

THE VILLAGE PEOPLE REMAIN AMBASSADORS OF DISCO

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There were big boots to fill when Jeff Olson joined the Village People more than 25 years ago, and he knew it.

He was an American model living in Europe before he became the new cowboy for the iconic disco group, which had exploded upon the music scene with smashes like "YMCA," "Macho Man," and "In the Navy."

Leave it do dear old dad to put things in perspective, though.

Olson, now 54, remembers, "When I joined, I brought in a couple of album covers and said, 'Dad, this is what I'm doing. I'm going to join this group,' and he had no idea what this group was. He looked at the album covers and he said, 'You're going to join these fools?'"

It was an unusual mix to be sure — an over-the-top group featuring the likes of a headdress-wearing Native American, a leather-clad biker, and a construction worker — but Olson said he managed to fit in right away. Acting the part of the cowboy wasn't much of a stretch.

"I went to school in South Dakota," he said. "All I gotta do is put on my boots and I'm on my way."

He'll be putting on those boots once again at 8 p.m. Saturday when he and the rest of the Village People perform at the Ritz Theatre in Tiffin.

After 30 years of being a disco sensation, the Village People are still performing with several original members. They are Felipe Rose, the Native American; Alex Briley, the soldier, and David Hodo, the construction worker. Rounding out the high-energy bunch is Ray Simpson, who joined in 1979 as the cop, and Eric Anzalone, added as the biker in 1995.

The group's origins trace back to 1977 when producer Jacques Morali saw Rose dancing in his Indian costume in a crowd in New York's Greenwich Village, giving him the idea to put together a group of Village icons from a variety of social groups.

Then came the hits — topping more than 65 million in worldwide sales — and the infamous 1980 musical with Steve Guttenberg, *Can't Stop the Music*.

Things have changed a lot since Olson, who was lead singer and percussionist in a band in college, joined the group. In his early days, the Village People were still producing and promoting albums, and TV work and other appearances meant little time for live performances. Now, it's just the opposite.

"Almost all the work we do are just live performances, which if you are aware of what's going on in the record industry today is a good thing," he said. "Nowadays getting a new song out there and getting a new album is almost impossible."

The shows draw an audience as varied as the characters in the Village People, he said.



The Village People, who have been icons of disco for 30 years, come to Tiffin this weekend.

"This music is infectious," Olson said. "It ain't about saying any big political statement or anything about ecology. People can experience it and enjoy it. ... Nothing we do is offensive."

If only the world was more like the Village People.

"We're about a variety of everything, including race and religion. There's such diversity in this group," Olson said.

And he said while the group was designed to cater to a gay crowd and has a large gay following, don't assume too much about the group's members: Their bios reveal that a couple of the Village People are married with children.

Olson, who is not married, said the topic came up once with a former girlfriend, whom he hadn't seen in years.

"She said, 'We just assumed everybody in the group was gay,' " he said.

Times have changed and disco isn't the musical force it once was, but the Village People remain enthusiastic ambassadors of that era. It certainly helps when you get to put on some cowboy boots and sing "YMCA."

"[I] never, never, ever tire of performing it," Olson said. "It doesn't matter if it's 100 times or 1,000 times."

The Village People will be in concert at 8 p.m. Saturday in the Ritz Theatre, 30 South Washington St., Tiffin. Tickets range from \$21 to \$66 from the box office, 419-448-8544, or Internet at www.ritztheatre.org.

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