

Gayville Hall provides venue for area musicians

Editor's note: Portions of this story, written by Travis Gulbrandson, first appeared in the Yankton Press & Dakotan on March 11, 2010.

GAYVILLE — When Doug Sharples went to a building auction in 1997, he had no idea he would be the one who came away with the building.

He and his wife Judi were friends of the previous owner, who had passed away, and Sharples said he went to the auction strictly as a spectator.

“They were trying to get the first bid, and I just (rose my hand) to bid on it, just to get it going,” he said. “Then there was no other bid. That opening bid was below what they would find acceptable, so they told me what their minimal would be, and it was a darn good price.”

When he returned home, Judi asked him, “Who bought the building?”

“Guess what?” he told her. “I did.”

The Sharples owned the building for four years before they ever thought to hold a concert there. This was because it was the home of a grocery store, which closed in 2001.

During this time, the couple were making a film about Omaha resident and jazz musician Preston Love, who died in 2004 and spent his career playing with artists like Count Basie and Ray Charles. Love also performed in smaller venues across the Midwest.

“I thought to represent that ... I wanted to get him playing in the hinterlands of South Dakota, so I got him a gig playing at the National Music Museum, and then he said, ‘I want to play someplace at night,’” Doug Sharples said.

The store had been cleared out by that time and the acoustics of the building were good, so a stage was built, and the concert was held Wednesday, May 16, 2001. The show still remains one of the Sharples’ favorites.

“It was quite an event,” Judi Sharples said. “He was wonderful.”

The show attracted approximately 100 people, and the Sharples decided to hold another, this time with John and Susan McNeill — whom they met as students at the University of South Dakota — and Nick Schwebach and Owen DeJong.

Doug Sharples said the next two shows both attracted 83 people, and he wasn’t sure if it would be feasible to continue.

Then John McNeill suggested hosting a celebration of Hank Williams.

“We had to turn away 50 people,” Sharples said. “We had more than 200 people.”

“It was tremendous,” Judi Sharples added. “The show

was so great.”

The Hank Williams show was so successful that it’s been performed again in different versions through the years. It will be performed again this season on March 27.

Doug Sharples said they even called it, “The show that saved Gayville Hall.”

Since that time, the venue has hosted “celebrations” of other artists, including Johnny Cash and fiddler Chet Olsen, which was broadcast by South Dakota Public Television.

These performances have been among Gayville Hall’s most popular.

“The most we ever had in here was the first time we did the Johnny Cash show. We had 270 paid people in here. It was just crazy,” Doug Sharples said.

On average, most performances attract more than 100 people, although some attract many more than that.

“Our last show of the season had 230 people in here,” he said. “They were even sitting in the aisle and into the gallery.”

Sharples said the concerts have attracted “a lot of regulars” over the years, some of whom travel long distances to attend.

“We have customers that come as far as 150 miles on a fairly regular basis,” he said. “Not every show, but they’ll pick out four or five shows a year and they’ll come that distance.”

Apart from music, art is also a very important part of Gayville Hall. Its walls are lined with posters from past shows, vintage sheet music, signage and albums.

There’s also a gallery that features a revolving schedule of art exhibitions.

Some works of art have even been donated by attendees of the concerts.

“At the Johnny Cash show, there was a person in the audience (April Dawboy),” Judi Sharples said. “We didn’t even know her. And she came to us and said, ‘I was inspired by that concert.’”

Since that time, Dawboy has painted a number of portraits of musicians, many of which are on display in the gallery.

“This is like an old-time music hall,” Judi Sharples said. “That’s what we aspired to be. ... It’s turned out that there is a market, and people do want to come and have a wholesome and enlightening evening. They sit and listen to the music and interact with the musicians, rather than in a bar environment where people are visiting and the band is just in the background.”

She added that neither she nor her husband anticipated such an enduring response.

“When you think about it, it’s pretty unbelievable that

we’re still here, that something like this would take off and grow,” she said. “We have some really wonderful patrons. It’s exciting. They respond, and we respond to them.”

Gayville Hall has featured a great variety of music over the years. Robin and Linda Williams and Their Fine Group, of Prairie Home Companion and Grand Ole Opry fame, are perhaps the most widely known musicians who have played the hall, which they have done twice. The South Dakota Jazz Quintet, with C.J. Kocher on saxes and Dave Olson on piano, has played four times. Other favorites have included the off-Broadway and former Red Clay Rambler composer, piano player, and singer, Mike Craver, who has played twice; the great guitar player Harvey Reid; the North Dakota troubadour Chuck Suchy; old-time country music stars Bob and Sheila Everhart; Nashville singer-songwriter Laurie McClain; folk musicians Curtis and Loretta, Bob Bovee and Gail Heil; alternative country and folk artist Joe West; singer-songwriter Gordy Pratt; and many others.

A very popular show in 2010 was the appearance of the Rapid City-based Beatles tribute band, Abbey Road. Of course, Gayville Hall’s “Fab Four” (John & Susan McNeill, Owen DeJong, and Nick Schwebach) continue to be the main attraction at Gayville Hall.

Any crowd of over about 160 persons appears to be a full house at Gayville Hall, and more than ten times during the first five seasons Gayville Hall had 200 or more patrons. The biggest crowd was about 270 persons at the first presentation of “A Celebration of Johnny Cash” on October 15, 2003, when an overflow crowd (at a discounted ticket price for the poor seats) sat in the gallery and at the farthest ends of the hall, where there was hardly a glimpse of the stage. The second largest crowd, about 250, occurred the second time that Gayville Hall presented “A Celebration of Chester Olsen,” in April of 2005. That concert, which celebrated the late South Dakota singer, fiddler and instrument maker and the old-time fiddle music he loved, was taped and broadcast in an edited form as a TV special on South Dakota Public Television twice in 2005.

