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## **Rockers' role**

### **Johnson Brothers Band is ready for 'Superstar's' screaming guitars**

**By Rich Copley**

**HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER**

The Johnson Brothers Band likes to play the hard stuff, eschewing three-chord rockers in favor of things like Steely Dan's jazzy motifs or complete renditions of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

That puts *Jesus Christ Superstar* right in their wheelhouse.

Guitarist Jim Gleason approached Shakespeare Festival artistic director Trish Clark about doing a musical, say a rock opera like The Who's *Tommy*, which the band had played in the past.

A few months later, Clark proposed *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

It would be a challenge.

*Superstar* has screaming guitars and pounding drums, but it's hardly typical rock 'n' roll.

"The difference between *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* is that Pete Townshend is a rock musician, so *Tommy* is written from a rock band's perspective," Gleason said. "Andrew Lloyd Webber is not a rock musician. The time changes, and keys are not typical of rock music. It's typical of theater music, but louder.

"It's a complicated piece to do for a six-piece band," he added, saying the band will handle all the orchestral sounds in the score, too. "That's the cool part. That's what we love."

It's a challenge the Johnson Brothers Band has faced before. The group was the band for Lexington Musical Theatre's *Superstar* at the Singletary Center for the Arts in 1991.

This time around will be quite different, outside in the Arboretum on Alumni Drive. Gleason says the main challenge will be synchronizing the singers and the musicians in the open environment. Music director Mark Funk will conduct the band off to the left of the stage.

Tuesday night was the group's first rehearsal with the Shakespeare *Superstar* cast, and Gleason volunteered an early review:

"The singing is so lush and so strong, and the singers are so powerful, it's going to sound great," he said. "There's huge horsepower there. It's exciting."

Gleason said he is so excited he's already talking about future collaborations between the festival and the band.

Perhaps *Tommy*.