

Valley News Dispatch

United Celebration is a labor of love for organizers, performers

By Rex Rutkoski
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Sometimes you *can* get what you want *and* what you need, says Mike Oncea.

That's especially true, adds the drummer in Jumpin' Jack Flash, who has the Charlie Watts role in the Rolling Stones tribute band, if that something is "fun."

Once again, there should be plenty of that, and much of it's free, at the annual Labor United Celebration in Northmoreland Park, Sunday and Monday, says Dan Carpenter, program coordinator for Westmoreland County Parks.

Jumpin' Jack Flash, making its festival debut Sunday, promises to be a significant catalyst for that good time, Carpenter says. "I expect them to be a major hit. They are fired up to play at Northmoreland, and we are just as excited to host them," he says.

"The festival type of show is what we like best, and we're very excited about playing the Labor United Celebration," Oncea says. "Re-creating that feel of fun and raw energy is what we try to do with every performance, and we encourage the audience to be part of it."

Inclusion has been a hallmark of the festival, Carpenter says. "Our mission is to offer a giant Labor Day picnic for local residents that is close to home, low cost and family oriented," he says. "We invite people to bring the family, enjoy the holiday, and you won't have to spend a lot of money. That's what we are about."

Admission, parking and the musical performances and other entertainment, including the Tom Thumb Circus with four shows daily, are free. Children can ride carnival attractions, ponies, a kiddie train and visit a petting zoo with a \$3 all-day pass. "You can't beat that," Carpenter says.

Last year, he says, organizers learned that children's music "goes over very big" at the festival. "We had tons of kids dancing onstage with the kid's band, Milkshake," he says.

This year, the nationally touring The Cat's Pajamas will aim to entertain children. The group bills itself as making "Very Cool Music for Kids," a "musical comedy twist to high-octane kid rock." It involves a world of stories, dance, puppets and props. The group's percussionist, Jim Hamilton, has toured with Grammy winning artists Boyz II Men.

Singer-songwriter Tom Breiding, who prides himself in delivering original songs

worthy of the folk, rock and country traditions with a perspective on the significance of past events that shaped today's America, returns to the festival.

"I hope people enjoy the music, but I also hope they will be reminded of the great debt we owe to the steelworkers, coal miners and laborers who came before us, those who made sacrifices so that we can enjoy the America we know today," he says.

He will have his full electric band, but also will present a short solo acoustic labor heritage set to honor the occasion.

Breiding's album, "The Unbroken Circle: Songs of the West Virginia Coalfields," spent 15 weeks in the Top 75 of the national Americana charts, receiving radio airplay throughout the United States.

He is a commonwealth speaker with the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, and his program, "Steeltown, Coalfields and The Unbroken Circle," is free through the council to all nonprofit organizations in Pennsylvania.

The Council is to feature his performance on the "Humanities on the Road" television series to air across the state on public television next year.

Breiding says he loves playing festivals, "where there is a lot going on around me." For the past four years, he has entertained between sets in the national showcase of Jamboree in the Hills near Wheeling, W.Va., a weekend series of concerts that draws thousands.

The Vogues have been making that connection for many years at the Labor United Celebration. "They're great entertainers and a festival tradition," Carpenter says.

Providing another kind of entertainment is the yearly giant flea market, arts and crafts and bingo.

Four new vendors sign on this year, including Vandergrift No. 2 Fire Department with a menu of pasta fagioli, Italian beef, fried ravioli and fried mozzarella sticks.

The theme of organized labor always is the festival's unifying factor, he adds. "Labor groups working together to put on a good event for the community -- that's why we call it 'Labor United,'" Carpenter says.

JUMPIN' JACK FLASH

It's difficult to argue with five decades of good music.

That's why the music of the Rolling Stones continues to resonate with audiences of a wide variety of ages, suggest the members of Jumpin' Jack Flash, the Pittsburgh-based Rolling Stones tribute band.

"When we play, we see the Baby Boomers dancing side by side with the Gen-Xers and Yers," says drummer Mike Oncea, who is the Charlie Watts of the group. "In short, rock 'n' roll would not exist today without the contributions of the Stones, both musically and socially."

To better appreciate that, he adds, it is only necessary to research who inspired the Stones. "Listen to their early, early material to see where they came from. Listen to their whole repertoire to see where they have gone," he says.

Jumpin' Jack Flash formed in 2003 as a side project for the musicians. "We expected it to last only a year or two," Oncea recalls. Eight years later, they continue to be embraced with enthusiasm, playing throughout the region.

Although Jumpin' Jack Flash emphasizes sounding like the Stones, more than looking like them, the Lawrenceville resident says "Our 'Keith Richards' (Mike Scheer of Ross) does such a convincing job that the band has recently paid closer attention to dressing the part and providing the ambiance of a real Stones concert."

Garrett Andrae of Bethel Park portrays Mick Jagger; John Macho of Ross is guitarist Ron Wood; Tony DeLuca of Shaler (bass and vocals) plays Bill Wyman; and Ray Mihalko is Ian Stewart, the Stones' original keyboardist.

"Our biggest compliments are from those that say how well we do in capturing the authenticity of the songs. When you see Jumpin' Jack Flash, the music is first," Oncea says.

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