New, softer seats and extensive renovations featuring additional restrooms were added to the Hall in 2009. This change reduced the number of seats in the Hall, but made it more comfortable for patrons.

For more information about Gayville Hall, visit www.gayvillehall.com.

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serious about getting my undergraduate degree, and when I was working on my graduate degree, I was playing four nights a week and studying at the same time. It was grueling.”

In the early 1970s, he decided to bring The Chateaux Band back together as a three piece power group along with two other members, Gary Knutson on guitar and Doug Test on drums. The band eventually traveled to Memphis, TN and recorded the song “Reference Man” on the Sun Records label. It received national airplay on stations in Oklahoma City, OK, Little Rock, AK, and most Top 40 stations throughout the Midwest.

With success as recording artists, The Chateaux Band enjoyed numerous sold out concerts and dance engagements.

Letting go

Ellison never abandoned his studies for he knew the time might come to eventually step away from his role as a rock and roll bandleader.

“I retired when I was 30,” he said. “I always had this vision of Christmas Day in a funky motel, waiting to play the next gig. I didn’t see myself fitting that scenario so I pretty much told myself if I make it big by the time I’m 30, great. And if not, I have a great career to fall back on.”

Ellison’s life has more or less played out just as he had scripted it. During the last few years of his band’s existence, several outstanding members joined his group before moving on to play with national acts.

Mark Craney and Mike Miller of Sioux Falls played in the group and eventually left to perform with Santana, Deep Purple, and Geno Vinelli.

The final members of the group joining Ellison in the mid-70s were Rusty Gill



In the mid-1960s, Ellison changed the name of The Shattoes to The Chateaux Band. The band’s look changed along with the times, adopting the clothing and hairstyles of that era. Pictured are Ellison, Doug Test, and Gary Knutson. Ellison and Knutson both hailed from Vermillion; Test, from Mitchell, was a classmate of Ellison’s at USD.

(Photo courtesy of Bob Ellison)

and Mike Yondrich from Sioux City, IA.

After 14 years of musical performances, with two degrees from USD, including a master’s in medieval history, he disbanded his rock and roll group in 1976 and was making plans to travel to Connecticut to work on his doctorate.

“I had my graduation pictures developed at the Gibson’s store in Vermillion, which eventually became Pamida, and the manager there, who I knew somewhat, asked me what I was going to do next,” he said.

When Ellison told him about his plans to continue his studies, the manager asked him to consider working for Gibson’s.

Company officials in Omaha, NE eventually interviewed him. “I went to work a couple weeks later, and I never looked back.”

Ellison retired at age 54 after serving as Pamida’s

vice president of real estate and new store development. He now devotes a few hours each day to his work as a commercial real estate developer in Omaha.

He was thrilled when he received the news in 2011 that his musical groups were to be honored by the South Dakota Rock & Roll Music Association.

“It shows some thanks, I guess, for all of the hard work that you’ve put in, and it’s a recognition of being one of the better bands during that era,” Ellison said.

Interviewed before the ceremony, he said he planned to dust off his guitar and perform five songs at the ceremony. “It will be a fun evening. The group that I put together are all either former musicians or sons or brothers of former musicians who are no longer with me,” Ellison said.

GAYVILLE HALL

-the home of old time music-

of Country ree"

Hella from Gayville Hall Gayville, SD

The Poker Alice Band with C.J. Kocher

The McNeills and Dan Kilbride at "The Hay Country Jamboree"

Josh Rieck and Jami Lynn at "The Hay Country Jamboree"

Gayville Hall is a live, old-time music venue started in 2001 which features many genres of music, including American popular song, country, bluegrass, folk, and jazz. It is located 14 miles west of Vermillion in Gayville. Established in an 1879 mercantile building that had been a general store or grocery for over 120 years, the hall features a small, raised stage surrounded on three sides by 160 chairs. The acoustics of the room are wonderful, and audiences and musicians love the hall’s intimacy and simple setting. Most also love the fact that the hall is an alcohol-and-smoke-free venue. Patrons come for our great two-hour music shows and our family-friendly, old-time atmosphere. An art gallery and displays of old sheet music, antiques and historical artifacts, quilts, and Americana dress up the hall. Come on over and see a show!

Don’t miss the finale of our 13th Season!

SAT. DEC. 7, 8PM: “A POKER ALICE CHRISTMAS”

The swinging Poker Alice Band and great country-western singer Brenda George will perform classic tunes from their eclectic repertoires and seasonal favorites.

OUR 14TH SEASON starts in late March and includes a concert by the fabulous guitarist and singer-songwriter Gordy Pratt on April 19. Call us at 605-267-2859 to receive our informative newsletter, *The Gayville Hall Gazette*. www.gayvillehall.com

Through Time...

The William F. Ludwig II Collection is donated to the NMM in 2001, and includes historic drums dating from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, collected by father and son, William F. Ludwig Sr. and William F. Ludwig II, over the course of approximately 90 years.

The 2005 gift of the D’Angelico, D’Aquisto, Gudelsky Workshop is the focus of a major exhibition, “Great American Guitars” (by D’Angelico, D’Aquisto, Fender, Gibson, Martin, and Stromberg).