

## Lake Life

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### **Secret to a good wedding reception: Transitions between songs**

*By David Wilcox / The Citizen*  
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Playing music at a wedding isn't quite like Adam Sandler makes it seem in "The Wedding Singer."

The rewards are plenty: An upscale meal, a sizable payday and single women as far as the eye can see. But the sweetest prize may be watching the audience celebrate the union of a friend or family member with their band supplying the soundtrack.

"One fun moment is when they'll form a Conga line," said Jim Lawrence, who plays bass and sings with central New York wedding band The Backtalk Band.

He continued, "People do that a lot of times to that song 'You Can Call Me Al' by Paul Simon because it's got that salsa rhythm, and they latch onto each others' backs and form a huge human chain and just wind their way through the whole reception area."

With the wedding party letting loose on the dance floor, it is the band's responsibility to provide familiar beats that will not only sustain the excitement, but also soften it when necessary. After a few up-tempo numbers it is important to allow the party to catch its collective breath, but slowing down for too long could lead bored guests to wander away from the dance floor.

"The secret to a good wedding reception is the transitions between songs, and we typically go from one right into another," Lawrence said. "We don't have a set list, we're always watching the audience to see what the energy level is."

When other wedding bands wait as much as 20 seconds between songs, Lawrence said, they risk losing the attention of their audience. He and fellow musicians Bob Keefe and Mark Joyce will often mouth song titles or use hand gestures to shorten that gap as much as possible.

Bob Piorun, who plays wedding ceremonies and receptions with his backing band, the Convertibles, believes there is another big secret to playing music at a wedding.

"Start off quiet so you don't offend anyone," he said. "Everyone's afraid of volume."

As the reception continues - and adult members of the wedding party make a few visits to the bar - Piorun suggests bands are safer playing noisier selections.

"After the meal, it's like a rock 'n' roll gig; everyone wants to

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party," he said.

Piorun was once a member of Spellbound, which disbanded two years ago. When the members went their separate ways, Piorun said, Auburn lost one of its last wedding bands.

He continues to play local weddings with the Convertibles, comprised of Julie Howard, Bernie McNabb, Cookie Coogan, Bruce Yaw, Dick Howard and Brian Murphy.

Piorun partly attributes the low number of local wedding bands to the challenge of playing songs that people of all ages will enjoy. That challenge has raised the demand for wedding DJs rather than bands, whose arsenal is much smaller than the digital music catalogue DJs often carry.

"The reason DJs are taking over is because bands can't play all that music," Piorun said. "People want rap, Sinatra then the Beatles, but bands can't do that."

Jane Stebbins DJs as many as 35 weddings a year through her Good Time Charlie's Mobile Entertainment company. She often works out a playlist with the newlyweds prior to the big day, but her library of 25,000 albums keeps her well prepared for a wide range of requests.

"I've done heavy metal weddings, rhythm and blues weddings, Grateful Dead weddings, hip hop weddings," Stebbins said. "There's so many facets to music that you have to be incredibly flexible."

DJs, however, cannot compete with a band's ability to create music in the live setting of a wedding. Some overcompensate by speaking between songs and cracking jokes about the bride and groom. As a guest at a wedding, Stebbins recalls a DJ who actually sang karaoke-style over a tune.

"I do my best not to become the class clown," she said. "Weddings should be elegant too. It's the beginning of the rest of their lives together so it shouldn't be a joke; it should be tasteful."

The Backtalk Band capitalizes on the live setting by sometimes collaborating with members of the wedding party on songs that they will even rehearse together in advance.

Although they focus on Motown, jazz and early rock 'n' roll music, the band will also learn current songs from artists like U2 or the Soggy Bottom Boys (from "Oh Brother Where Art Thou?") in advance of a reception if the couple requests them.

For these reasons, Lawrence feels that couples continue to appreciate having live bands at their wedding despite the wider range of DJs. Once The Backtalk Band is hired, he says, the pressure to please the wedding audience lessens.

"People hire you because they heard you're good from other people," he said. "If you play a bar somewhere, you have to win over the crowd, but here you're already appreciated before you



**Glenn Gaston / Special to The Citizen**

*lead guitarist Bob Keefe, bass player Jim Lawrence (in background above and at right)*

even set up.”

Lawrence believes wedding musicians should honor that appreciation by playing like professionals -not rock stars who are too good for the gig.

“We're not some egotistical group that feels they can do what they want and not bother with anyone else,” he said. “We're providing a service, and we pride ourselves in pleasing the audience and keeping them on the dance floor.”