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Down Home Celebration - Remembering 30 years of good music at humble downtown club



Doc Watson (Contributed / Bob Benson)

By Doug Janz
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More than three decades ago, several local musicians and music lovers were grumbling over the fact there was no true “listening room” in Johnson City devoted wholly to live music. And the idea came up — “Let’s open our own place.”

Thus was the genesis of Down Home, a music club and gathering place unique to the area. It was 30 years ago this weekend when the place opened for business under the direction of Joe “Tank” Leach and Ed Snodderly. The debut band was The Red Clay Ramblers.

Through times lean and fat, the wood-lined club has brought in high-quality music, specializing in bluegrass, Americana and blues, along with all the genre offshoots. The place is an icon among Johnson City clubs, a landmark almost everyone knows.

Singer/songwriter legends like Townes Van Zandt, Lyle Lovett, Billy Joe Shavers, Gamble Rogers, Robert Earl Keen, John Hartford, Jesse Winchester and Guy Clark have taken the Down Home stage. So have blues legends Willie Dixon and John Lee Hooker, country superstars like Allison Kraus and, in their early form, The Dixie Chicks, and legendary pickers and singers like Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley, Jerry Douglas, Sam Bush, Doc Watson, New Grass Revival and Del McCoury.

And although he was never a featured artist, present-day country superstar Kenny Chesney, an ETSU graduate, played at Down Home’s Wednesday open hoots.

“We try a little bit of everything, although we’ve specialized in singer/songwriters,” current co-owner Danny Julian said. “And also that’s what we can usually afford.

“We’ve had very few duds in the bunch — a lot of great artists and great people.”

The club hosts The Gourds tonight, while Snodderly & Guests will play a special show Saturday. The anniversary celebration began Thursday with one of Los Angeles’ hottest alt-country acts, I See Hawks in L.A.

“To me, this is the perfect weekend celebration of 30 years, to have two acts who’ve not played here before,” co-owner Snodderly said. “We’ve had a lot of great artists over the years, and we’re bringing in more new acts. That’s one way to let in some fresh air. And a lot of the old greats may come back this year and play; they’ve said they want to.

“The Gourds just did ‘Austin City Limits.’ They’ve been compared to an

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eclectic The Band. They're supposed to be really entertaining and crazy — sort of a 30-years-later Red Clay Ramblers.”

Thirty years later. Indeed. Down Home's longevity is remarkable; the average lifespan of a club is probably less than five years. Even more impressive is the fact that the place hasn't altered its original format. The focus remains on the music; there are no video games, TV, pool tables, karaoke or cover bands. Down Home has remained simple, unfettered.

While the club has survived, it hasn't always made money.

“We felt lucky to make it through the first year,” Snodderly said. “We took it one weekend at a time.”

To stay alive, many similar venues have reverted to nonprofit status; it's a bit of an inside joke that Down Home has done that unofficially already.

“The secret is we all haven't put our livelihood on it,” Snodderly said. “We've got our other jobs. If we'd had to rely on this for a living, we'd have had to do something different a long time ago.”

“Thirty years is exceptional because not many people would be willing to do what we've done, just for the love of it,” said Phil Leonard, a part-owner for nearly 20 years who sold his share in 2001 but maintains a recording studio upstairs. “The people who've run it have done it basically without pay.

“But Danny and Ed and I have all looked at each other and said ‘What else would we do?’ Otherwise, we wouldn't have had a Down Home to go to.”

There's live music every Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and open hoot on Wednesdays. Ticket prices average about \$16. There is basically no advertising budget, thus the club relies on word of mouth, a flyer, a Web site and a good reputation among artists.

The room itself is one reason. Everything is wood and the acoustics are excellent. The custom sound system, made by Doc Watson sound man Cliff Miller, and the size of the room (about 150 people) ensures an intimate experience. High-decibel rock'n'roll acts like Webb Wilder or Brian and the Nightmares sound good, just like acoustic artists Roy Book Binder or Norman and Nancy Blake.

The staff generally conveys an interesting mix of hippie and hillbilly humor, with a little bit of punk attitude, and the audience is appropriately eclectic. Down Home is also kid-friendly and smoke-free; how many clubs can make all these claims?

“There’s an ambience created here,” Julian said. “It’s friendly. People don’t feel threatened. Women can come in here alone and feel safe. It’s not a meat-market atmosphere.”

Another big plus is the staff’s willingness to bring in new acts not familiar to the area, and give them several bookings in order to develop an audience. Both sides view it as an investment.

There have been many magic nights when the place was packed and every single person seemed completely plugged into the show. But Down Home nearly went under 25 years ago. Leonard and his wife, Pat, now deceased, stepped in to keep the place going in 1981 after financial problems threatened, and Julian and Snodderly soon each bought a one-third share from Leonard.

The club had good runs and developed a core audience who appreciated music for music’s sake. But as the early audiences grow older and go out less, there have also been hard times, especially since 9/11 and the Iraq War, Snodderly said.

“Things slipped a little bit,” he said. “Shows that used to sell out didn’t anymore. Business has come back a little bit since then, but it’s hard.”

The influx of Americana music festivals and renovated historic performing theaters, plus a thriving original music scene in Asheville, N.C., has meant more competition.

“It used to be we were the only place around where you could see these acts,” Julian said, “but now there are a lot of other places to see the same people.”

What of the club’s future? Could Down Home live another 30 years? Julian and Snodderly are taking it “one weekend at a time,” but they hope with more new artists and better outreach through Internet mailing lists that the audience will continue to support the club. The neighborhood around Down Home is also undergoing improvements, making patrons more comfortable at night.

“I’m excited about this year,” Snodderly said. “We’re hoping it can be festive. We’re bringing in a lot of people who haven’t been here, or haven’t been here in a long time.”

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