DOWNTOWN ALIVE! GOES COUNTRY WITH BIG JOHN HOWELL

By Benjie Hughes
STAFF WRITER

Rock and country: just like bowling, but with tighter pants.

Or so says Big John Howell, morning radio host at Chicago's US 99 FM. And he ought to know. In the past ten years, Howell estimates he and the Born to Boogie Band have played more than 500 shows in the Chicago area. They'll notch one more Friday night at Downtown Alive!

"This is like our night out bowling," says Howell, a trumpet player and graduate of Boston's Berklee College of Music. "We do it when everybody's schedule permits."

The group currently features Joe Macicak on bass, Mike Arturi on drums, Tommy Dziallo on guitar and Nate Klinger on keyboards. "Nate Klinger is our ladykiller," Howell says. "He wears the tightest jeans in the business."

The group also includes "Guitar Gavin" Todd, Howell's morning co-host, who is expected to perform his "Shania Twain Tribute" on Friday. "He's a goof — he'll try anything once," Howell says. "That alone is worth the price of no admission."

The Born to Boogie Band was formed in 1988 to be the in-studio band for the Chicago Bears' Dan Hampton's weekly TV show. It quickly took on a life of its own, playing everything from corporate gigs to celebrity weddings. When Mike Ditka's daughter married Howell and co. were on the scene — with permission, Howell says, to play any country song but *All My Exes live in Texas*. When the group played on the boat *Star of Chicago*, a storm whipped up and tossed its amplifiers back and forth across the deck. When it played an Ace Hardware convention, John Madden joined them onstage to sing *All My Exes*.

"He didn't want to come up, but I made him," Howell says. "He's even worse than me — and believe me, that's something."

Madden isn't the only one to have embarrassed himself at a Born to Boogie show, of course. A former fiddle player broke his foot leaping from the stage at a Naperville show. Klinger's tight jeans, Howell says, have caused "some embarrassing predicaments onstage." And even Big John Howell — who measures up to his name at 6'5" and 240 pounds — has had to give up wearing boots.

"I now wear tennis shoes onstage," he says. "If I jump up and down and get 240 pounds going in the wrong direction, those cowboy boots can be lethal."

Injuries, of course, are a small price to pay for a long night out making music with the boys. They must be — Klinger has even snapped his femur backstage, Howell says, while getting into those tight pants.

"Nate breaks his arm every year," Howell adds. "To my knowledge, he's yet to break an arm this year. But, of course, Friday night is another gig."

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Downtown Alive!
Friday in downtown Aurora
6-9 p.m. — Cruise Night — Hot Truck/Special Interest Night
6-10 p.m. — Inflatable games
6-10:30 p.m. — Food vendors
7:15-10:20 p.m. — Big John Howell and the Born to Boogie Band