

Musically inclined

Mansfield's Main Street Theatre hosts Texas music concerts

10/06/2000

By Steve Freeman / Special Contributor to Arlington Morning News

MANSFIELD - Step inside Main Street Theatre some Saturday nights and you'll think you've died and gone to Willie Nelson's Fourth of July picnic.

Situated amidst Fire Station No. 1, the Mansfield Historical Society and barber Roy's Hair Shop, Main Street Theatre is one of the newest venues in the Dallas/Fort Worth area to offer acoustic, back-to-basics folk and country tunes.

"This is a well-kept secret," says Jim Jeter of Arlington, a frequent audience member for the Main Street Texas Unplugged series. "The music is acoustic and good artistically, and everybody here is family."

One recent Saturday night, the sounds wafting from the theater's came from a couple of guitar-strumming solo balladeers named Bodie Powell and Brian Houser. The entertaining pair, from Fort Worth and Denton, respectively, traded off the spotlight to perform their self-penned songs while filling the gaps with down-home narration and wisecracks.

Mr. Powell followed a personalized introduction to his own song, "Texas Has It All," by leaning over and asking a bass guitar player the song's key. At his turn at the microphone, Mr. Houser proffered his own silly preface to his song, saying "I'd like to play a song off my first CD ... which was also my last CD."

But each performer's real talent - and the reason the crowd was there - was the songs he sang. The lyrics were part angst and part longing while expressing real-life feelings and experiences for real people.

"Starry skies, fireflies, trail drives, family ties, 'Nam vets we don't forget, Texas has it all," sang Mr. Powell. "Homesteads, thoroughbreds, presidents, common sense, huntin' dogs, horned frogs, Texas has it all."

This variety of music is called Texas - or Americana - music. To the uninitiated, the music may sound like the same old country strains, but to those in the know, it's a breed apart.

Americana music took roots in the early 1990s, music experts say, when the slick Nashville sounds and high-falutin' lyrics seemed too commercialized for common tastes. This cousin to mainstream country seeks to remain true to Western swing, folk and rockabilly styles and often falls under other labels like neo-traditional, singer/songwriter and alternative country.

The music's standard-bearers include Robert Earl Keen, John Hiatt, Don Edwards, Lucinda Williams, Larry Joe Taylor and Joe Ely. Local radio stations KNON-FM (89.3), KTFW-FM (92.1), KHYI-FM (95.3) and KBEC-AM (1390) occasionally give the genre airplay.

"Texas music has more soul than what's coming out of Nashville," says Tommy Alverson of Arlington, a local favorite on Main Street's stage. His song, "Purty Boys," makes light of how record companies market country artists by focusing on good looks and trends instead of good, authentic music.

"Texas music people are not great to look at, and some don't sing all that well, but it's the music, the words themselves, that draws people," says Karen Mills, an organizer for the Mansfield shows.

Texas music artists, many of whom keep their day jobs, write their own simple songs that tell colorful stories of love, disappointment, hopes, fears, adventure and memories. The words mention well-known towns, landmarks and businesses, and spark a connection with listeners.

Mr. Powell understands the importance of the lyrics to fans.

"Texas is full of characters, and if you just open your eyes, you got something to write about," says Mr. Powell, who used to perform with Johnny Cash. "Everybody is writing songs with more heart to them."

New fan Dione Wiley never dreamed she would frequent her favorite artists' Texas music concerts, especially as a transplant from the Midwest.

"When I came here, I didn't like country music but we love Texas music," says Mrs. Wiley, who journeys to Mansfield from her Mesquite home. "It's real; it's people's stories, and the words are just as important as the music."

Many of the onlookers tapped their toes next to their coolers of beer - the city is dry - then applauded enthusiastically for the Mansfield music show.

A neighborly crowd, one man received some innocent ribbing when he asked permission, out loud, to store his homeless bottles of brew in another man's ice chest a few rows back. As he handed over his plastic grocery bag for all the audience to see, someone on stage pointed out, "That's an Aggie cooler."

The music, interspersed with moments of levity, continued for hours. Playing before a huge Texas flag spanning the stage, the appreciative performers nodded their cowboy hats after each number, bantered some more, then offered up more songs.

Main Street Theatre started offering a few Texas music concerts last year. The venue, one of the few nonprofit spots for Texas music in the Arlington-D/FW area, offers

entertainment away from crowded, smoke-filled night spots that typically feature such acts.

"The thing about Mansfield is it's more of a concert, more low key, where people come to listen to the music," says Mr. Powell.

Last season's handful of concerts were a hit, so organizers kicked off the theater's new season by adding shows, typically scheduling two concerts during months when the theater's footlights are off. Concerts are scheduled for October, November, January, February, April and May. Main Street also offers a Southwestern- or Cajun-style dinner before each performance.

Mrs. Mills books acts from all parts of Texas, including Austin, Denton, Tyler, Houston, Fort Worth, San Marcos and Dallas. She and her husband, James, both Texas music fans for years, noticed the success of similar shows at other venues. They knew the Royal Theater in Archer City, where the 1971 movie *The Last Picture Show* was filmed, raised money for renovations by offering Texas music performances and dinner theaters.

"We thought we'd try as well," Mrs. Mills says.

Proceeds pay first for the theater's bills; the remainder is earmarked for the theater's eventual renovation.