Prison band puts four songs on tape

By JAMES MINTON
Baton Rouge bureau

The Louisiana State Penitentiary's Big River Band waded undaunted into unfamiliar waters this weekend, finishing a marathon recording session for cassette singles in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Since Warden John Whitley and sponsor Bobby Howard formed the traveling band in late 1990, Big River's inmate musicians have performed to appreciative audiences at festivals, anti-drug rallies and institutional parties across the state.

But when the 12 inmates unloaded their gear at Techno Sound Recording Studio in Baton Rouge Saturday afternoon, they had an audience of one: sound engineer Tony Daigle.

Daigle stuck with the group for 12 grueling hours to make sure each track was, in his words, "happening." After post-production work, the group will sell cassette tapes of its four original songs during public appearances.

The band also added a footnote to Angola history on Saturday.

Although several popular musicians gained stardom after their release from Angola, the last inmate to record a song while incarcerated was blues singer Huddie Ledbetter, better known as "Leadbelly," who sang his way out of prison in 1934.

Band members are mindful of the recording session's significance, the position of trust they've earned with the prison administration and the role they play in representing Angola's 4,200 inmates, vocalist Larry Guitarist Jimmy Booker and drummer Jackie Williams practice before the Louisiana State Penitentiary's Big River Band records at a Baton Rouge studio.

Band

CONTINUED FROM 1B

Wilkinson and lead guitarist Myron Hodges said, "The band's overall purpose is to change the public's image of the convicts at Angola and to show the inmates we're not just out here for a free ride," said Hodges. "We're out here as ambassadors for them.

"Angola is changing to become one of the most rehabilitative and productive prisons in the country," he added.

"The talent we have is not the only talent at Angola," said Wilkinson, including acting, public speaking, writing and "whatever you can think of." His definition of talent.

Angola's inmates, through their inmate welfare fund, loaned the band the money to buy equipment and furnished funds for a six-hour recording session.

Studio owner Nelson Blanchard said he gave the band an initial discount and then donated the extra time needed to finish in one session.

The band has returned more of the original loan through the sale of "Big River" T-shirts, and hopes the cassette sales will generate an even better return for the inmates' fund,

said scheduling director Eba Wilson.

The songs recorded Saturday were:

"It's Your Life," a rap song by vocalist and trumpeter Dale Bladen with a pro-education, anti-drug, "pay attention to your mother" theme.

Speaking of a "pre-fab ghetto philosophy," the song "totally denounces the video imagery of gold chains that spreads greed, envy and jealousy," Bladen said.

"Stay With Me," written by vocalist Raymond Compton and sound man Jerry Williams.

"It's a rhythm and blues number — I guess," Compton said. "I'm a lonely man singing about companionship, I sing it so far, and then Larry (Wilkinson) raps about it.

"Wings of Another," a soft rock tune written by Hodges, one of the band's five lifers.

"It's based on a true story, with special thanks to the girl who inspired it," Laura Brown of New Orleans," said Hodges. "It's asking her to go on with her life.

Other Big River members are bass guitarist Jimmy Booker, keyboard player Jimmy Byrd, trombonist Ellery Gastinelle, trumpeter Eugene Tolos and drummer Jackie Williams.

Although not a regular member of the band, Melvin Lewis joined the recording session on trombone. "We needed a little more bottom end on the brass," Howard explained.

Besides the thrill of working with the band, Saturday's session had extra meaning for Lewis — it was his first trip outside Angola in 20 years.