The Lifer

Louie "the Lead" Bond never pursued the limelight, but he's built a four-decade career as arguably Missoula's best guitarist.

by Erika Fredrickson • photos by Cathrine L. Walters

At 65, Louie Bond has made a career out of playing lead guitar for bar bands.

On a recent Saturday night, the dance floor at the Top Hat is swinging. Young and middle-aged couples bend into pretzels and twirl out—sometimes dangerously wide—as a post-dinner audience, still nibbling on tapas, looks on. It's a contemporary crowd, what with the newly renovated bar occupied by patrons in Nike Airs sipping on Red Bull vodkas and microbrews. But there's also an old-school vibe to the show.

On stage, under blue and red spotlights, the Western Union Swing Band captures the mood and fashion of a classic country dance hall. Front and center stands Louie "the Lead" Bond, the sharp-dressed lead guitarist in a silver vest and Stetson, strumming a big-bodied Gibson. He doesn't ham it up for the crowd, but when he plays a fiery solo to Bob Wills' "Right or Wrong," he nails the notes with the easy precision of a man who could do this kind of fretwork in his sleep. With the exception of a few young musicians who remark on Bond's skills ("He's the best guitarist in town, bar none," one is heard to say) the crowd is mostly too lost in its own revelry to take much notice. Bond doesn't seem to mind. He just plays.

The musician keeps a similarly low profile away from the stage. On weekdays, Bond often settles into a booth at the Uptown Diner, starting his morning with a breakfast of eggs and bacon. At 65, he still makes his living playing music, which means he's up until at least 2 a.m. almost every night. As he sips his coffee, he is deceptively mellow, with twinkling eyes and a kind smile. He's polite and gracious—talk with him about his music, he'll tell you about every musician in town whom he admires. All of that humility disguises the fact that Bond is a sucker-punch guitar player, a secret weapon for any band with whom he plays. Over the years he's been in several dozen bar bands—from Texas to Nashville to Missoula—backing up or opening for big acts like Bobby Bare, Sawyer Brown and Buck Owens. Unlike so many musicians who live fast and die young—or at least fade from the industry—Bond is a lifer who has cultivated a steady career at a long, slow burn. Whether it's a slammed night at the Top Hat or a near-empty Tuesday at the Eagles Club, Bond plugs in his Gibson and dives into the big catalog of songs he keeps inside his head—with no other reward but the chance to make a living playing music night after night.

Bond does a gorgeous version of George Strait's "Amarillo By Morning." If you close your eyes and listen to his silky voice with its slight gravel, and the breezy riff of his guitar, you could swear you were listening to some country legend like George Jones or Willie Nelson. He lets the notes resonate just right:

Everything that I've got is just what I've got on.
I ain't got a dime, but what I got is mine.
I ain't rich, but Lord I'm free.
Amarillo by morning, Amarillo's where I'll be.

Bond, who started playing professionally when he was just 17, has amassed an impressive repertoire of country standards and Top 40 rock songs. Starting in his 20s, he spent time wandering across the country playing gigs wherever he could find them. On a road trip through Montana in January 1974, he ended up playing a six-night gig at the old Flamingo Room in Missoula's Park Hotel. He had come with a drummer from Dallas and they'd picked up a bass player in Miles City. One night, on a break, Bond struck up a conversation with a young James Welch, who was just finishing up his book *Winter in the Blood*. Bond says he was enamored with everyone he met and especially with the wild bunch of musicians, writers and late-night partiers that frequented the hotel.

"I didn't know anything about the music scene," he says. "But I looked out the window of the Park Hotel and I saw that train and the mountain with the 'M' and I said, 'I want to live here.'"

He didn't have a job. He had no place to live. He didn't really know anyone. He showed back up in Missoula anyway, with all his possessions and a hope that he could make it work.

Bond wasn't sure what to expect of a town buried in the mountains of Montana, so far from the bright lights of Dallas and Nashville. But on one of his first nights settling in Missoula, he entered a bar and saw Ray Riggs playing on the stage.

"Ray had played with Barbara Mandrell," Bond says. "I walk in and I hear this guitar player and I go, 'Well, I guess I'll be back in Texas here in a couple of weeks. If they're all that good around here I don't know if I'm going to find a job.'"

