

Education and Visual Arts Joined Live Music at Blackdome Music Festival

By Jonathan Ment
WINDHAM - What began as an idea formed over breakfast in a local coffee shop and debuted as a Saturday night concert at the Windham Civic Center in 2017 expanded this year to span multiple events and concerts.

Kicking off the two-day event was a talk by Robert Cue Gerhards. A Windham-based musician, woodworker and luthier, or maker of stringed instruments, the casual conversation covered qualities and availability of different species of wood, and the parts of stringed instruments to which they are typically fashioned.

The Stradavari family had access to old-growth timber that's simply not available to today's artists, Gerhards explained. But with such a modest amount of wood needed to create an instrument, material can come from unlikely sources.

Gerhards is currently working on a series of acoustic guitars using black walnut for part of the body, and he had a section shaped with steam and clamps to show off on Saturday.

The wood was harvested not from a local forest, at least not recently ... but from an old house in the Hudson Valley. It will be combined with different species for several guitars to compare the cumulative effect in single-digit percentages on tonal quality, Gerhards explained.

He's also experimenting with a sort of com-

posite material composed of compressed paper and resins, which will be light and durable, while bringing unique character to the instruments it becomes a part of.

Blackdome Music Festival concluded Sunday morning with a free humor-filled educational concert with visuals for curious kids of all ages.

During the unique presentation author and composer Michael Hearst offered a look at the curious constructions, unusual creatures and extraordinary people who have captured his imagination - and that of so many others.

There were humorous songs about the blue-footed booby (for whom the 'booby trap' is named according to Hearst); and the enormous Chinese giant salamander; a tune about trailblazing female tennis player Billie Jean King, sung and played to a prerecorded percussion track consisting of what was surely bouncing tennis balls; and an ode to the enormous Propane-blazing steam-punk octopus "El Pulpo Mecanico" and its creator Duane Flatmo.

Hearst compliments his tales of the curious unusual and extraordinary - also subjects of his three books and various albums, with music played on a handful of uncommon instruments.

Featured Sunday was a clavola, a sort of cross between a bagpipe and a melodica that was on the market in the late 1990s; a stylophone - a handheld synthesizer trig-

gered with an attached stylus; and a theremin, an electronic instrument commonly billed as the only one not touched by the person playing it (the thereminist).

This was possibly the first theremin to grace the stage of the Windham Civic Center.

Following his set, Hearst invited the audience to come on stage and try the unusual instruments for themselves.

In between these educational bookends, two concerts captivated audiences.

The Windham Local hosted Gerhards and local teen Emily Smith, who shared a bill previously at the May 2017 Raise the Roof Benefit Concert at the Civic Center. Philadelphia transplant and more established singer-songwriter James Hearne, now of Catskill, rounded out the bill though by some accounts Smith stole the show with her powerful renditions of rock classics.

Saturday night's concert opened with Catskill-based The Hudson Dusters. Spirited singer songwriters, Jon B. Woodin and Foggy Otis offered a feel-good launch to this full night of music. Some songs seemed familiar, others simply inviting. And if you'd never heard a ukulele played through a distortion pedal, this was your chance. The duo plays regular gigs at The New York Restaurant in Catskill and will be featured Sept. 21 at Club Helsinki in Hudson.

Sam Moss, a Boston-based singer-songwriter and skillful guitarist delivered a beautiful set. The Boston Globe has called him a 'finger-picking guitar virtuoso,' and I would have to agree. Speaking with festival organizer Yako Stavrolakes Sunday I found myself agreeing that one perfect way to listen Moss would be simply to sit back, close your eyes and enjoy.

Capping off the night with an endearing personality and at times almost pop album-oriented rock sound from Keelan Donovan from Maine via Nashville. Donovan put his own spin on covers including an almost unrecognizable rendition of "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," and a handful of originals including his recently released "Like a

Radio" which lyrically sounds like a hit to me.

An exhibit of paintings and photographs by 15 local artists was displayed within the civic center in collaboration with the Windham Arts Alliance's Summer Show. A reception at Windham Fine Arts Gallery followed the Saturday night concert.

