

From the Branches to the Beaches: 'A Cornucopia of Music' in Ocean County

By Victoria Lassonde

Music is magical in its ability to delight, enrich and unify; to move listeners emotionally and physically; and to convey lessons about history and human nature.

It takes all kinds to make up Ocean County's live music scene, its genres ranging from old-timey to contemporary to progressive. From the pickin' purveyors of traditional Pinelands music, to the agency-groomed bar bands that fuel the Jersey Shore nightclub scene (and many coastal towns' economies), to the local original songwriters doing their own thing, the scene is rich and multilayered – a veritable tiramisu of talent.

Traditional Pinelands music might be said to have bluegrass roots and an Appalachian feel, with instrumentation including banjo, fiddle, mandolin, standup bass and acoustic guitar, according to Jim Murphy of Jim Murphy and the Pine Barons. Murphy, a 2007 inductee into the Old Time Country Music Hall of Fame, is recognized for his work to preserve and propagate old time music through performance and education.

"There's no absolute, clear definition of it," he said, partly because it changes and evolves as it's passed from one generation to the next.

Jim Murphy and his Pine Barons, now in their 42nd season of performance, frequently play at outdoor festivals, community events and at Albert Music Hall in Waretown, where six or seven different bands play every Saturday night, all year long.

It's a tradition that dates back 30-plus years to the Albert brothers, Joe and George, who hosted weekly jam sessions at their cabin in the woods, or the Home Place, as it came to be known. The Home Place grew into Albert Music Hall, operated and managed by the Pinelands Cultural Society, an entirely volunteer-run organization.

But "Pinelands" music is not actually indigenous to the area, offered Linda Salmons, coordinator of music events at Tuckerton Seaport and guitarist with the band Home Cookin'. Rather, it was borrowed from the popular styles of the 1920s and 30s. The people of the Pines took the music they heard on the radio at that time and adapted it to suit the instruments that were available to them, she explained.



Photo Credit: Jaclyn Stewart

Happy participants in the montly pickin on the porch at Tucker's Island Lighthouse & the Tuckerton Seaport.

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They built their own musical tradition on the foundations of “Americana” laid by artists like Jimmy Rogers, the Carter Family and Hank Williams, and by the nationally syndicated Saturday night National Barn Dance radio program, as Murphy pointed out, which gave birth to a culture that spread rapidly across the country.

“The Pineconers were playing Tin Pan Alley,” Salmons said.

Educating listeners about the genre’s history and influences is “such an integral part” of the Pinelands music tradition, Murphy said, because when all the facts and stories align, they form a context. In his opinion, listening to the music without understanding where it comes from is “like looking at a picture without a frame.”

“The framework is what makes the message viable and worth listening to,” he said. In fact, he added, storytelling is “the most important aspect of our performance.”

Murphy recalls the jam sessions at the Albert brothers’ old hunting outbuilding, which had no electricity, only propane gas. The spirit of those jams is alive today in Albert Music Hall’s Pickin’ Shed, which is open to anyone who wants to sit and learn their instrument or improve existing skills in a warm and welcoming environment.

Salmons has created a similar environment at the Seaport, which hosts a traditional music jam on the second Sunday of each month. Pickin’ on the Porch, as it’s called, preserves the tradition of musicians gathering to play together, to teach each other and to share a pot of beans. Traditional tunes are learned aurally and memorized, not from sheet music, Salmons explained, which is why it often happens that two people recognize the same tune by two different names, for example, the song “Back Up and Push” is also called “Rubber Dolly.”

Humans have always felt the need to tell stories and to express themselves outwardly through music, Murphy mused. Like a secret network, traditional musicians still meet in places like gas stations or hardware stores after business hours, Salmons said.

“Any night of the month, I could point you to a jam within 50 miles,” she said.

The Seaport’s Folklife Center Director Jaclyn Stewart feels music is “just as important to our heritage as anything else” and should be celebrated as an art form.

As a student of the mountain dulcimer, Stewart has been on the receiving end of the welcome and encouragement from the more experienced Pickin’ on the Porch players. The porch attracts musicians of all ages, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, she added.

New original music, much like the Pinelands’ musical tradition, is a natural reflection of the local culture, as pointed out by Jake D’Arcangelo, lead vocalist with the free-spirited, reggae-roots-rock-fusion jam band The Following, based on Long Beach Island.



Photo Credit: Ryan Morrill

Ryan Bott (L) and Jake D’Arcangelo (R) of “the Following” at Ricks American Café in Barnegat Light.

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It's important to understand how the influx of tourists in the summertime is not only vital to the shore's economy but also fortifies the musical art form, he said.

"The value of art is how it illuminates our connectedness," he said. In the height of the summer season, in a venue filled with people who seem to have very little in common, music reveals shared feelings and experiences.

Subtle but intense, the underground music scene is a thriving tribute to the people who reside all year long in a seasonal resort area. The locals are a rather rugged breed, in D'Arcangelo's estimation – strong-willed individuals who endure long lonely winters on a largely deserted island. Over time, that experience becomes part of their emotional makeup and music is a way to release it. Bands like The Following, Sack Morris and Figured Out provide a platform for self-expression that locals identify with, he said.

The flavor of the original music scene can also be found at the Green Planet Coffee Co. in Point Pleasant Beach (the sister store to Green Planet Coffee Co. in Manasquan), where owners Steve Pazienza and Susan Flaherty foster the growth of original music and host live music on Friday, Saturday and Monday nights and Sunday afternoons. When Green Planet opened in 2005, there was a real need among singer-songwriters for a venue other than a bar to perform their music, Flaherty said.