As luck would have it, a band called A Pint of Country needed another guitarist and asked Bond to sit in. They hired him within a few days. A keyboardist then set him up in a cheap apartment in Milltown where Bond discovered Harold's Club, which was interested in hosting live music. He booked A Pint of Country for the weekends and also for some off-

nights, for which the band called itself A Fifth of Country. It was a serendipitous setup, but due in large part to Bond's quick establishment in the local music scene. He could play old country, but he also had a soft spot for rock and roll, having spent his teenage years playing along to Paul Revere & the Raiders and the Beatles on the radio.

"There were great players around here but I was good enough to hold my own," Bond says. "I was the guy hitting the distortion pedal and rocking a bit, and people kind of liked that."

Missoula has earned many nicknames over the years, but back in the mid-1970s and early 1980s it was known by country-loving truckers as "Little Nashville." Bars typically had house bands—musicians who played in-residence—and those house bands often got a chance to back out-of-town headliners. At the Amvets bar on River Road, Bond and musicians like singer Jan Dell and drummer Carol Minjares backed up stars from Bakersfield, Calif., including David Frizzell, Buck Owens, Buddy Alan, Wanda Jackson and Tony Booth.

Another venue, The Cabin in East Missoula, hosted local music seven nights a week, with 350 people showing up regularly. It was a scene. The house bands were carried by a pool of musicians who, like Bond, lived in Missoula but often traveled to share the stage with bigger acts on nationwide tours. Fiddle player Ellie Nuno was part of the rotating cast of musicians who took up the challenge to keep the local crowds happy.

"There was a heavy social scene back then of folks who went out regularly to dance," Nuno says. "Couples and singles who were at the club four to five nights a week were there to dance and they rarely left the floor if the band was tight. And we were! That means we left little or no downtime between songs so the dancers didn't have time to leave the floor."

For the musicians, the long stretch of hours night after night meant they had endless hours of practice together.

"Radio country and dance hall music is a team sport," Nuno says. "We were after that pure and classic country sound on our respective instruments and vocal styles. Every good 'lifer' player has carefully and endlessly experimented and crafted his or her sound, and Louie Bond is a master guitar man in the radio-country style of playing, yet his style and delivery is truly his own this many years down the road."

Usually being the house band meant playing the role of bridesmaid to the bride, but it didn't always work out that way. Not long after he moved to Missoula, Bond left, along with drummer Minjares, to play lead guitar in a house band for a stint in Dallas at the Longhorn Ballroom, formerly known as Bob Wills' Ranch House. One night, in 1979, Buck Owens confronted Bond backstage. Bond had just finished an opening set with his band. Owens, a country music star, co-host of "Hee Haw" and headliner for the night, was about to go on—except, instead, he was standing in the green room yelling at Bond.

According to Bond, Owens was mad because the house band played a little too well, ending its dynamic set with a cover of "The Devil Went Down to Georgia." "Buck started railing on me," Bond says. "He said, 'I can't believe you did this to me. I gotta go out and follow *that*? You should know better.'" Bond smiles. He's a little bit proud, a little bit embarrassed. "I don't want to say anything bad about him," he says. "He was a really a good guy and he has a great band. And I can understand in a way—it might have been a professional faux pas on our part. But we didn't understand it. We thought, 'Holy cow. *No one* is going to outshine Buck Owens no matter how good your band is—people came to see *Buck Owens*."

The Longhorn Ballroom house band opened for the country star again the following night. Bond says he felt bad about Owens getting upset the night before, and he considered different ways to handle the situation. In the end, the band decided to just do what it always did—play to the crowd the best it could. "We didn't really end up changing anything," Bond says with a big laugh. "It kind of pushed us a little harder because the attitude was, well, Buck needs to buck up."

In the late 1980s, after returning from a stint in Nashville, Bond returned to Missoula and joined the Country Boogie Boys fronted by Dave Knight. Bond recalls the music scene was already changing. In 1985, The Cabin burned down, wiping out one of the town's most lively venues for country music. That same year, the state legislature passed the Video Poker Machine Act, which allowed five poker machines per liquor license and unlimited keno machines. Bond says many musicians thought the new revenue would make it easier for bars to hire bands and pay them well, but the measure backfired.

"There were no house gigs and there was a reason for that. People came in and threw money in gambling machines and the take from one machine would have paid for a band," Bond says. "But they didn't need to, right? It was all theirs. It's hard to give that up as a bar owner."

There was also a new generation of musicians coming into the mix, with new ideas on what would capture an audience's attention.

"I remember Dave [Knight] saying, 'Wow! We're the old guard now,'" says Bond. "And that was 20 years ago."

