Jazz on the Alley celebrates three years



FOR THE JOURNAL

Opening night for Seneca's Jazz on the Alley in April brought out people of all ages to hear live music. The city started Jazz on the Alley the first Thursday in August 2010 and celebrated its three-year anniversary last week.

BY LADONNA BEEKER
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Riley Johnson took a chance on a small downtown city street in the heart of Seneca and imagined fun, free, musical nights.

"I was sitting right here (in my office in Seneca City Hall) in the middle of June (2010) and just came off of a huge Seneca Fest weekend," said Johnson, who serves as the city's events coordinator. "Some of the comments I heard were, 'Wow, we have to wait another year before we have something like this again?' I thought, 'Why can't we do something like this every week?'"

And the wheels started turning. With a blessing from Mayor Dan Alexander and City Administrator Greg Dietterick, Johnson started seeking sponsorships from area businesses and encouraged downtown restaurants and storeowners to remain open for what was going to be the city's weekly Jazz on the Alley.

"It's music that's relaxing ... something you can do with the whole family," Johnson said.

But there was one question: Who was going to play the jazz music?

"(Johnson) approached me saying he has a vision, and he's a salesman, so he was putting on his sales pitch pretty heavily," said Chris Cartledge, of Soul Fetch band. "He said he can't pay me much at all."

While pay is nice for musicians, Cartledge said his band likes to play together, so they agreed and found themselves on Ram Cat Alley every Thursday starting in August 2010.

"(Johnson) paid me in handshakes and smiles," Cartledge said, plus a little from a tip jar.

Now in its third year, Cartledge said Soul Fetch plays at Jazz on the Alley about once a month to a crowd of about 200 people. Starting out, the jazz band saw about 30 people each week for the free outdoor jazz concert.

"It was difficult at first, but it's really turning into something special," Cartledge said. "The crowds are receptive and listen and seem to respect and appreciate the music."

While several area musicians like to have their time on Ram Cat Alley for jazz night, many downtown businesses are also seeing the fruits of their labor.

"We give businesses a three-day weekend," Johnson said. "That was my goal: to increase the business downtown. Before you could park anywhere downtown (on Thursdays). Now, you have to park at Norton-Thompson Park."

JPeters owner Jon Angell and The Spot on the Alley owner Stuart Pohl said they see a 25 percent increase in business on Thursdays when Jazz on the Alley is in season.

"Every week, we have reservations for outside tables for more than 50 people," Pohl said, adding he offers a $3 martini special for Jazz on the Alley participants. "We are generally sold out every week outside unless it's 110 degrees out."

Angell said the city's efforts have highlighted Ram Cat Alley and given it much-needed exposure.

"The more people, the more chances," Angell said. "It never hurts to have exposure. Anything they can do to bring people downtown surely helps businesses like mine."

Green Springs retail storeowner Alison Springs keeps her store open until 9 p.m. for Jazz on the Alley.

"It brings in new smiling faces and regular favorites," Springs said. "... It's a fun time. It's a real sense of community. You can sit in a lawn chair, at a restaurant, grab a bite to eat and listen to great music."

For residents at The Residence at Park Place, Jazz on the Alley is a delightful time away from their normal routines.

"I have been twice, and I enjoyed it both times," said Bob Van Ness, a Park Place resident.

Park Place resident Margaret Callahan meets her grandson and granddaughter at Jazz on the Alley to make it a family outing.

"We love jazz," she said.

Jazz on the Alley continues each Thursday from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. through October. For a schedule of musicians, visit www.seneca.sc.us and click on Events.

WANT TO GO?

Jazz on the Alley is today at 6:30 p.m. with music by Leisha J. The event is free to the public.

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