Having answered the call, the coffee shop has become a destination for music lovers looking for the entertainment without the cover charge and for original musicians looking to play and network with other musicians – a cause advanced by studio musician Pat Karwan, who started Green Planet's very successful Monday night Open Mic. It also serves as a place to refine technique and build confidence; a launching pad for younger musicians, or for older musicians who are getting back into it after some time.

The shop draws "a nice range of people and sounds," Flaherty said.

Though it's hard to categorize the local original sound, she described it as a melodic blend of folk and light rock, driven mostly by vocal and guitar work, accompanied perhaps by some hand drums or other percussion.

Under the Covers

Much like the Pinelands players of 80 years ago, contemporary cover bands are still borrowing the songs they hear on the radio to entertain the summer throngs at bars and nightclubs, making them as much a part of Ocean County's heritage as sandcastles and surfboards.

Cover bands have been doing what they do for more than 50 years, according to Al Geary, president of Shore Bets management agency. Their main objective is to promote a party atmosphere by playing popular tunes that get everyone singing and dancing along, which is why just about any band that plays covers (whether exclusively or in addition to its original material) will have in its repertoire certain timeless and surefire hits like "Build Me Up Buttercup," "Brown-Eyed Girl" and "Sweet Caroline."

"People love hearing a live band play one of their favorite songs," Geary said.

In every shore town, a cover band that can do a near-perfect version of a familiar song makes people smile – be it Sinatra, The Beatles, The Stones, U2, Pearl Jam, Rage Against the Machine or Kings of Leon. A good cover band can be the highlight of a person's vacation, he said.

"Live music has real power. It resonates through people. It's often the soundtrack of their lives. (It makes) indelible memories."

The biggest change he has noticed in recent years is a dearth of rock and pop music. It seems as though bands no longer get the huge record company launches of yesteryear. In addition, the contemporary radio stations no longer have huge listenerships or the corresponding power base. It would seem that launching a band (exclusively) through radio is ancient history. The Internet, of course, is critical. As is the corresponding social networking.

“Cover bands, more and more, are finding their fodder in the (music of the) ’60s through ’90s, but mostly ’70s and ’80s,” he explained. Notable cover acts like The Nerds, Shorty Long, 11:11, Lifespeed, Brian Kirk and the Jirks and Love Seed Mama Jump cull from those decades the most memorable hits, because bar crowds want recognizable songs that fuel singing and dancing.

Rob Monte has been a fixture in the Jersey Shore nightclub scene for almost 30 years, fronting and managing original and cover bands. He started out on the original circuit, he said, but transitioned to the cover band world when he discovered that he could make a living at it, at which point he had to ask himself, “How long am I going to chase the rock star dream?” For more than 10 years he was the lead singer of the band Dog Voices; now he fronts Monte and the All-Stars and puts his wisdom of experience to good use in the talent management agency he opened last year, Monte Entertainment, based in Paterson.

Back when the live music scene was at its healthiest, in the late ’80s and early ’90s, he said, less emphasis was placed on the distinction between “original” and “cover” bands, he said. Plenty of bands thrived doing both, playing cover gigs simply to support and supplement their original music careers and to build their fan base – Bruce Springsteen, Bon Jovi, Southside Johnny and Twisted Sister all did that, he said.

Some still do, like Hyperactive and The Benjamins, but they are the exception rather than the rule.

These days, perhaps because of the economic downturn or stricter drunk driving laws or other reasons altogether, the nightclub scene seems to have fallen into a bit of a slump. There are fewer gigs to go around, which creates competitive tension among today’s up-and-coming bands. To combat the dog-eat-dog mentality, Monte tries to instill in his bands a sense of unity: the idea that they should support and encourage each other because a healthy live music scene benefits all working musicians.

The level of talent among New Jersey musical performers is still phenomenal, Monte said, and the energy they put off is the energy they get back from the fans. “If the genuine love to do it isn’t there, you can’t fake it,” he said. “Audiences can tell when it’s being mailed in.”

Full Circle

Around the same time that Geary and Monte were starting out in the music industry, Valerie Vaughn, the Tuckerton-based musician, songwriter, educator and founder of Eyre Haven Folk Club, was getting acquainted with Ocean County and discovering “an absolute cornucopia of music.”

“It was the early ’80s, and the area was undeveloped and untainted,” she recalled. “I met the most wonderful people who were excited about music and stories.”

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While teaching music at Tuckerton Elementary School, she recalled, “a three-year-old boy asked me the question that changed everything: ‘Sing me a story?’” She created “Talespinners,” a traveling school assembly program made up of her collection of educational story-songs.

“To me, music is history and history is in the music, she said. “It’s my passion, so it was natural for me to use music to teach the culture and history of our area.”

Meanwhile, she was performing in bars and clubs, meeting like-minded musicians and cultivating her songwriting craft.

In 27 years, Vaughn has come to understand the parallels between the Pine Barrens and Appalachia. Historically, both regions were considered useless for farming and building, and therefore they remained sparsely populated, serving as good hiding places for outlaws, outcasts or refugees – people who had “only their imaginations to entertain them” and for whom storytelling and music were the main focus.

As soon as she arrived in the Southern Ocean County area, she said, she could sense the locals’ respect for the old ways.

“The music scene here, where the Pines meet the shore, is beyond unique,” Vaughn said. In her opinion, Ocean County residents and visitors have, or develop quickly, a real appreciation for original music based on local history and folklore.

Most of all, she is grateful to live in an area that nurtures creativity: “There’s no other place like it to be a performer or musician in New Jersey.”



Photo supplied by The Sandpaper

Local singer/songwriter Valerie Vaughn and young assistants