The first time Bond met Hoyt Axton was around the time of the Great Northwest Log Haul in Darby in 1988. The Country Boogie Boys found out that the Nashville country star was filming a movie in the Bitterroot called *Disorganized Crime* and they decided to track him down at the KOA where his tour bus was parked.

"We went down and knocked at the bus door," Bond says. "And there he was sitting in the booth on the bus. He said, 'What's up?' And our drummer said, 'We got a band down here and we know some of your songs if you want to jam.'" Axton invited them in and they played together for several nights.

One night, Bond recalls, Axton requested that they do "The Pusher."

"God damn the Pusher Man? Steppenwolf? Why do you want to do that?"

"He said, 'Well, I wrote it.'"

"We didn't know that," Bond says. "He was quite a prolific writer. He wrote 'The No, No Song,' a Ringo Starr hit, and of course he did the Three Dog Night songs 'Joy to the World' and 'Never Been to Spain.'"

Axton was slated to play the Log Haul that month—a protest by Darby loggers against environmental groups—and the Country Boogie Boys ended up backing him.

"It was kind of funny because there were so many log trucks coming in that when we got down to Florence they had a police escort to take our band down to Darby," Bond says. "We were on the shoulder of the road sometimes and all over the place—and some of the people protesting the logging threw nails on the road." He pauses. "Politically, I'm on both sides of the fence when it comes to things like that. I don't want to see clear-cutting … You have to have a mindset that goes beyond generations, that looks into the future."

Bond kept in touch with Axton. They did a radio commercial for Lane Furniture that featured a rendition of "Sixteen Tons;" Bond played guitar and he and another musician did the background vocals as Axton did a voiceover in his low, easy way.

Bond moved to Missoula in 1974, during the heyday of house bands, and he got a chance to back up popular country artists coming through town like Wanda Jackson, David Frizzell and Buddy Alan.

"He could sing really high—higher than you would think," Bond says, "but he also did a Johnny Cash cover of 'I Walk the Line' and he drops down below the low E on a guitar, and just as smooth as silk. He vibrates. He had more range than any singer I've ever known."

Not long after the voiceover work, Axton had a stroke that left him in a wheelchair. Deborah, Hoyt's wife, asked Bond to come help Axton with his music. Bond moved into the guest house on the Axton's ranch in Victor. He would play with Axton at benefits and private parties and helped him with songs.

"Hoyt respected Louie and his musical talent," Deborah says. "Louie had patience. Hoyt had some songs that he had started before his stroke and Louie and Hoyt would sit in the room for hours and Louie would help put the music to the songs. He did a fabulous job."

It was just a handful of songs. One was called "The IRS Killed Dottie West," about the country-western singer who lost her car to the IRS and then was killed when she hitched a ride from a drunk driver. Another was called "Some Women." The songs were put on demo tapes and Kostas Lazarides, the Montana-based songwriter who has written for Dwight Yoakam, Patty Loveless and George Strait, shopped them in Nashville—but nothing came of it.

After Axton died in 1999, Deborah found some of his half-finished songs. She gave a copy of one of them, titled "The Way it Should Have Been," to Bond. It's a riff off the first part of an old Leadbelly song called "Western Plains." Axton wrote it in a way that each chapter talks about a past life. In one, Axton is a cowboy fighting Jesse James, in another he's a trapper who, it seems, gets killed by his kidnapped Indian wife. Bond had seen the song before and he'd always asked Axton if he was going to write a verse about his own life and death. At the time, Axton said no, because he was still alive.

Bond decided to write the final verse for his friend.

Once I was a poet, coloring people's lives
with song
when the body quit me, I knew it wasn't long
those who really loved me knew it wasn't my age
And when the body fell, their hearts helped me
fly away

Bond played it for Deborah in a law office as they were getting Axton's estate in order, and he remembers the room filling with passersby—lawyers and staff—curious about the rare occasion of a man with his guitar in their place of work. "There was silence in the room afterward," Bond says. "It was emotional. Deborah said, 'Hoyt would like that verse in the song.' And so they wrote it down and I was a posthumous co-writer."

Bond has lived in a funky artist residence at the Atlantic Hotel on and off for the past 15 years. His window looks out at the old Park Hotel where he played his first gig in the early 1970s.

"He gave me a big boost," Bond says of Axton. "I'm proud to say that I worked with Hoyt Axton. I'm glad I got to help him in that respect."

In the late 1990s, long after the house band was all but extinct, Bond wrote a song about lost love called "When Did You Learn the Blues."

