

Burlington's ONE Band Celebrates Immigrant Traditions

By KYMELYA SARI



ONE Band rehearsing at the Boys & Girls Club of Burlington

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For the past 30 years, **Brian Perkins**, a longtime resident of Burlington's Old North End, has performed traditional music that English, French Canadian, Irish and Scottish immigrants brought to the area long ago. But recently Perkins, 53, realized that the immigrant culture of Vermont, particularly in his neighborhood, is even more diverse than he had thought.

"We have one of the oldest synagogues in the country," said Perkins, "and 200 yards away, we have dozens of century-old Arabic gravestones in a French Catholic graveyard" (both on Archibald Street).

So when Perkins started **ONE Band** (Old North End Neighborhood Band) in 2016, he wanted the teen musicians to perform songs that honor the musical traditions of each wave of immigrants that has settled in that part of the city.

"By recognizing that our neighborhood has always been home to immigrants, we can push back positively against bigotry," he said.

The **repertoire of the ONE Band** includes songs from the new Somali, Nepali, Bosnian and Swahili-speaking communities, as well as songs from long-standing immigrant communities. Perkins' former neighbors, brothers **Deluxe** and **Janvier Ode**, taught the band the Swahili song "Jambo Bwana." The group also plays the Yiddish song "Lomir Sich Iberbetn" and the "national anthem" of Franco-American fiddling, "Growling Old Man, Grumbling Old Woman."

"I just love learning different kinds of music," said mandolin player **Sam Acus**, who lives in Richmond. "I can make connections between folk and bluegrass music. I love it."

At 10, Acus is the youngest member. "I want to make sure it's a teen band," said Perkins, "but I made a special exception for Sam because he was very enthusiastic [and] very supported by his family."

Besides, the Old North End community has a history of mandolin players, Perkins pointed out. One of them was Ben Zion Black, an immigrant from Lithuania who arrived in Burlington in 1910.

About 25 teenagers have played with ONE Band since its creation, and five members — ages 10 to 17 — form its core, including Acus and Perkins' daughter, **Ella Staats**, who plays the baritone ukulele. The other core members are jazz pianist **Milo Bouricius**, fiddler **Ellie Davidson** and flutist **Tovin Gordesky-Hooper**. The band has performed at several locations and functions, including Burlington City Hall and First Night Burlington.

"It's nice to get a chance to play [songs all the way through] with other people," said Gordesky-Hooper. When practicing with his Burlington High School band, there's a lot of starting and stopping as the different sections take turns playing, he explained. In the ONE Band, however, "it's a little more simple, and we can just play."

Davidson, who lives in Colchester, said she appreciates the one-on-one instruction that Perkins offers. "The teacher can focus on you individually and really help you learn," she said.

Recently, Perkins moved band practice from his residence to the **Boys & Girls Club of Burlington** on Oak Street. "I want to have a program in the neighborhood that kids can have access to," he said. It isn't enough for his band to play the music of the community. He wants kids from the neighborhood to join the band.

The ONE Band Rehearses at the Boys and Girls Club



The Boys & Girls Club has good programming that includes kids from the New American community and from the Old North End, said Perkins. "I'm very impressed with the steps [it has] taken to be inclusive and serve exactly the group of kids who I feel are cut off from musical programming," he added.

He's noticed that children from his neighborhood typically stop playing a musical instrument once they enter middle school. "Because of transportation issues, many kids in the [area] have difficulty accessing musical opportunities in other parts of town," Perkins said. "Kids need to experience music in the schools, with their families and in the public spaces of their neighborhood."

He has designed the ONE Band's repertoire and program to work on many different levels. "If we sing a Nepali song, then the Nepali kids who come in can instantly perform at a very high level, whereas a [performing musician] who doesn't speak [Nepali], who's never heard the song, has no idea," Perkins said. "That's kind of a leveling factor."

The bandleader is hopeful that, in a couple of months, he'll be able to build "a fun gang" of young performers. "Music on its own is not really what keeps people involved in music," Perkins said. It's the people they're with who motivate them to continue playing.

On Thursday, March 29, the ONE Band will perform its first hour-and-a-half set at **Radio Bean** in Burlington. "It's going to be fun, jazzy, folk music with a good beat and some really inspired young musicians," said Perkins.

The original print version of this article was headlined "Burlington Teen Band Celebrates Immigrants' Musical Traditions"

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