Open-mic celebrates first anniversary (originally published 2-05-09)

By Aaron Tebrinke,

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Its nearly 7 p.m. on Monday Jan. 12, at Dr. Ugs on the square in Virginia, and a figure is taking multiple trips—darting in and out of the front door to bring items inside quietly. He sets up microphone stands, a vintage portable public address system with worn edges, a guitar, and finally a tip jar with the ease that repetition brings. Tonight is Monday Open-Mic night. It's two nights shy of a full year of participation from regulars that have become Dr. Ugs open-mic community.

January 14 of 2008 marked the first open-mic event with only a hand full of curious onlookers. Since then the scene has blossomed into a constant flow of proud participants of all ages and artistic styles. Owner Susan Young said, “It has evolved to some nights where we have more music than we have time.“ What was a hopeful experiment between owners Susan Young and Mike Carlson, and open-mic host Jeff Newman, has turned into a creative tradition.

Jeff plays a few of his favorite Ryan Adams, Tom Waits and Bob Dylan songs he skillfully figured out during the day before his drive from Jacksonville. He has an intergenerational assortment of songs that he can recall at the drop of a hat. Its been about ten minutes and everyone has built enough courage to take the stage in front of their peers and strangers when Jeff announces the first name on the sign-up sheet.

The theatrical Amanda and Lexi De Sollar, ages twenty and fourteen, respectivley, grace the stage with classic Broadway standards as the first act of the night. They discovered Dr. Ugs and the amazing food after looking for a place to eat after a visit to the veterinary office down the street. As luck would have it, they came on a Monday night open-mic.

Jeff invited them to come on stage to sing. Ever since, they have loaded up all of the friends they can fit in a car and make the trip from Beardstown every other Monday to feature their talent. Susan recalls one open-mic Lexi sang a song from Phantom of the Opera that had a male part and when Lexi came to the part she expected a quiet break before her next verse. To her surprise her day was made when a gentleman took the male lead, and a new connection was made in the community.

Erin Mc Carthy and Chris Holmes drove from Macomb to perform. Both 23 and students at Western Illinois University, they played their original tune ‘Hear Us’ and Jeff smiles as he reflects.

“Its amazing! I remember a year and a half ago when she first started playn’ this song, it was terrible! It was seriously bad, and now she’s come so far.” Erin agreed. “It’s the truth though,” laughing at herself, “The other night I was listening to old recordings of it and it was horrible! But now I come here, see the folks and, ya know, come to the open-mic to practice. We interact with groups of friends who all want to get each other to form confidence and learn how to get onstage. That’s where it starts and once you get use to being onstage after a while you get brave enough to put your own words down and write your own songs. You got to start out somewhere and open-mics like this is where it happens. It’s a good thing.”

The country influences of Taylor Swift can be heard in the voice of Virginia High School student Natalie Ackerman. At sixteen she has learned to play by ear and practices with her brother David. They do their own part to promote the open-mic by making their own posters and putting them up around school. “The audience has honest opinions. I develop my sound that way. If they clap, its good.”

Kat Cox has been a friend of Jeff’s before he transplanted the operation from Jacksonville’s Due Gatti where he was the open-mic host there. “It’s a great opportunity in town like this that doesn’t have a lot to offer high school aged kids. They can come and hang out, show their talents, and practice being in front of people. You find the people you get to meet at an open-mic have so much to share, so much in common. Its neat to see how people change and progress and all the talent that a small town has to offer. I’m here to support Jeff and the kids that go up there on stage. I even bring my daughter up here and she has got up there and sang once. I love it now. I’m hooked.”

“I think they’re all really good. There are so many that are budding that do an awesome job.“ Jeff says when he is asked about the standouts.

Susan added, ”Building self-confidence is what it its all about, getting up there and doing it. We want this to be a place where you can connect with others, because people don’t do that much anymore.“

Wanting Dr. Ugs to appear true to its drug store heritage, Mike handmade his own lights and kept the original tin ceiling during an extensive restoration. It makes a great looking venue for the exchange of creative thoughts. “It is a great walking community,” Susan said, “and people need something to walk to.“

Star-Gazette photo by Aaron Tebrinke

Open-Mic participants at Dr.Ugs clockwise from left: Jeff Newman, Natalie Ackerman, Kat Cox, Erin Mc Carthy and Chris Holmes .