

WORCESTER MAGAZINE

Howie Newman's second life as a folk musician

By Charlene Arsenault

Howie Newman's at a better place now. He actually wants to play, and when he does play, he's selective about where he plays.

Years ago, this wasn't true. For a 10-year span, from '73 to '83, Newman made his living as a musician. For anyone who has tried that, it isn't necessarily as glorious as it sounds.

Newman fell into the rut of playing in clubs and pubs all over New England — doing covers, sitting in the corner strumming away to make a buck. As a singer-songwriter who writes humor tunes and rests a lot of his act on comedy buffers between songs, it got hard to be the backdrop for pick-up scenes and beer swilling.

"Yeah, it got a little tired," says Newman. "I wasn't really playing the kind of venues I wanted to play. I was only doing it for the money. I gave it up because I wasn't enjoying it as much as I should. In fact, I wasn't enjoying it at all."

In that spell, Newman put out two discs — one of them an EP of songs about baseball (which is now included in the archives at the Baseball Hall of Fame). A guy in Dorchester came across the disc in a sports collector magazine and asked Newman to come and write for his publication.

DETAILS

Who: Howie Newman

When: Saturday, Nov. 22,
from 8:30-10 p.m.

Where: Lito's, Green Street

Newman didn't really know if he could write, and the guy from Dorchester didn't, either. Turns out, he could.

"I liked it a lot," says Newman. "I stumbled into it. I ended up working for The Middlesex News covering American Legion baseball. Then I got a full-time job at The Lynn Item, The Patriot Ledger and The Lowell Sun, and did some freelancing for The Boston Globe."

For 18 years, Newman wrote sports and shelved the musician thing. During that time he started a small PR firm to help promote folk musicians.

"In the course of doing that," he says, "I got myself into the loop again. I was like, you know, 'I think I could do this again, and I think I could do it better this time around.'"

So two years ago, Newman got a 9-5 job doing PR for a non-profit and eased back into the singer/songwriter scene. Still on the comeback trail, Newman has fine-tuned his show from the early '80s.

Playing pop folk with usually funny lyrics (he's got a few serious tunes), Newman's songs are in the same vein as those of Barenaked Ladies. Instead of singing covers in the corner, he sings his tunes about things like driving in Boston in the snow, fantasizing about being a rock star in Belgium, dating as a middle-aged man and collecting garbage in outer space.

"I like to think of myself as different and refreshing," says Newman. "This music really requires an audience, and when I get that kind of audience it goes over well. The difference now is I'm not depending on this for a living anymore. I try to make the best of it when I'm talking to my audience. That's when you engage people."