

Musicians jam at community center

Owner of the former schoolhouse offers musical event for free

By Geoff Parks

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When Tarno Coleman gets tired of a week's worth of talking to his four goats, three horses, two cats and one dog, the nearby Guthrie Park Community Center is where he eagerly runs on Friday nights, toting his accordion.

One-time Bostonian and three-year washboard bass player Paul Bourgeois of Salem heads out Highway 223 to the Guthrie Park center when he wants to hear "real country music being played."

The free, anyone-is-welcome, every-Friday-night Acoustic Music Jam Sessions held at the center are unique to the valley and a continuing tradition since 1988, a year after owner/manager Sally Clark bought the old schoolhouse building.

Clark runs the Friday night events "out of the goodness of her heart," Bourgeois said. "I'm on the board (of the nonprofit center) and I've seen all the books and she doesn't take a penny in salary. If it wasn't for Sally, this place wouldn't be here."

It very nearly wasn't.

In fall 1987, the acre of land surrounding the center and the timeworn building — built in 1912 as a gymnasium to replace pioneer David Guthrie's schoolhouse play shed and itself used as a school through 1960 — was put on the auction block by Polk County.

Clark, who has lived near the center for 25 years and who adamantly wanted to maintain the building as a place for the local community to gather, socialize and play music, won the auction with a bid of \$11,000.

She un-boarded the windows, painted the inside and outside of the building and had three beam-and-truss structures added to shore up bulging walls.

Seven donated church pews serve as seating, a donated piano is for accompaniment and a new furnace was installed a few years ago.

Other than that, a small, wood-floored, open room covered by a hip-roofed, barn-like ceiling is what greets music-jam hopefuls when they gather from 7 to 11 p.m. every Friday.

The Grand Ole Opry it's not.

But Clark, 51, a mandolin and guitar player, former member of the Luckiamute River Band and current member of a band called Cooper Hollow, emphasized that the Friday events "are not performances."

"People can come here to socialize or to play or just to listen, but music is the glue that keeps them coming back," she said. "The feedback I get is that people come here because they say they can 'be themselves' when they play. I like it the most when the older, established players really get into it as they're playing."

She said "jammers" come from all around the valley — Philomath, Sheridan, McMinnville, Corvallis, Salem and elsewhere — to gather and play together.

Coleman called the Guthrie Park Community Center a "folksy place" to jam with other musicians.

"I've never had music lessons and I'm not very good, but it's surprising how much I've picked up by playing in a jam session with real musicians like my wife (Joan, who also plays accordion)," he said. "A person has a real opportunity to improve. If you've ever heard a fiddle tune played on an accordion, you know what I mean."

Bourgeois — the former public relations manager of the Massachusetts Country Music Association, who built his own washboard bass from plans he gleaned off a Web site — said he is "amazed" at the different types of people he meets at the center.

"There are ranchers, school teachers, college professors, farmers, all manner of people that come to play," he said. "And they play genuine country music, anything from old-time music like 'Cattle Call' to a (local) song I'd never heard before called 'The Valsetz Lament.'"

Clark said she rents the center for weddings and other events and holds country square dances on the second Saturday of January, March, May, September and November.

However, she said it would always be the Friday acoustic jam sessions and another long-running series, the Third Saturday Gospel Jam Sessions, that are the heart and soul of the center.

Pressed to explain why she continues to offer the free (or low-cost, in the case of the dances) events on a regular basis for 10 to 15 musicians and 30 to 50 audience members on a good night, she just shrugs.

"I feel the need to serve in some way, and this is my service to the members of the community."

Geoff Parks is a freelance writer. He may be contacted at gaparks@comcast.net.

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If you go



Acoustic Music Jam Sessions are held at the Guthrie Park Community Center from 7 to 11 p.m. Fridays and are open to the public to play or just watch and socialize. All levels of musicianship are welcome. No charge. Free Gospel Jam Sessions are held the third Saturday of each month from 7 to 10 p.m. Music is limited to gospel music only, and all ages are welcome.

Country Square Dances are held the second Saturday of January, March, May, September and November. All dances are taught, a live band plays and all ages are welcome. Admission is \$5 for adults; children 12 and younger are free; and families may attend for \$15.

Information: Sally Clark of the Guthrie Park Community Center, 4320 Kings Valley Highway (Highway 223), Dallas; (503) 623-0874 or e-mail salclark@hotmail.com

Web site: <http://www.guthriepark.org/>