



Jazzin'

Dynamic jazz trio Allen Youngblood & Jazbalaya (above) got diners up and dancing during 'BBQ on the Boardwalk' at Les Anges restaurant, Royal Phuket Marina (RPM).

ABOVE: Allen Youngblood (right), bass guitarist Paul Candelaria (left) and drummer and vocalist Larry Hammond take time out with RPM's Jeanette Skelton.



RIGHT: RPM's Wilaiporn Pitimanaaree (right) and Karuna Tip-o-sot (center) pose for a photo with Central Festival Phuket's Marketing Activities General Manager Songphol Pongrapeeporn.

BELOW: Ladies get down with a boardwalk boogie.



Singing to

Hidden in the darkest depths of Phun Pol Plaza, tucked away down a shady alley in one of Phuket's more run-down areas, there is an unexceptional-looking building in the shell of an old shophouse. Take a step through the doors into a small, crowded room and a flurry of greeters welcome you and ask how you are.

People are milling about, friends are chatting and a group of about 150 people are finding seats, waiting patiently for the show to begin. It's 10:30 on Sunday morning, and while most of Phuket is still in bed a collection of Thais and foreigners are in this building waiting for a concert.

The lead singer and guitarist of the band casually saunters up to the front of the room, picks up his guitar and straps himself up. The backing singers are in place, the drummer takes his seat, the female vocalist signals she's ready and the lead singer plucks a few strings in preparation for the band's opening number.

An overhead projector beams a message onto a large, white screen to the back-left of the room: "Please honor God and turn off your mobile phone."

You get the impression that this isn't going to be your average concert.

The crowd rises to its feet, the band commences its set and the white screen displays lyrics in both Thai and English for the crowd to sing along with. Jesus, God, redemption and forgiveness figure heavily in the karaoke session. This is a typical morning at Phuket Christian Centre (PCC), located in the heart of one of Phuket's most infamous neighborhoods.

The lead singer of the band is Pastor Brian Burton – an enigmatic character from Wolverhampton in the UK who looks as though he might have been an Elvis impersonator in a past life. He's instantly likable and positively glowing as he strums and sings his way through a number of hymns.

The congregation at PCC sings with so much vigor that you wonder if the Man upstairs can't hear them. Some of the followers sing with beaming smiles, a few raise their hands to the roof in celebration, while others appear so lost in prayerful trances that it's difficult to tell whether they are awake.

A row of Thai children stands at the front of the room, clapping along with the grown-ups behind. This is the flock that Pastor Brian has worked for 17 years to build.

"God's great, isn't he!" exclaims Brian as the band finishes its set.

Sunday, August 5 was PCC's 17th anniversary; the ser-

vice was a birthday party with a divine twist.

He's a rock star, a secret agent and a comedian, but behind the one-liners and numerous TV appearances, Brian Burton has been working to help those in need in and around Phuket for 17 years.

Gazette Desk Editor Matt Crook reports on the Phun Pol pastor.



WELCOME TO THE FAMILY: Baby 'Not' was well-behaved as Pastor Brian dedicated the newborn in front of her mother and aunt during a service at Phuket Christian Centre.

vice was a birthday party with a divine twist.

After a brief call for offerings and tithes to help with the running of the church, Brian told his congregation that he had a treat in store for them. The lights were dimmed, the ambiance set and a movie began to roll.

Brian is a churchman with a sense of humor. The video his congregation watched was a parody of James Bond, starring "Pierced Burton" in *You Only Live Twice*. The holy 007 traveled across the world in search of a "faith promise". After traipsing from Phuket to Australia to London and back to Phuket via the magic of cheap stage props, 007 finally found his faith promise back at the PCC building.

The faith promise is a form that each of the congregation was asked to fill out, pledging a donation toward the construction of a new building for the church. Pastor Brian's troop has outgrown its home in Phun Pol, and 20 million baht needs to be raised – that's a lot of money for a church that has only 220 followers.

The service was sharp and to the point, with Brian throwing one-liners and gags into his delivery. "The *Gazette's* here today, so I've even worn a shirt and tie," he quipped.

During the service, Dave from Australia gave a testimony about how his life had improved now that he had found God and

joined the church. He told a story of depression and thoughts of suicide that eventually led him to Christianity and to meeting Brian.

Brian had called Dave over to him at the altar during a ceremony of worship at a PCC leadership retreat. He looked down and instead of seeing the altar, Dave said he saw God's throne. "It was so powerful to see the throne that I broke down and cried," he said.

