

Front Porch Kickin'

Tracing the origins of the Front Porch Jubilee, DeSoto County's annual hill country bash



STEVEN PITTMAN

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DUWAYNE BURNSIDE

If you were to travel back to Hernando in the 1950s, you'd probably hear a thing or two about Von Theater. Citizens would flock to the movie and music venue, passing under its grand, glowing marquee that illuminated the Mississippi night sky. Inside popcorn was purchased, and people piled into the seats to watch the most celebrated films of the day. "It used to be a very popular place back in the forties and fifties when you didn't have a lot of other entertainment going on," says Steven Pittman, president of Friends of the Von Theatre. "So that was where people would go." On Saturday nights, country music jamborees were held, and on rare occasions young up-and-comers like Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley would grace the stage, giving the quaint little Mississippi town a taste of what the entire world would soon see.

But pay a visit to the Von Theater today, and chances are you won't even recognize the place. The marquee is gone, and where the voice of Elvis Presley once filled the room, The Bangles' "Manic Monday" now purrs through the radio speakers. Where popcorn, candy and other concessions were once served, flip flops now rest on a swiveling

sales stand. The seats and stage, remnants of another era, lay tucked away beneath a floor of plywood, and on that floor are scented candles, frames, hammers, wine glasses, fake pumpkins with the heads of cats, and insulated coffee containers that read "I can't adult today." For after all it has been, the Von Theater now functions as a retail area that plays host to several gift shops and apartments. "People pass by all the time and don't even know what it was," Pittman says.

But with a music festival that brings the town back to its roots, he and several others are looking to change that. Sept. 30 will mark Hernando's fourth annual Front Porch Jubilee, which raises funds for the restoration of the Von Theater, and features primarily hill country blues music. Set at the town's historic Clifton Gin, this year's musical lineup will include Rev. Peyton's Big Damn Band, Kenny Brown, Duwayne Burnside, and R.L. Boyce. "This year really just has a feel good line-up," says Rob Long, co-founder of Friends of the Von Theatre. "You've got a lot of balladeers, and you've got some great blues music. Kenny Brown is kind of the torch bearer for Hill Country Blues, and Earl Peyton's band is just get up and shout kind of music."

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This year's festival will also see changes to those in the past, as the former two-day format has been done away with, and the ticket price has been lowered to \$5. And, according to Pittman, this year will bring in other types of music in addition to hill country blues. “We’re getting back to making gospel a big part of the day,” he says. “So in the morning, beginning at 10, it’ll be different gospel acts. You may have a 15-person, all-male choir, or you may have a solo performer. So that’ll be a lot of fun.” After the gospel music, an open mic session will be held from noon to 2 p.m., giving those not on the list an opportunity to perform. The featured acts will then begin at 2 p.m., and will close around 11 p.m.

The Front Porch Jubilee has grown more successful each year, and has been made a part of Bridging the Blues, a series of concerts that is spread throughout the South. In 2015, Jerry Lee Lewis was honored, and the iconic singer came to accept the award. With people like Lewis attending and the festival's continuously increasing success, Pittman hopes to have the funds to restore Von Theater raised within the next five years. But for him and Long, the festival is about more than just money. It's about reintroducing a musical genre that conveys a powerful sense of emotion. “It’s a spiritual feeling,” Long says. “The blues and gospel are spiritual genres. And the blues is very cathartic. It helps you feel better when you listen to the blues. You can kind of commensurate, it’s telling a story.”

Which, according to Long, is part of the point. “That’s what we’re doing with the blues tradition,” he says. “We’re telling stories, but it’s real and authentic, and I think people are searching for authenticity. And when you have that raw, up-tempo hill country blues from the cotton fields of Mississippi, then you really know you struck on something that’s authentic.”

It’s an authenticity that Long thinks will shine through in the festival, and one that he knows lays hidden in the seats of Von Theater, tucked away beneath the candles, frames and flip flops. “When you preserve something old and you introduce it,” he says. “Every old thing becomes new again and people hear it for the first time.”

