

FEATURED

Musical odyssey: Kuwait to Minnesota to Casey

Pulitzer winner, songwriter David Hanners gathers bluegrass combo for Casey Popcorn Festival

- By Mark Bennett Tribune-Star
- Aug 31, 2016

The sounds flowing from the instruments and voices will be bluegrass and folk, but the term “world music” might apply, too, for the Quarry Branch Boys’ performances this weekend in Clark County, Ill.

The foursome will play Saturday at Moonshine Store at 11:15 a.m. CDT and the Casey Popcorn Festival at 2 p.m.

For singer, songwriter, guitarist and Casey native David Hanners, the concerts mark the finish of a short Midwestern tour and a homecoming. Hanners won the 1989 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism while working for the Dallas Morning News. The town of Casey named a street in his honor.

Hanners and bassist Karl Burke performed in August around Minnesota’s Twin Cities region, where Burke now lives and Hanners used to live and work during his days at the St. Paul Pioneer-Press newspaper. Since summer 2014, Hanners and his wife, Sharon, have lived in Kuwait, where she is a teacher. David and Sharon returned in June to the U.S. for a visit, but will return to Kuwait after the Clark County shows.

Hanners penciled in the Popcorn Festival gig more than a year ago, and assembled a bluegrass band, the Quarry Branch Boys by long-distance correspondence. Hanners needed gifted musicians able to rehearse via emailed digital recordings of his original songs, and landed two aces — eastern-Illinois banjoist Richard Hippler and mandolin virtuoso Solly Burton from across the Indiana border in Sullivan County. Together, they'll roll through Hanners' tunes and some classic such as "Six Days on the Road" and "Wabash Cannonball." On the latter song, Hanners may use lesser-known lyrics once written by Terre Haute novelist Theodore Dreiser.

"I'm excited," Hanners said by telephone Tuesday from Minnesota. "I'm not the type who has a bucket list, but if I did, putting together a bluegrass band and playing my hometown would be two of them."

Hanners and Burke have been friends for 22 years, since Burke served as host of the popular Twin Cities Open Mic Night. Through mutual friends, Hanners connected with Hippler, a veteran musician whose banjo work once drew high praise from bluegrass legend Bill Monroe at the Bean Blossom Music Festival in southern Indiana. Burton came highly recommended as a two-time Walnut Valley National Mandolin Championship winner who's played on NPR's "From the Top" and numerous recordings, including "The Wabash" album with Brent McPike.

Hanners coordinated their collaboration by email from Kuwait, sending each mp3 version of his songs to individually rehearse.

"My philosophy has always been to get people who are good on their instruments and play tastefully," Hanners said, "and to let them do their thing."

Hanners hopes their shows can be recorded before he returns to Kuwait, a small Middle Eastern country at the tip of the Persian Gulf. He and Sharon moved there two years ago when she took a teaching job and when the St. Paul newspaper offered buyouts to staff members. Hanners doesn't perform much in Kuwait, an oil-laden emirate where concerts are more controlled.

"I tell all my musician friends here [in the U.S.] to celebrate their freedom for getting gigs wherever and whenever they want," Hanners said.

He will keep writing and playing, though. "Who knows," Hanners added, "maybe I'll be able to form a bluegrass band in Kuwait."

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