

A hard day's night in music

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Three gigs with two bands at two different venues on one night.

Quite a feat for keyboard player Jim Alfredson, considering he lugs a 425-pound Hammond B3 behemoth of an organ to his shows, bad back and all.

So it was no surprise to see him, after Gig No. 2, sitting stiffly in a corner backstage at The Intersection the other night, biding time with his jazz trio Organissimo amid the hubbub of the WYCE Jammie Awards, an annual show honoring local music.

"I'm trying to rest my back," conceded Alfredson, 28, a chiropractic jumble who fears he has a herniated disc caused by -- what else? -- lugging around that vintage keyboard and a 200-pound Leslie speaker cabinet bulkier than side-by-side refrigerators but ever so sweet, sweet, sweet in the sound department.

Like most happily hard-working musicians, you won't find Alfredson complaining much, even on such a hectic evening: playing a 6:30 p.m. show with Organissimo at Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park and a 7:45 p.m. set on the same stage with his second band, Root Doctor, before packing up gear and zipping downtown to the Intersection for a late-nighter with Organissimo as 2006's top Jammie Award winner.

"We've done gigs like this before," he said of juggling performances, of packing and re-packing equipment, of crisscrossing the state for concerts. But as a highly praised, full-time musician whose two bands have started generating a national buzz, he wouldn't have it any other way.

"Things are finally coming to fruition," he said, "so that's pretty exciting."

Back-stage hoisting

It's what happens off the stage that makes me marvel at the dedication of local bands: The countless hours in basement rehearsals, the musician-turned-roadie loading and unloading, the miles logged in rusty, cramped vans.

Alfredson got plenty of help from bandmates and WYCE volunteers as he wrestled the keyboard he calls "the back-breaker" on and off those stages. But by the time he crawled into bed that night, the Lansing musician had put in a grueling 10-hour day and performed three concerts for "a couple of hundred dollars" in compensation -- and he's responsible for his own health benefits, equipment overhead and travel costs.

Audiences are mostly oblivious to the ultra-heavy lifting that goes on behind the scenes, mostly unsympathetic to the plight of drummers and guitarists who are lucky to bring home \$100 in beer-soaked bills at the end of a long night (which adds up to about \$12 an hour before taxes).

"We really don't do it for the money," said Gregg Krupp, 45, of the surf-rock band Los Cobras, one of 15 groups that performed for free at the Jammie Awards show, turning the backstage area into a bustling storeroom for a mountain of guitars, amps and cymbals.

Quipped guitarist Michael Miller, 50: "I could sell Amway and make far more than that. Obviously, we're a little crazy."

They're also clearly in love with their music, judging by the energetic performances and all the back-patting and toothy grinning going on among musicians at The Intersection. For Organissimo, it helped the trio took home a couple of big prizes -- best local album and best jazz album -- because, said Alfredson, "It reaffirms that we're doing the right thing."

But that's not what keeps him dragging that sweet-sounding Hammond B3 to shows -- between visits to the chiropractor.

"It's the love of the instrument," he said. "It's like a beast you have to tame."