

BY RICH ALBERTONI

“I know a lot of people whose families don’t get along,” says Michael Sienkowski. “But it’s fun for me to hang out with my family. We usually just sit around and try to make each other laugh.”

That’s exactly what was happening on the patio of Buffalo Wild Wings on a Monday evening as J.T. sampled the hottest of the hot sauces and his brothers waited for him to squirm.

I was sitting between J.T. and Luke, and across from Michael. I noticed that these three brothers are more different than the same.

Michael, 27, is fashionably reserved. He was wearing a tie, a vest and sunglasses. He looked the part of Robert Redford in *The Sting*.

Luke, 34, was fidgeting with a stack of Great Luke Ski CDs. The top one featured his caricature, cloaked in a cape and rapping comic parodies at a sci-fi convention.

J.T., 30, is tall and athletic. His T-shirt and baseball cap hung around him loose and relaxed while he drank down the hot sauce with ease.

Fans of Madison music might be familiar with the creative endeavors of these brothers. Their projects include *Sleeping in the Aviary*, the *Crest*, *What-For* and the *Great Luke Ski*. But thanks to their stage names, locals might not have realized that family ties bind these acts.

J.T. is better known in the music scene as DJ Skrabble. He’s one of the guys who add beats and samples to the raps of the local hip-hop group the *Crest*.

As the *Great Luke Ski*, Luke is a comedy-rock artist who’s got a chart history on Dr. Demento’s national radio show.

And Michael, who hasn’t traded in his real last name for a moniker, drums for *Sleeping in the Aviary*. He’s also the chief songwriter behind the Madison indie-rock project *WhatFor*.

This week provides another opportunity for one of the Brothers Sienkowski to shine. *Sleeping in the Aviary* will be celebrating the release of their new CD at the Frequency on Thursday, Oct. 9.

But for now, over dinner, Luke, J.T. and Michael are looking back to old times, not to the days ahead. They’re remembering their hometown of Pell Lake, Wis., and long bus rides to school in Lake Geneva. They’re remembering a junior high music teacher who inspired their interest in songs. They’re remembering years when they belonged to the 4-H club and performed in talent shows at the state fair.

So here’s the story of a family named Sienkowski. The oldest brother is a musical comic striving to be the next Weird Al. The middle one is a regular guy who tinkers with beats after work the way an uncle might tinker with belts and hoses under the hood of a car.

And the youngest brother is chic and contemplative. He’s earned a degree in philosophy. He likes to deconstruct rock classics. He likes to write songs that are frequently sad.

All three say they owe their artistic success to a mother who was, J.T. says, “always sticking crayons in our hands” and challenging them to be creative.

“She wanted us to be artists,” he says. “And what I mean by that is she wanted us to be people who make things, people who do something with their lives.”



Michael (left), Luke and J.T. Sienkowski thank Mom for their success.

SHARON VANORNY

BROTHERS IN TUNES

Luke, J.T. and Michael Sienkowski make their mark on the local scene

SCI-FI RAPPER

The *Great Luke Ski*’s tour schedule is heavy on hotel meeting rooms and convention centers. That’s because Luke’s target audience is attendees of sci-fi and fandom conventions. This summer he performed at GenCon in Indianapolis and DragonCon in Atlanta.

The *Great Luke Ski* has carved a niche for himself in the genre of music known as filk. Filk is fan music performed in communal circles by sci-fi and gaming devotees. But even among filkies, the *Great Luke Ski* is alternative.

“The act I’m doing doesn’t fit into what people consider to be filk,” says Luke. “Filk is fans sitting around in a room together and performing their songs to each other. I come along with a microphone and tape recorder and do parodies that are loud and obnoxious. And I want to entertain everybody at the convention.”

The *Great Luke Ski* raps a lot of his parodies against instrumental versions of cover tunes. But many of his tracks encompass full-production rock.

His current single is “Battlestar Rhapsody.” It’s a five-minute parody of Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” that’s all about *Battlestar Galactica*. The song held the #5 spot on Dr. Demento’s countdown of the top ten American comedy hits for August 2008.

Courting filk fans wasn’t an enterprise Luke imagined for himself when he left Wisconsin in the 1990s to attend the Kansas City Art Institute. “I went to college to learn how to animate,” he says. Once there, he found himself without a car, without cash,



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without cable TV and without many friends.

“I watched a lot of local TV, and one of the stations had late-night reruns of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*,” he says. “I started seeing commercials advertising the sci-fi conventions. Once I started learning about the conventions, I realized that *Star Trek* was one of the most popular topics, but no one was doing any parodies of the spinoff shows like *Deep Space Nine*.”

About the same time, a friend told Luke that Dr. Demento was broadcast weekly in Kansas City. It was a show he couldn’t find on the broadcast dial growing up in Pell Lake. “After I listened I went out and bought a dual cassette karaoke machine at Walgreens and made it my goal to get a song on his program,” says Luke.

That was nine albums ago. At DragonCon 2004, Dr. Demento said the *Great Luke Ski* was his radio program’s “most

requested artist of the 21st century.”

Luke resides in Kenosha, but his ties to the Madison music scene are deep. He collaborates with the local electronic band the *Gothsicles*. He’s helped Art Paul Schlosser assemble two compilation albums.

But mostly, the *Great Luke Ski* meanders around the country, looking for laughs. “I used to listen to my mom’s Steve Martin albums,” he says. “I was always into funny music.”

‘THE EMOTION IS JUST RIGHT’

Michael Sienkowski has one thing in common with his oldest brother, Luke. He wasn’t very social in his early years of college. “I started out in a voice and percussion program at UW-La Crosse,” says Michael. “But I spent a lot of time in the practice room, goofing off.”

Unlike Luke, Michael would not take solace in comedy. Instead, he transferred to UW-Madison in 2001 to pursue a degree in philosophy. “I wanted to figure out what the hell I was doing on this planet,” he says. He took up songwriting as a way to work through “something I had to deal with or something I had to express.”

He had just gotten into the music of the band *Of Montreal*. “It was lo-fi and simple,” he says. “I thought to myself, ‘I could do something like that.’ So I started collecting instruments and experimenting with recording.”

Sleeping in the Aviary
CD release party
The Frequency,
Thursday,
Oct. 9, 10 pm