Brattleboro venue, he said we should bring the show up there, too, and do the same thing,” Thomas said. Earlier this year the band began their monthly residency in Brattleboro.

“Brattleboro has been great; we have a good crowd that comes out on our first Fridays, and it’s growing steadily,” said Thomas. “They love to dance.”

He went on to say that people have come out of the woodwork for both residencies, driving as far as from Worcester to attend the shows in Brattleboro.

Keeping the show fresh

Thomas noted that one of the advantages the Moonstompers have is that very few bands play old-school ska.

“People who like ska and know what it is, love it, and there’s not a lot of it out there,” he said.

“When you say Ska, people think of bands like the Mighty Mighty Bosstones, who came out of America in the ‘90s, or bands like the Specials, which were popular in the ‘80s. All

75 ska is great and fun music, but there is a vacuum for this
76 traditional style,” Thomas said.

77 “Part of our underlying mission is to promote awareness
78 of traditional ska, especially from a jazz point of view,” he added.
79 “We’re all jazz musicians that have gotten into playing popular
80 styles.”

81 The use of a rotating lineup is practical in terms of
82 scheduling busy working musicians, but it has other benefits as
83 well.

84 “It keeps the shows fresh and brings in new approaches,”
85 Thomas explained. “One drummer may play it this way, and the
86 other drummer plays another, and it keeps it fun for us.”

87 The band currently works with trumpet player Gershon
88 Rosen from Brattleboro and also welcomed pianist Eugene
89 Uman, director of the Vermont Jazz Center, at one of its shows.
90 The Moonstompers are looking to tap into more local players.

91 The Moonstompers are currently expanding their
92 schedule and playing more gigs beyond the regularly scheduled
93 dates at the Marigold theaters. They are also working on
94 establishing a presence on streaming platforms and have released
95 three original songs, as well as a Christmas song.

96 “We recently recorded another Christmas song that is
97 coming out in a couple of weeks and a version of the Italian folk
98 song ‘Bella Ciao,’ which is an anti-fascist song which seems
99 relevant at this point in time in the United States,” Thomas said.

100 He encouraged everyone to come check out the band,
101 and stressed that it’s free (although tips are appreciated).

102 “This music is 100% danceable,” Thomas said. “And the
103 more dancing, the better.”

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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104 Sheryl Hunter is a freelance writer from Easthampton,
105 Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in various regional and
106 national publications.

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