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BRIAN KIRK

Not Your Average Musician

MOST READERS WILL recognize Brian Kirk as the leader of the tremendously successful party band Brian Kirk & The Jirks, but many may not realize that he is also an accomplished local businessman. Why would a man, whose band will perform at nearly 180 events this year, still find the desire to work during the day?

"I think insecurity has something to do with it," said Kirk, who has lived in Middletown all his life. "The band has been going strong for 20 years now, but I know it can't last forever."

Indeed, longevity in the music business is something that only a small percentage of performers can attain, but Kirk has taken a business approach to his music, an approach that has worked well for him his whole life.

He started out as a solo guitarist at Donovan's Reef in Sea Bright in the late '80s – with the assistance of Red Bank-based Monmouth Rugby Club whose members primarily made up Kirk's audience at the time. Later, preferring the idea of a full band around him, Brian Kirk & The Love Pumps were born. The Love Pumps became well-liked in the area, but, Kirk said, internal forces pushed him out of the band he helped form. After a short stint with Brian Kirk & The Coup (a little dig at his former bandmates), Brian Kirk & The Jirks was officially formed in the early 1990s. Performing to hundreds at Donovan's Reef, and in excess of 1,000 fans regularly at the late, great Tradewinds nightclub in Sea Bright, he was off to an amazing music career.

Kirk's career choices reveal a lifelong entrepreneurial spirit. After graduating from Rutgers University in 1986 with a communications degree, he took a job with Southwestern Bell selling phone systems. When his pay went from "salary plus commissions" to "just commissions," Kirk decided to take his newly gained experience and start his own telecom business. The phone system salesman was now the phone system installer as well, but Kirk worked diligently, building his company to serve an impressive 2,000 clients before selling it recently.

Building on his telecommunications talents, Kirk and his brother Danny developed an elevator intercom system for the deaf in the mid-'90s, and became successful in that venture also, with his system installed in hundreds of buildings across the country. With his life quite full at this point and The Jirks becoming increasingly popular, Kirk decided to hire someone to oversee the business so he could focus his energies on his music.

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"With power comes responsibility," Kirk said. "Take care of your people, and deliver the absolute best product possible to your audience."

Onstage and off, Kirk's engaging personality shines through. Surrounding himself with hand-selected musicians of the highest caliber, he and the band interact with every crowd, whether on a club gig or one of the 80 or so weddings on their annual calendar.

"It's important to be genuine up there," Kirk said.

Of course, his contagious smile and affable personality help enormously, but the audience has to buy what you are selling. Like any other business, the band has to adapt to the current scene and vibe. Nothing is constant but change, and popular music changes from year to year. The band covers several genres, with a song list ranging from Led Zeppelin to Jimmy Buffet

to Taylor Swift. They have also recorded two albums of original music. In picking new material, Kirk follows his experience and intuition.

"We have to be happy playing what we play," he said. "Our hearts have to be in it."

Dozens of five-star reviews from brides and grooms on their most important day expose Kirk and The Jirks for what they are: simply some of the best entertainers in the region.

Now age 52, Brian Kirk shows little sign of slowing down. A part-time career in real estate keeps him busy during the day, buying distressed properties to rebuild and resell, and managing his 10 rental properties in the Two River area. He is a fan of the older buildings.

"Great architecture is like fine art," Kirk said.

Of course, it's not all about the money for Kirk and band members David Pershan, Kristin Grassi, Dan Lotito, Bryan

Douglas, Tom Cottone, Tyrone Fredericks Jr., Joel Mikulyak and Matt Cochran. The group gives back several times a year through their "Santa For..." concert every December at the Count Basie Theatre, and events for the Alzheimer's Association, the Light of Day Foundation, the FoodBank of Monmouth & Ocean Counties, and even a benefit to help keep Mater Dei Prep open.

Life is good for Brian Kirk, wife Liz and daughter Emerson, 9, and son, Donovan, 6. Simultaneously achieving a high level of success in business and music is not easy, yet Kirk has managed to do so with enthusiasm, compassion and an inexorable responsibility to his family, customers and audience. All of this, my friends, is why Brian Kirk is not just your average musician.

By Chris Spiewak

