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Turning the city Blue - With the city's annual festival comes food, crafts and — most importantly — MUSIC



Crowds fill downtown early in the day Saturday. (Dave Boyd / Johnson City Press)

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The music is what draws them.

The annual Blue Plum Festival in downtown Johnson City offers many attractions to area residents looking for a relaxing way to spend the day and tens of thousands took advantage of the opportunities available Saturday.

A whole range of delectable food from nearly every culture around the globe, merchants peddling all manner of trinkets and pictures and clothing, lots of people traversing the streets of the section of downtown cordoned off for the event, an ice cream making contest, a myriad of activities for kids and plenty of beverages are what a person can find at this annual tradition.

However, ask anyone on the street what they are there for and the answer is almost always the music, specifically bluegrass.

“Yes, for the music, really, that’s where we’re headed now,” said Kent Gardner, who was waiting near the food court with his 2-year-old granddaughter sitting on his shoulders.

Gardner said he attends quite a few of the area’s summer festivals, but he and his family usually attend the Blue Plum.

“This is not our first time here,” he said. “We’ve been here two or three times.”

Why? The music, he said.

One band offered a slow country song, giving an opportunity to slow dance with a loved one or finally ask a date to dance.

As the day continued and more and more fans arrived, the area around the stage became crowded.

Some danced, while others focused intently on the stage as band after band performed,


Barry Lawson said he was there “to hear some good bluegrass music.”

Lawson plays music himself and has been in several bands. He plays the banjo now.


“I try to practice about once a day,” he said. “I love it.”

He said he likes playing the banjo and wanted to hear some of the local talent because the instrument makes some interesting sounds.

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"I just really like the banjo, and it's really fun to play when you learn certain things," he said.

Lawson and his friends planned to hear all the bands Saturday.

"I'll be down here until it ends tonight," he said.

The music is the big draw, but Lawson said he enjoyed looking at what all the vendors had to offer.

"We've been by and seen a few things but haven't bought anything yet," he said. "Seen some things that looked pretty cool."

The festival offered a chance for him to see old friends, too.

"I think it's pretty cool," he said of the whole idea of the festival. "I think it's all right that they have it once a year, glad it's not raining today. I'm glad to see folks I know. Sometimes at the Blue Plum Festival you see people you haven't see in a long time."

A staple at the festival is the annual ice cream making contest called The Freeze.

The Hillbilly Parrothead Club won The Freeze for the second year in a row with the flavor Lava. They won a year's supply of Pet ice cream, which they donated to the Ronald McDonald House.

The festival also is a hit with the vendors who line the streets.

Sam Todaro, Elizabethton, had set up a gemstone tree shop on Main Street.

"I've been with this show since the first year and I love the fact that it's growing," he said. "Every year it gets better. This is a fun show to do. A nice crowd of people."

Todaro's products are small wire trees placed on rocks. Gemstones and coins are used for the leaves. They range in price from \$6 for the small ones to \$30 for the larger ones.

"I have sold pieces upwards of \$1,000," he said.

Those are made with gold wire and sapphire stones. He had none of those on display Saturday.

Todaro said the music helps draw in business because people enjoy it so much.

It even provides entertainment for him.

“Oh I love the music,” he said. “In fact, I’m going to be here tonight until the music quits.”

Because he has been a vendor at the festival since the beginning, Todaro said he has seen it mature and grow into an expected event for the region.

“It’s turning into a really good festival,” he said. “I hope it continues. I think it will.”

Near the end of the day, when the mood was most relaxed, festival-goer Adam Vollrath summed up what was probably the crowd’s feeling about Blue Plum.

“Well, I think this is, like, the best thing that happens every year, and if we could do it twice a year that would be nice,” he said. “And I like drinking on the street. Drinking in a bar is good but there’s just something about drinking on the street.”

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