



Danny Montana and the Bar Association bring a western flair back to country and western music. They are guitarist Dana Olsen (top left), bassist Tim Bush (top right), pedal steel player Larry Cragg (center), fiddle player Phil Richardson (front left), drummer Bill Bowen (front right), and Danny Morrison, aka Danny Montana (front).

Are you ready for the country?

BY ANDY JONES
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Danny Montana and the Bar Association are breaking all the unwritten laws of the Marin music scene.

They are neither blues nor jam band; they aren't peaceful folksingers either.

From their manly footwear up to their wide-brimmed hats, the Bar Association is a straight-up country-and-western band composed of some of the best veteran musicians in the county. "We don't do any country

rock or Grateful Dead upshot-type country," says Bar Association ringleader Danny Morrison, aka Danny Montana.

"It's not really a cover band either that's playing all the hits you hear on the radio," says the band's pedal steel player, Larry Cragg. "This is definitely more esoteric. It sounds different to people.

"The audience isn't used to hearing it," says Cragg, who stays busy with a

vintage-instrument rental business and as Neil Young's guitar technician.

"Some really good musicianship is happening here, and it all sounds really professional and produced, which is very unusual for around here," Cragg says. "So that's kind of how we're different and that's why people kind of go, 'Oh, something's happening here,' because it does sound a lot different from anything else going on."

It's a classic country sound that Morrison came to quite by accident. "I joined the Columbia Record Club, you know where you buy one album and they send you 11? And instead of the Kinks' greatest hits, they sent me George Jones' greatest hits," Morrison says. "I was irate, I was really mad. I mean this was lame, here's this guy with a crew cut, and I was like, 'What is going on?'"

"But I didn't have the wherewithal to send it back or anything and I just kept it around and would listen to parts of it over time and I got hooked and I just fell in love with country music," Morrison says. "And then Dylan came out and I started listening to Dylan and then I could see how it's all country music. Rock 'n' roll is country. If it doesn't have country music in it, then it's probably not really rock 'n' roll."

Playing a batch of songs written by former Clover front man-turned-Nashville songwriter Alex Call (who penned Tommy Tutone's "Jenny (867-5309)," Huey Lewis and the News' "Power of Love" and Pat Benatar's "Little Too Late"), the Bar Association plays classic country without having to dive into the cover archives.

Morrison plays rhythm guitar and handles the vocals in the Bar Association. A Tamalpais High School graduate, Morrison has been in or around Marin for most of his life, not counting the time he spent in the state that inspired his moniker.

"I had a bluegrass band, the Hereford Heartstrings, with Phil Richardson and Sean Hopper (keyboardist for Huey Lewis and the News),

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and that was from high school, which was really a lot of fun," Morrison says. "There were only about two or three other ones in the Bay Area at the time and it was really a new thing."

Eventually, Morrison's band broke up as Richardson went to study viola in France and Hopper joined Clover with Lewis. It was around this time Morrison decided to hit the road.

"They put a stoplight up at East Blithedale and Camino Alto, and I went, 'You know, it's getting too crowded around here,'" Morrison says. "So I moved to Montana. I was 19 and couldn't take it anymore."

Although his stay in the state wasn't long, upon his return Danny Montana was born.

"There were 800,000 people in the whole state. And there were about seven or eight women my age in the whole state, so I lasted like a year," Morrison says. "When I came back, Huey and Alex started calling me Montana. And then Huey insisted I be Danny Montana as a stage name."

The name stuck so well that when Morrison and Cragg crossed paths some 30 years after playing together in a little-known band with Lewis and Call called the Aloha Street Band, the steel player realized he never knew the true identity of his band mate.

"When I met him, I didn't know his real name, I just knew him as Danny Montana back then," Cragg says. "So a couple of years ago, I reconnected with Danny Morrison and he wanted me to fix his guitar, and I didn't know who he was."

After some time off from the music world, Morrison got reacquainted with some old running buddies and some new faces and formed the Bar Association. Morrison's high school friend Richardson (Hot House Swing Band, Ain't Misbehavin') plays fiddle in the Bar Association while Fairfax bass wizard Tim Bush (Chuck Day and the Burning Sensations) keeps the beat with drummer Bill Bowen, who Morrison says was a local legend in the old days.

"Bill Bowen was the original drummer with Sons of Champlin, and actually in my days of growing up, Bill Bowen was the drummer," Morrison says. "At all the little local dances, they'd have a couple of bands and then in between the bands they'd have the battle of the drummers and everybody would play 'Wipe Out,' but Bill was the guy to beat."

Relative Bay Area newcomer Dana Olsen plays lead guitar with the Bar Association.

For the past year, the band has been playing around Marin and Sonoma. Despite everyone's busy schedule, they're hoping to land more gigs and eventually cross the Golden Gate Bridge with their country sound. "We've got a kick-ass band, the musicians are really something. Phil Richardson is just a master of the fiddle," Cragg says. "And Dana Olsen is just the most amazing guitar player I've seen in the county, he's just unbelievable. I just want to get up in front of him and sit in the audience and watch him. He's that good."

Morrison says the Bar Association's songs are all "dysfunctional love stories," but the music adds some swing to the laments.

"We have a lot of dancing going on and you know, true to this area, people haven't ever really known how to dance but they all do anyway," Morrison jokes.

"And when the people get up and dance, you know we elongate the solo, maybe go around another time or two," Cragg says. "If the people are up, you don't want them to sit down."

And if the people are up for some country music in Marin, they should check out Danny Montana and the Bar Association.

"We want to put the western back in country and western," says Morrison.