

George Bush's Musical Chairman

By Linton Weeks

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, January 13, 2005; Page C01

Before you hear how he got the nickname Wemus, sit back and listen to a few things about Dennis Grubb.

He and his wife, Cynthia, are the entertainment czars for the second inauguration of President George W. Bush. And he and Bush have been buddies since their boyhood in Midland, Tex. Baseball brought them together. The oil bust drove them apart. The power of music, and the music of power, brought them together again. He has some practice at doing inaugurations. He did it four years ago when George W. Bush won the first go-round. Fact is, Grubb has been Bush's unofficial minister of music since Bush decided to run for governor of Texas in 1994.

Traits he most admires in George Bush: "Four words: Faith, integrity, honesty and loyalty."

Today Grubb, 58, and Cynthia, 56, run Wemus Entertainment, a multifaceted company that specializes in providing music for corporate and political shindigs.

They recycle second-tier cover bands with names like Vince Vance & the Valiants. They have offices in Midland, Dallas and Nashville. But for the past few weeks, the Grubbs have been hunkered down in a government-issue office in the Mary Switzer Building on C Street SW. Wemus and Cynthia each have a homely wooden desk, a laptop, a phone and a chair in a room the faded-out color of bleached blue jeans. Inside these drab walls, the Grubbs -- and a come-and-go staff of 100 -- are putting in 16-hour days to plan most of the inaugural entertainment. They are overseeing the entertainment for the "Saluting Those Who Serve" concert at MCI Center on Tuesday; the "Celebration of Freedom" concert at the Ellipse on Wednesday and the nine official balls Thursday night.

In his crisp, white shirt, black pin-striped suit, a red, black and white tie and wispy gray-brown hair, Wemus Grubb doesn't look like the kind of businessman who would hoist up an electric guitar, launch into "Johnny B. Goode," and pick and sing like Chuck Berry as he duckwalks across a stage floor. But that, Grubb will tell you, is what he is famous for back in Texas. "How's that for versatility?" he asks.

"He's pretty dang good," says someone who has heard him. "He can play."

Right now, Grubb is having a good time. He likes the challenge of producing very large inaugural balls "with varying types of music that will play throughout the night," he says. The soirees will last from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m.

By using bands that play familiar standards and rock-and-roll covers, Grubb hopes to make each ball as exciting as the next. He is scheduling three or four bands per venue.

Bush and Grubb got to know each other as Little League baseball players in Midland in the 1950s. Grubb was a first baseman. Bush played shortstop for a rival team -- coached by George H.W. Bush. In 1960, the Bush family moved to Houston.

In Midland, Grubb also knew Laura Welch, who would eventually become the first lady. "She was at one junior high and I was at another," Grubb says. "Her father was a builder. He built my parents' house." At Robert E. Lee High School, Laura Welch was a grade ahead of Grubb. Tommy Franks, who would become a four-star general and lead the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, was two years ahead.

Along about high school, Grubb saw he wasn't going to be a major league player so he did what any self-respecting Southern boy would do in the Age of Elvis, he picked up a guitar, learned a few chords, picked a note here and there and formed a band: The Mystics.

They covered Roy Orbison, Buddy Holly and other early Texas rockers. In 1963, they won a battle of the bands and were named the No. 1 rock-and-roll band in the state.

Wemus Grubb continued to play guitar while he was at Texas Tech. He majored in administrative management, with a minor in psychology. He met Cynthia there. She was from Lubbock and, she smiles as she says today, "Happiness is indeed Lubbock, Texas, in the rearview mirror." She is a woman with jet black hair, tan skin, white blouse, black skirt, gold jewelry and a twinkling eye for Grubb. The Grubbs graduated in 1972. They married and moved back to Midland in 1978. Lured by the oil boom, a bunch of other young people -- including the Bushes -- were also returning to Midland at the same time. Bush started an oil company. Grubb went to work for an oil and gas exploration company run by Donald Evans, who would eventually become Bush's secretary of commerce. "Don actually hired me and I became the contract manager for their drilling division," Grubb says.

Bush, Evans, Grubb and orthopedist Charles Younger became known as the Galloping Greyhounds because they jogged around in old gray sweat shirts.

Younger likes to tell the story of Grubb going into the National Guard. The new recruits were asked if anyone knew how to drive. Grubb raised his hand and was given a wheelbarrow to push around. Finally, after a few days of humiliation, Grubb was called into the captain's office. "I understand you know how to drive," said the captain, who had his back to Grubb. The captain turned around. It was Grubb's old high school pal Tommy Franks. Grubb became his driver.

The Greyhounds still get a laugh out of that story. Grubb is the kind of guy that others get a kick out of.

"He's just kind of a music geek," Younger says, laughing. "We used to play a game called 'Stump the Wemus.' Name a song and he could sing it. He's got an unbelievable collection of old vinyl records. And he's met and rubbed shoulders with lots of famous musicians -- mainly old rock-and-roll stars and country-western people of today."

His Web site, www.wemus.com, has a vanity page showing pictures of Grubb with Bush, and the Coasters, and Charley Pride.

In 1986, when the oil boom went bust, Wemus Grubb became a full-time music producer. "It was too late to become a doctor or a lawyer," he says. He continued to play with various bands. Bush never got up and sang with him, Grubb says, but Laura "is a good dancer."

In the mid-90s, Grubb was sitting next to George W. Bush at a Texas Rangers baseball game. Bush, who owned part of the team, leaned over to Grubb and -- in one of those blinks of an eye that can change lives -- said, "I'm going to run for governor."

Remembering the moment, Grubb sits back in his chair and says, "And I thought: Well, okay."

He coordinated the music for Bush's first gubernatorial campaign, doing essentially the same thing he is doing now -- calling on variety, swing and nostalgic rock-and-roll bands. "For the galas," he says, "we featured some well-known country artists, choirs, soloists and comedian emcees."

Grubb has been in charge of all the Bush campaigns and inaugurations since.

The 2001 inauguration was a breakthrough for Grubb's company. "It put us on the fast track."

After the big 2005 to-do, he plans to return to Texas. He has a son, Darren, who is deputy chief of staff for Donald Evans and a daughter, Danielle Shroyer, who lives in Princeton, N.J., and has two children. "I'm a rock-and-roll grandpa," he says.

Now about that nickname. It was not bestowed by the First Nicknamer, Bush, as it turns out. It happened at a radio station in 1963 when the Mystics were on top of the world as the best band in Texas. The group was being interviewed by a disc jockey. He asked them what they thought of a new novelty song by Nino Tempo and April Stevens called "Baby Weemus."

I call her Wee Cause she's small I call her Baby Cause she's my baby girl.

Wee wee Baby Weemus Baby Weemus for me.

The Mystics hated the song. But, in another of those life-changing eye blinks, one of the older members began referring to Grubb as Baby Weemus. Eventually the "baby" and the second "e" were dropped. And that is how Bush friend and running buddy and court entertainer got the strange name of Wemus.

"It's an easy name to remember," Cynthia says.