



MARK MAIMONE and his trumpet get into the swing of things at Thursday's event.

JPL band gets into swing of things

Celestial tunes heavily featured on the playlist

By **Andrew Bridges**

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LA CAÑADA FLINTRIDGE — Only at JPL can a bunch of rocket scientists get together to belt out swing favorites like, yes, "Fly Me to the Moon."

Since it formed in January, the

band variously known as Big Band Theory, The Jazz Propulsion Big Band or, as one member suggested, simply Nerds with Horns — has played various gigs on the Jet Propulsion Laboratory's La Cañada Flintridge campus.

Packed with Ph.D.s, the band is equally scientific in its playlist, which leans heavily toward the heavens. "Stardust" and "It's Only a Paper Moon" are two favorites; "Orange Colored Sky" — a paen to Mars — is another.

"We try to do as many musical puns as possible," said trumpeter and software engineer Pat Olguin, who founded the band with computer specialist Brenda Burkhart. "There are so many celestial songs, we haven't even begun to explore them."

Unlike the years of preparation that most JPL missions go through, the band formed almost instantaneously after a call for musicians went out over the lab's internal Internet message board, Burkhart said.

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Like every other JPL project, the band proves its mettle, appropriately enough, in the Environmental Test Laboratory. While JPL spacecraft are put through the paces in the 25-foot space simulator thermal vacuum there, which replicates the temperatures and pressures of space, the band sets up in a computer room next door for its weekly 40-minute practice sessions.

About 40 people now participate, with about half performing each concert, such as the 30-minute set played Thursday during a JPL honor awards ceremony.

Mark Maimone, a trumpeter, said he joined to "get back in shape."

"We just get great responses," said Maimone, a JPL camera expert who recently missed a few rehearsals because he was in the Ukraine training specialists in the use of a robotic rover used to probe the failed Chernobyl nuclear reactor.

Norman Carter, a technical editor, said he literally stumbled across the band while on a lunch-time walk.

For the 67-year-old big-band fan,



Staff photos by KEITH BIRMINGHAM

MEMBERS of the Big Band Theory play swing music during a JPL honor awards ceremony Thursday.

who sang "Satin Doll" on Thursday, the group gave him his first break.

"It's the fulfillment of a dream I've had for 50 years," Carter said.

One of the band's next gigs will be

Aug. 17, when they join up with the JPL swing dance club to celebrate the Cassini spacecraft's flyby of Earth to gain momentum for its trip to Saturn.