

FULL HOUSE



Rob Mahoney and his Magic Piano



Any gigging piano player yearns to have a real acoustic piano under his fingers. Alas, life on the road means you leave the spinet at home and use a succession of digital keyboards, perched on stands, and draped with cords.

Granted, these digital wonders are capable of recreating every style of piano sound, from a rich baby grand to an out-of-tune honkey-tonk upright. If only it looked like a piano instead of an electric ironing board.

Johnson City musician Rob Mahoney has created a solution.



He developed the Stowaway PianoBack, a concept so simple in design and so nimble in use, it's a wonder no one came up with it before.



"The idea came during a conversation with a friend and mentor," Mahoney said. "He said what I want is to hold up a tablecloth and POOF you have a grand piano. I looked off into space, my eyes rolled back in my head, and I punted on that idea for a minute. Then I drew a sketch of the back and sides of a piano, that you unroll out of a tube, and BOOM you got a piano."



The PianoBack was born. It is the image of a piano printed on a durable banner that weighs less than 3 pounds and wraps around a keyboard to hide the stand, pedals, and cords.

Mahoney's leap of insight is not surprising given his background. He got his degree in petroleum engineering ("the day that industry was over"), he worked in radio for years, played in touring bands for a decade (including with The Killer Bees), hosted an Austin music TV show, and recorded voiceovers for commercials and video games.

These days he lives in a house he built out of recycled materials on the banks of the Pedernales River, and plays solo piano gigs, mostly at area wineries, restaurants, and clubs.

While his "picture of a piano" works well as trompe l'oeil and has been selling steadily for nine years, Mahoney has since created sturdier versions out of wood, mimicking an upright piano (FlatStack) and even a grand piano (GrandStand).



They fold up to be flat so they are easy to transport. Once at a gig, he rolls them in on a dolly and unfolds them to surround his keyboard on three sides.

Mahoney has sold his products to musicians, theaters, high school bands, and touring stars, including the "biggest rock band on the planet."

But he admits it has yet to be a path to riches, "If you want to get rich, don't make products to sell to musicians," he advised.

"And this is a niche product, targeted only to piano players, and only piano players that want to look like they are playing real piano. It's more of an art project, really."

But a very, very good art project.

"People are so convinced it's a piano, they don't even look down and see that it's really a digital keyboard," he said.

Amazingly, Mahoney's piano wrapping not only fools the eye, it fools the ear, according to one satisfied customer.

"One lady told me that I played better with a real piano instead of using a big keyboard," one user wrote on his page.

"I guess there isn't a better testimonial than that."

Rob Mahoney plays at Barons Creek Vineyard most Saturdays through the year. He can be contacted through his web site www.RioGumbo.com.

Information on his Stowaway products is at www.pianoback.com.

Phil Houseal is a writer and owner of Full House PR www.fullhouseproductions.net.

Contact him at phil@fullhouseproductions.net.