I guess everything's a trade-off
Does it have to be that way
Why can't we just live and love
and forgive yesterday
Does it start in the cradle
Did they make you wear those shoes
When will love ever come to you
When did you learn the blues

He was writing a lot more original material and playing in four or five Missoula bands to make ends meet, but it wasn't easy. As a country musician with a distortion pedal, he had come into the scene ahead of his times. Soon, he was finding it harder to keep up.

"When I first got to Missoula I had pedals and no one else did," he says. "And now there's all this technology—guitar players have a small city under their feet of pedals and effects and all kinds of crazy stuff. I was a tech freak and I just didn't change and now technology's went by me."

As another way of making money, Bond picked up a job doing sound at the Top Hat. He remembers a show he did for a young out-of-town band. As he helped the musicians carry in their instruments he overheard one of them snarkily comment on the sound man's gray beard—and it got to him.

"Well, they hadn't even met me yet," he says. "They don't even know who I am. They don't know I've done concerts for 40,000 people. That's the hard part to me when I get around younger people. I respected older musicians in Dallas. And I'm kind of looking for some of that back."

The changing music scene allowed for Bond to connect with some younger musicians, like folk rocker Andrea Harsell, whom he played with for 12 years.

"He's such a great wealth of musical knowledge, he was always open to teaching me to be a better guitar player," Harsell says. "On stage, he just enhanced what I was doing. He was totally comfortable being in that role. He was this massive supporting role that I needed him to be. He's been the supporting role everyone has needed him to be."

Missoula musician Tom Catmull recalls sitting down with Bond sometime in the early 2000s, playing guitar at the Atlantic Hotel, where Bond has lived on and off for 15 years. Catmull has played his fair share of covers, but his distinct original sound has made him a staple at bars and coffee houses. And yet, spending that time with someone as good as Bond, Catmull says he realized the importance of those old-school house bands.

"When you're playing original music you're pretty much playing the style that you play," Catmull says. "But if you're a cover band you have to learn every other style and it can make you a really stellar player. And Louie is one of those guys. He has some serious country licks."

New generations of musicians opened Bond up to music he never thought he'd like—at the Top Hat, for instance, he found himself blown away by hip-hop acts whose freestyling ways impressed him as much as any good country solo. And yet, despite his desire to keep himself ahead of the game, and despite a

steady lineup of gigs around town, he still hasn't been certain where he fits in and how all these years of playing add up in a place where cover bands aren't exactly the top of the food chain.

"Sometimes I use the term that I've lived myself into a corner, you know, like painted yourself into a corner," he adds. "I've lived a life that is really cool but sometimes I find myself in this little corner and everyone else is out there, and I can't get out of my corner because the whole room's changed."

When the Western Union Swing band ends its Saturday night set, Bond quietly slips his Gibson guitar into its case. Cash For Junkers starts playing and the crowd appears to double in size, the floor a party of lights and sweaty swing dancers. After 15 minutes, Bond emerges from the green room and takes a spot off to the side of the stage. He leans against the wall and points up at the band. "Now here's a band who can play swing but still sound like the old honky tonks in Nashville," he says.

The late Hoyt Axton, left, used to invite musicians like Bond, center, and Arlo Guthrie, right, to his Victor home to jam.

Later, Bond will return, as he does most nights, to his small room at the Atlantic, which faces the room he stayed in at the Park Hotel when he first arrived in Missoula. "It's a vortex I never knew I'd end up in," he says.

As much as he appreciates the local scene, he's preparing for a move. In a few weeks he's heading to Hot Springs to play full-time with The Dark Horse Band, which is based in the small town. He's hoping to be able to make money working with one band instead of spreading himself thin among many. Perhaps the change will allow him to spend time on side projects of his own, though he says he's not looking to front anything anytime soon.

"I've had people say I should have a Louie Bond band," he says. "But I don't really like that because I've always been the journeyman musician. I've always wanted to be part of a successful band, but it wasn't so much for the fame and fortune. The fortune would be nice—but for the freedom to put the money back into your music, get better guitars.

"The fame is something I thought would just be there—and it always was for me on a local level," he continues. "You're good enough and you get recognized, that's good. But I never did feel like I wanted to be the star. I get in a band and whatever part there is that can make the band sound better, I try to find that part."

For more than 40 years, he's been pretty good at finding the part. And even still, he's far from done looking.

efredrickson@missoulanews.com

Bond has no intention of slowing down. He's currently working on an album with Kimberly Carlson and planning a move to Hot Springs where he'll join The Dark Horse Band.