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Former city official still making band-lineup decisions for Plum



Ellen Buchanan, Blue Plum music coordinator, did the booking of acts from Montana, where she lives. (Doug Janz / Johnson City Press)

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Credit for the success of the Blue Plum Music & Arts Festival lies with many people, but there may be no one more deserving than Ellen Buchanan.

The former Johnson Citian is the driving force behind the music lineup for the festival. She has booked the bands all six years of the event, including big names like Goose Creek Symphony, Nickel Creek, Acoustic Syndicate, Laura Love, Sam Bush, The Tony Rice Unit and, this year, Yonder Mountain String Band and Tim O'Brien.

"She has a love of the music and a knowledge of the music that is unbelievable. I've never seen anything like it," said Kim Schneider, one of the longtime festival volunteers and organizers. "And she has the connections.

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“It’s the music that draws people here, and the arts that keeps them fascinated. If it weren’t for the music, we wouldn’t get the crowds we get.”

Buchanan continues to book the music despite the fact she now lives and works in Montana. But last year and this year, she returned to Johnson City to see and hear all the racket she hath wrought. Her informal title with Blue Plum is music coordinator; her laminated festival pass reads “Princess of Productions.”

Working up the Blue Plum music from Montana hasn’t been a problem, she said.

“It’s really been easy working through e-mail,” she said. “And it’s fun bringing in the bands from out West. This year we’re raiding Colorado and California. Getting Yonder Mountain String Band was a score, in my opinion.”

Buchanan ended up in Johnson City after living all over the country, including Maine, New York, California and Florida. She worked in architecture and development, designing subdivisions, among other things, before ending up as special projects manager for the city of Johnson City. It was during that time she landed the job of Blue Plum music coordinator, even though she had no experience in that line of work.

“When they first started talking about doing this, I was a big live music fan, so I volunteered to do it,” she said. “The first year it was just local bands, but the second year the Friends of Olde Downtowne got together on the music.

“I just got on the Internet to see who the booking agents were, and then I started contacting them. Now I’ve gotten to know a lot of them, and some are calling me.”

Early on, there wasn’t enough money for a big lineup or multiple headliners, but she signed Goose Creek and got the festival’s first big crowd

“The next year Nickel Creek played and that year the crowd was huge,” Buchanan said. “People were literally hanging off the trees. It was kind of scary. But it was great. We had Acoustic Syndicate on Friday and Nickel Creek on Saturday.

“In 2003 we had Sam Bush. Before he came on, there was a really bad storm when Larry Keel played, and that scared people off. But when Sam walked onstage, the sun came out. It was amazing. And he played a fantastic show.”

The music coordination as well as the festival organization has been boosted by the addition of a festival coordinator, Christine Murdock, herself a big music fan. Buchanan has lined up the big acts and she and Murdock have combined to flesh out the rest of the lineup with regional and national artists.

Keeping the quality of the music at a high level is a challenge, she said, because of the burgeoning popularity of Americana music. There are so many festivals and so much competition for the best acts that booking must be done far in advance. Not knowing what her budget would be until late in the process has been one of the hurdles, although this year the major sponsorship was on board early.

In Montana, Buchanan serves as director of the Missoula Redevelopment Agency, which coordinates the redeveloping of downtown, including renovation of trails, parks, streets, sidewalks and bridges. But as long as Blue Plum wants her to book the music, she's willing.

"I love live music. That's what keeps me sane," she added with a smile.

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