

FEATURED

Sideman Jamboree

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32nd Sideman Jamboree performances on Feb. 5 included musicians, from left, Mark Earp on bass; Lisa Hermenitt Wenzl on drums; Kelly Rowden on lead guitar; Judy Hall singing; Paul Atherton on harmonica; and Eric Troyer on keyboard. Rhythm guitar player Houston Cluff is outside of the photo. Many other western swing musicians, including Billy Easton and Ray Harrison also performed over the Feb. 5-7 event.

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After her 13 years in Hollywood as a top executive with Lakeshore Entertainment, a leading independent production, finance, sales and distribution company, Christine “Kee Kee” Buckley decided she needed to get away. In 2011, she took off on a road trip with her dog, Yoda, a boxer/French bulldog mix. About five months into it, she stopped for gas at the Shell Station and Dwayne’s Fresh Jerky at I-10’s exit 366 in Bowie, exhausted from traveling. There, she heard about Judy Hall, former sidewoman for many great

musicians, from Merle Haggard to Jimmy Buffet. Hall was hosting an annual musical festival called Sideman Jamboree just across the Interstate, at The Alaskan RV Park. Buckley headed over and Hall offered her dinner and a small camper for her and Yoda to sleep in after that evening's musical jam.

"I told her I'd like to write something about the event for the Huffington Post, as it brought together sidemen and sidewomen from bands all over the country and beyond every year in February for the past 30 years," Buckley said during this year's event, Feb. 5-7. "They've been coming for decades, basically in secret, to perform in the desert. They called the event the Sideman Jamboree because it is their turn to perform center stage."

"Judy just finds musicians and tells them, 'you come and we'll feed you. Just bring a flag from where you came from, so we can hang it up at the event'," Buckley said.

Buckley was back this year, working with Eric Troyer – a musician in the iconic classic-rock band of ELO and ELO Pt 2 former members and The Orchestra, who has also recorded with John Lennon, Billy Joel, Celine Dion, KISS, Aerosmith and many others -- to film a documentary about the event.

"Many of these musicians are in the Western Swing Hall of Fame. A lot of them are dying out. We want to do this documentary because western swing is a musical genre that is uniquely American as jazz and could just as readily be called 'jazz with a cowboy hat'," Troyer said.

Troyer and Buckley own Ad Hoc Media Partners, a production company with a broad range of services including filming documentaries, independent films and promotional videos, composing movie scores and writing jingles, and scriptwriting and ghostwriting.

Buckley said they filmed at Sideman Jamboree during its 30th year (2014), which was initially going to be the final year because of the aging attendees. However they "got so excited about it" they decided they want to keep the event going each year. "We are making a story about western swing music, and where it started with Bob Wills, Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies, the Light Crust Doughboys and Spade Cooley," she said.

"We are hoping that the documentary will help light some fires for people," Troyer said.

Along with Hall, performing this year during its biggest days (Feb. 5-7) were such western swing greats as Billy Easton and Ray Harrison.

When Hall first started the event, it was just a few folks in a small room with an attached kitchen at the Alaskan RV Park on Music Road in Bowie. In that same room 32 years later, on Friday, Feb. 5, Hall talked about the event and her career.

Hall said she recorded her first single record in Nashville in 1972. That record is on the wall in that very room, along with other memorabilia from her career and others who have come to the event. There are photos of Hazel Vinn, with whom Judy has sung for 60 years. The pair sang together again on Feb. 5, as did Vinn by herself, telling the crowd, "If I hit a high note flat, just clap and go on!"

"Every musician gets a turn on the bandstand, whatever they want to do, songs, cowboy poetry, what ever they like," Hall said.

She talked about some of the other antiques in the room, a mandolin from Turkey, a coat from Russia, and other items from many years overseas on USO tours with various artists.

I performed on a TV show with Tennessee Ernie Ford, and sang overseas with Hank Thompson and Sara Vaughan. I've toured with Ernest Tubb, Merle Haggard and Waylon Jennings," she said.

Eventually, the room was just too small for the event and they decided to build another onto it. Willcox residents Dale Biddle and Keith Gallagher helped with that project, she said.

One of the best parts of the event is dinner time. Each night at 5 p.m., everyone is invited to a potluck dinner and they share food and stories, Hall said, "and then as long as there is music, we'll stay and play all night."

"Over the years we've had Joe Venuti (related to American jazz violin musician Joe Venuti), Sons of the Pioneers' bass player Mark Abbott, Asleep at the Wheel's Jason Roberts, Bud Isaacs, members of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys band and many others," she said.

Regulars include musician Kelly Rowden of Willcox's Renegades and Whiskey Row, who has not only come to play for many years since his first time in 1988, but also organized and set up equipment for many of his more recent years, said his wife, Terry. On Friday he played backup for everyone that came to sing or jam and on Saturday night the Renegades were featured. Also on stage with Kelly is drummer Lisa Hermenitt Wenzl, a Willcox High School graduate of 1986, Terry said.

Hall said that when she was young, she and her husband John were homesteaders in Alaska. “We had no electricity and no way to know when I would be called upon to perform with someone. I had a suitcase packed and a helicopter pad outside. The helicopter would show up and I’d say goodbye and go. The helicopter would take me to Anchorage and then I’d get on a plane to wherever I was going. I’d send a postcard back home to John, so he would know where I am.”

“The suitcase contained scarves of all colors, so I could make any shirt look like a blouse that went with any of the stage clothes,” she added.

Later, she and John would spend half the year in Alaska and half in Arizona, driving their RV for 10 days, “stopping to eat and play music – and at all of the hot springs,” she grinned.

Hall said, “Last year I lost my husband of 63 years, and both of my children before that, but God isn’t ready for me yet and the Devil doesn’t want me.”

However, she is not alone. “God has sent me a Cowboy from Snowflake, John Neely, and he is wonderful.”

Her most exciting memories were doing the Jerry Lewis Telethon and the Danny Thomas Show.

“I love doing things for children. I also enjoyed performing in the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. Life has been good. I have lots of friends. I’m blessed.”

And for those not blessed enough to make it to the Sideman Jamboree, the documentary may help you gain some understanding of the annual event and western swing music.

Troyer explained, “Our documentary film is about the musical genre of western swing, its origins and influences, both past and present, as told through the eyes of the Sideman Jamboree music festival, where the sparks still fly, the old meet the new and the love and devotion still shine on.”

Check out the event on Facebook, “Sideman Jamboree.”

Tags

Documentary

Musician

Christine Buckley

Eric Troyer

Music

Singing

Western Swing

Lisa Hermenitt Wenzl

Kelly Rowden