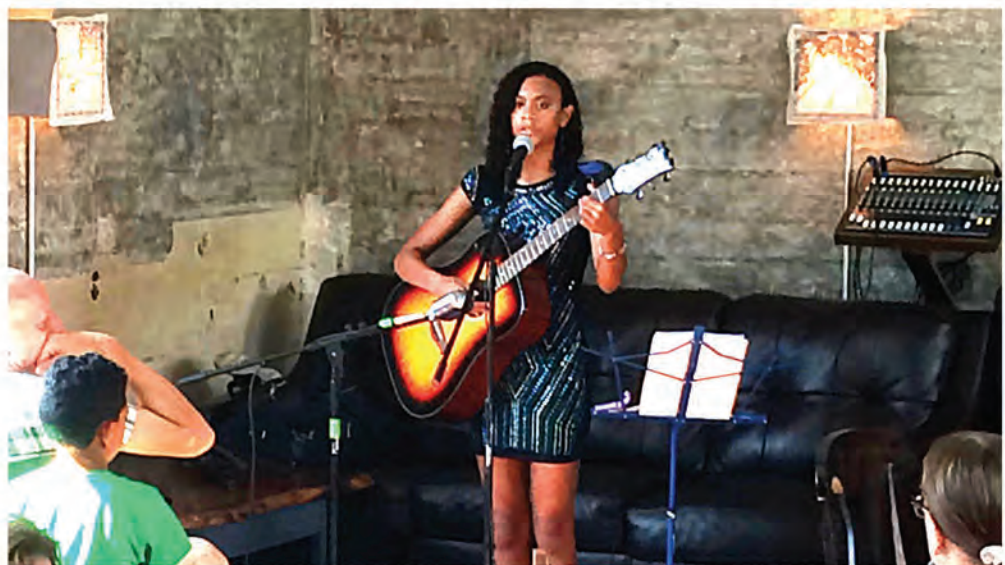
Stavrolakes grew up in a musical family and credits early exposure to music, specifically the cello, with leading him to artist management and festival work, including the Aspen Music Festival.

"This only happened because someone else put an instrument in front of me and introduced that to me. A child may choose to like it or not, but it's like planting a seed. ... You might see something grow," he

says.

"There is really so much talent out there and we have been very selective throughout the process," said Stavrolakes, whose family has spent time in the region since the 1940s. "I think as we continue to do this, people will ... come to understand the artistry and level of talent to expect. ... We look forward to continuing to identify exciting artists that we can bring to the Windham stage and are beginning work on Blackdome 2019," he added.

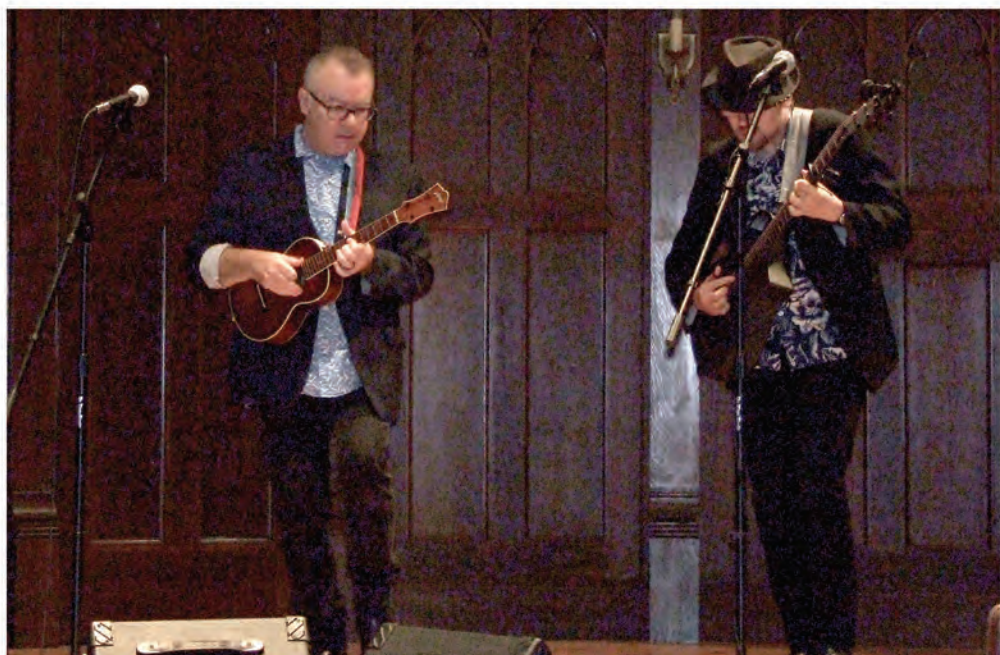
This year's festival was made possible in part by the support from the Windham Foundation, the Community of Windham Foundation and numerous local businesses and individuals.



Emily Smith performs at The Windham Local during the Blackdome Music Festival local artists concert last Saturday. Photo Provided.



Michael Hearst, playing the theremin and wearing his illuminated humpback anglerfish hat for the song named for the creature pictured on the screen beside him. Photo by Jonathan Ment.



Keelan Donovan (top left), Sam Moss (top right) and The Hudson Dusters (bottom) on the Windham Civic Centre stage Saturday night at the Blackdome Music Festival. Photo by Jonathan Ment.



Robert Cue Gerhards holds up a section of reclaimed black walnut he'll be building into an acoustic guitar at last Saturday's Blackdome Educates Series. Photo by Jonathan Ment.

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