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JACOB LANGSTON/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Kehau Kuhi (a k a Hula Lagoona, left) and Chris Charles (a k a Maestro Klutz) cut up during a recent rehearsal, yet they say their Outer Toons project has a serious goal: Helping kids learn about music.

## Local band is attuned to cartoon tunes

By ALIA MALIK  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Inside the rehearsal hall on Robinson Street, cartoonish things were happening.

A pirate, a foppish golfer and a white-haired conductor circled around a xylophone in a giant fake shell. The yellowest sousaphone on record lay dismantled on a nearby table, where a hula girl sat.

The Outer Toons, a Central Florida band devoted to playing theme songs of animated television series, was preparing its new show — one that teaches children that pianos aren't just for dropping on people.

“We wanted to fill the gap in music education and get enrollment up,” said Chris Charles, 44, who leads the band as his alter ego, Maestro Klutz.

So the group has recently added to its repertoire original songs that familiarize children with musical instruments, their sounds and functions. They play about once a month at theme parks, festivals and other events.

After instruments are introduced, they play themes from shows as old as *Jonny Quest* or as new as *SpongeBob SquarePants*. The fun format helps kids learn, said Kehau Kuhi, 24, a Hawaii native who plays a

shell-shaped xylophone as Hula Lagoona.

“It's different from people having it beaten into them in the classroom,” Kuhi said.

The band put that theory into action during recent performances at the Orlando Repertory Theatre.

“I was thinking I could introduce the saxophone family over some cartoon music,” Charles said to the crowd of families. “Why don't we play the theme from *Ren and Stimpy*? It's a blues song.”

Children's eyes lit up in recognition as the band played.

Growing up in Orlando, Charles was inspired by catchy Disney themes to sing and to pick up on the saxophone. And during a time of state budget cuts and dwindling resources for the arts, he and the rest of the band hope their songs will inspire children, too.

In addition to Charles and Kuhi, the seven-piece band is rounded out by more humans-turned-cartoon-characters: Pirate Pete, Ace Par Three, Jungle Jeff, Rockin' Rudy and Colorado Cate. All have experience teaching music, and some have music-education degrees. All are committed to keeping music education alive in schools.

In Orange County, schools get money for bands and or-

chestras based on enrollment, said Mike Parks, who oversees the county's instrumental-music programs. Next year's districtwide proposed music-education budget tops \$700,000, not including teacher salaries. But principals are allowed to divert the money to resources they deem more necessary, Parks said.

Money for repairs is a particular problem, said Gary Underwood, who used to play with the Outer Toons as a soldier named Major Lee Loud. He is now a repairman who owns Underwood Music with his wife in the Goldenrod area.

When people donate instruments to Underwood's shop, he tries to send them to schools in need. Sometimes he repairs schools' instruments at a discount or for free.

When they start turning a profit, the Outer Toons plan to donate to local repair shops so they can fix school instruments for free.

“I think kids need to be well-rounded,” said Terry Baber, 48, the band's Pirate Pete. “Some kids excel in other things, such as the arts, and if they're not given that chance, how do they know what they can be?”

Charles put it this way: “Imagine a world without music. It would be pretty strange.”