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## Score! — Hockey band, The Zambonis, is music to fans' ears

BY ANDY HUTCHISON

Since 1949, the sound of the ice re-surfacing machine — the Zamboni — circling the ice has been music to hockey players' ears. Over the past decade, however, Zambonis have become music to more ears than just those of bruised and battered skaters holding sticks.

The rock band, called The Zambonis, named after the middle-of-the past century invention, has performed "hard-hits" about hockey since 1991. One of the band's members, drummer and singer Mat Orefice, is a Fairfield resident. He joined the band (got called up from the minors, as he likes to say) about a year-and-a-half ago.

Orefice and his band cohorts (or teammates) suit up like hockey players — padded pants, helmets and jerseys — and sing about the game of hip checks and slap shots. They perform about 25 or 30 times each year, and have faced-off with fans in such venues as the HBC Center in Buffalo, the Fleet Center in Boston, and the Staples Center in Los Angeles.

"I open up my bag at the rink. Thanks to mom, my gear — it never stinks," is a taste of the lyrics in one of the band's songs, "Hockey Mom." Those words allude to young players whose sweaty, soaking equipment would never be aired out if not

for their dedicated moms. The song also makes references to the early hours of the sport, making mention of a hockey mom who is up packing the player lunch at 5 a.m. when the rest of the world is sleeping. "The rink is 20 degrees. She's got long johns and a thermos full of coffee. From Philly to Maine, she never complains — she's my hockey mom," the song continues.

Sure, it sounds like the only people who could relate to this music other than hockey players, moms and fans are the Hansen Brothers who starred in the movie Slap Shot, but the songs are appealing to anyone, the band members insist. The fact they don't sing about the same old stuff other rockers focus on is what makes this band interesting, they add.

Guitar player and singer, Dave Schneider, the man who came up with the idea to form the band, points out that many of the songs have subtle references to hockey. One of the band's love songs makes mention of the "neutral zone" — which can be applied both to hockey and life in general. "Metaphors exist in this band in a huge way," said Schneider, who lives in Bridgeport.

Like hockey players, these band members worked their way up the ranks of popularity — their first gig was at a friend's indoor pool — which, by the way,



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### Hockey hits

Members of The Zambonis, from left, front: Dave Schneider, Jon Aley and Steve Tanski, standing in back: Mat Orefice, have a little fun.

was not frozen for The Zambonis, Schneider said. They have since played for as many as 20,000 fans in a professional arena, although these hockey-musicians say it doesn't matter how big the crowd is.

"If you're playing for the right 100 people, it's worth it," Orefice said. "There are great shows you can have with big crowds and great shows you can have with intimate crowds."

In 1996, The Zambonis' first full-length compact disc "100% Hockey ... and other stuff" cracked top-25 charts and worked its way into National Hockey League and NCAA arena play lists nationwide. The band was profiled on CNBC, MTV, ESPN2 and in New York Magazine, just to name few. In 2002, the band had the thrill of performing at the Staples Center for the NHL All-Star game.

It's not all glamorous being a Zamboni. The band's members lost a night of sleep after a concert in Boston this past Sunday, thanks to their rental van breaking down. The life of a hockey rocker, all in all, however, makes the practice, travel and occasional setbacks worthwhile, the group members say. "You get to play music for people who enjoy it," Orefice said.

### First shifts

Schneider, 36, once played hockey, and thought it would be great to combine his love of pucks and pucks over a decade ago. Two of his friends, brothers Peter and Tarquin Katis were in a band, and another friend, Jon Aley, was also in a band back in the early '90s.

"I didn't have a band, I wanted a band," Schneider recalled. "All my friends had bands."

So Schneider suggested forming a band that sang strictly about hockey to Tarquin.

"His whole education just failed him at that point. He said 'Oh my god, that's an awesome idea,'" said Schneider, explaining that Tarquin attended Yale only to sing about hockey.

The name, The Zambonis, just made sense. "The machine itself is something of a masterpiece," Schneider said.

"There's something really cool about the letter 'Z,'" said Schneider, who often performs in one of his favorite jerseys, a game-worn Zarley Zalapski shirt from the now defunct Hartford Whalers.

In the past couple of years, Orefice and Steve Tanski (bass and guitar) have joined the "team" and the Katis brothers,

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not as much in the picture, join them for gigs from time to time.

"You have to budget your time and choose the right gigs," said Orefice, who makes ends meet by doing independent marketing and advertisement writing for such companies as Snickers and Pepsi. Schneider may be familiar to hockey fans at Bridgeport Sound Tigers' games. He works as an on-ice MC, sparking chants in the crowd between periods. Schneider also does the buying for his family-owned business, Jimmy's Army & Navy Store, which has locations in Bridgeport, West Haven and Hamden.

Orefice and Schneider were huge Whalers fans before the team blew away to North Carolina and become the Hurricanes in the late-'90s. Orefice says he will root for the 'Canes until the last former Whaler is off the team. At that point, he'll become a New York Islander fan, given that team's ties to the Sound Tigers, their minor league team.

The Zambonis will perform at the Acoustic Cafe, 2926 Fairfield Avenue in Bridgeport, Saturday, Aug. 23 at 9 p.m. Admission is \$8.