After Dave's testimony, Brian said, "I think Dave gets the badge for the most improved man. Before he used to walk around looking glum, but now every time I see him he's got a smile on his face. He's even got a bit of a swagger. Praise God!"

Though his humor adds some spice to his services, Brian maintains an air of authority and seriousness that has earned him the respect of everyone at PCC.

"Seventeen years ago I came to Phuket with my wife Margaret. We started this church with just two people," said Brian, satisfied with the improvement in attendance since his work began.

As the service drew to a close, Brian dedicated a baby and posed for photos after a church birthday cake was cut. All in a busy day's work for Christianity's James Bond, but after the service Brian had some time to chat.

"I arrived in Phuket in 1990 as part of a program to start a Thai church," said Brian. I came

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SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE: (Above) Pastor Brian (left) and Pastor Nok pray for Aussie Dave (right) to acknowledge his new position in the church as spiritual parent, a type of church leader.

FLOCK 'N' ROLL: (Left) Pastor Brian leads the band with his guitar at Phuket Christian Centre during a service commemorating the church's 17th anniversary.

here with my wife and after a short period in Bangkok we came to Phuket."

The first meeting of PCC, attended by 34 people, was held April 1, 1990, at City Hotel Phuket. On August 1 of the same year, Brian and Margaret completed their move to Phuket and relocated the church to Nimit Rd, and then to the first of two buildings at Phun Pol Plaza.

"At first the church was just me and Margaret; then two more people joined, and slowly it built up to what we have now. We're here because God wants us to be," said Brian.

Brian recounted the story of how Nok, Youth Pastor and one of the churches earliest members, arrived at PCC. "Nok was just 14 when we found her on the bank of a canal near Phun Pol, abandoned by her mother," he said.

"She was looking after six younger brothers and sisters on her own. We took them in and looked after them. That was 16 years ago; now the brothers and sisters are members of the church, the mother has come back, and the family is restored,"

added Brian.

Church Services held by PCC are given in four languages: Thai, English, Burmese and a sea gypsy dialect. "After the tsunami, we took teams to the coast to help out at a sea-gypsy village that was destroyed on Koh Pratong," said Brian.

"There was an outbreak of chicken pox at the time, and the sea gypsies asked us, 'Why are you helping us?' I told them, 'Because God loves you'. They said that nobody had cared about them before. After that, they joined the church and now they come here about once a month."

PCC is involved in a variety of projects around the island. One of those projects is the New Life Foundation, which helped with the rebuilding of Baan Kamala School and the creation of Sussex House.

The projects are funded with money that resulted from Brian's meteoric rise to fame as he appeared on multiple major news networks following the tsunami.

Sussex House, in Phuket City, opened about one year ago and helps children in need, with

18 children currently being cared for.

"People saw me on TV and they were looking for ways to help," said Brian. "Sussex Police did a sponsored bike ride around Britain and raised money for both Sussex House and Baan Kamala School."

PCC also helped build a nursery school in Tai Muang, Phang Nga, which opened in May and is now attended by 56 children affected by the tsunami.

Not limited to aiding children, Brian said that PCC formed Self Help and Empowerment (She) group to help women working as prostitutes in Patong to find alternatives means of making money.

"We help five girls at the moment," said Brian. "We teach them to make jewelry that is then sold in the UK and the US. We are hoping that some of these girls will be able to go on and train new girls."

Construction of PCC's 20-million-baht church building will begin in December, said Brian. "We've been in this building for about eight years, but it's too small. The new building is near

this one, by the weekend market. It will be finished by the end of 2008 and will seat about 600 people."

Phun Pol, an area renowned for sleazy late-night hangouts, has been the home of PCC for the better part of a decade.

"The area needed the light," said Brian. "I remember one time after the tsunami when I had to travel to the UK and Sweden to raise funds: As I was leaving, a group of shopkeepers and residents, who had heard I was going, came to see me and asked, 'You are coming back, aren't you?' It's moments like that when you realize you've made a difference.

"After the tsunami, the church was used as an overflow

center for the island's hospitals. We had about 40 people being looked after here. The whole community pulled together to help: doing laundry, bringing food, tending to the sick. The people do know we are here," said Brian.

Brian admitted that charitable life can get tough sometimes, but his motivation to carry on is borne out of the realization that his work is not dependent on how he feels.

"I can't just stop because I had a bad day. I'm doing the Lord's work."

For more information, contact the Phuket Christian Centre at Tel: 076-246380; email: pcc@loxinfo.co.th; website: www.phuketchristiancentre.com

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