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America's Music Hall

The Birchmere: America's and Alexandria's legendary music hall

Drive by the sign for the Birchmere club on Mt. Vernon Avenue on any given night and you may think you're either in Los Angeles, Nashville or Las Vegas. Marquee names highlighting the main stage inside defy a small-town venue.

By **MARY CLAIRE KENDALL**
Alexandria Times Features Writer

The Birchmere is big, really big, in the circle of major entertainment. To drop a few names of those who have performed there, try Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Emmylou Harris, Gordon Lightfoot, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Donovan, Lyle Lovett, Patty Lovelace, Vonda Shepard, and Joan Baez.

The list is long, because the Birchmere has been around for a very long time.

The Birchmere makes artists feel at home in a way few clubs do. It's not just this sit-down concert club's intimate, living room-like setting. In it, an audience of 750 on sell-out nights quietly listens in rapt attention, having dined courtesy of well-known restaurateur Ralph Capobianco.

Nor is it the million-dollar sound system, enabling artists to showcase brilliantly, in the words of club promoter Michael Jaworek, their musical "dexterity and ability."

Nor is it the greenroom, showers, or washers and dryers that all help artists feel at home.

It's all that and more. Gary Oelze is Birchmere founder and co-operating manager along with Capobianco. Said Oelze, "The secret is that once the artists walk in the door, they are treated with every respect they demand or request or even don't."

It's a respect, and love, that artists return in kind. Just consider the words of country singing star Mary Chapin Carpenter, who started at the Birchmere as a support act when she lived in Alexandria.



Alexandria Times Staff Photos/Bob Lennox
Birchmere owners Ralph Capobianco
and Gary Oelze at the Birchmere.

“The Birchmere is one of the finest places in the world to perform and listen to music,” she said in an interview, “and to have it in my backyard was beyond fantasy. It has always booked wonderful acts... and the audience is just great. They’re respectful of the performers and you get the feeling they have a deep love of music. Every time I come back, it feels like home.”

Testimonials

Or consider a sample of testimonials that artists inscribed on their posters, arrayed on the walls outside the concert hall at the Birchmere:

From Vince Gill: “To you beautiful cats at the swinging Birchmere. I’ll be back soon.”

Lyle Lovett wrote: “To Gary and the Birchmere with a million thanks for the great job you do.”



Alexandria Times Staff Photos/Bob Lennox
Legendary folksinger Joan Baez recently
performed at the Birchmere.

Donovan: “To the Birchmere. Like a family.”

Rodney Crowell: “You know how I love it. Keep it rolling.”

Julian Lennon: “To the Birchmere. A pleasure.”

Alison Krauss: “To the Birchmere. Thanks for all the great times.”

John Hiatt: “To the Birchmere. Great place to make music.”

It just happened

Oelze said hardly anything about the Birchmere was planned.

He bought and opened this “neighborhood bar” in 1966

If you’re going ...

The Birchmere
3701 Mount Vernon Avenue
Alexandria
703) 549-7500.

www.birchmere.com

and retained the original name

Birchmere, he said, which is an old Maine inn. But the image of New England foliage soon gave way to bluegrass when Oelze started playing the down-home music of his native Kentucky.

When customers’ talk rose above the music, Oelze recounted, he put signs on tables requesting “quiet please.” Some customers even had to be asked to leave, which only resulted in contented patrons bringing their friends.

Oelze soon rewarded patrons’ loyalty, when in the early 70s he lured The Seldom Scene away from Bethesda’s Red Fox on Thursdays. After that, Oelze said, “we sold out for 20 years.”

The pairing was perfect. As their name implies, with the artists juggling day jobs The Seldom Scene could not absorb a hectic concert schedule. “So,” Oelze said, “they had a home base and the Birchmere had a home band.”

And he said the band was “so well-known and respected in the business that any time any musician was in town, they would come by the Birchmere to hear them – Linda Ronstadt or John Prine or any traveling musician — and play with them.”

Emmylou Harris returned the favor at her recent Birchmere concert. Telling the audience, “it’s great to be back up here” for the closing act, she brought up original Seldom Scene members John Starling (guitar and vocals) and Mike Auldridge (dobro), whom, she noted, were integral to her early musical development.

The Seldom Scene was integral, as well, to Birchmere’s development as “America’s legendary music hall.”

That legend includes two towering artists, Johnny Cash and Ray Charles. On July 20, 2003, Charles played his very last concert at the Birchmere.

As The Seldom Scene was winding down its 20-year stint, artists like Mary Chapin Carpenter, Alison Kraus and the Indigo Girls were just coming up. Carpenter has reminisced that “Gary Oelze gave me a shot early, and let me open for great artists like Nanci Griffith. When I had no money to speak of, he would let me stand behind the soundboard or in the kitchen so I could watch and learn from the prominent singer-songwriters who played there.”

In true form, Oelze did even more. He said that when he was meeting with record executives in Nashville, “we started talking about new talent... I told them that Mary Chapin Carpenter” is “getting ready to release on an independent label [and] you should listen to it.”

Carpenter expressed gratitude for his support, saying, “I was very lucky to have the support of Gary Oelze, among others,” which facilitated “a great deal with Sony records.”



Courtesy Photo

Alexandria's own Mary Chapin Carpenter began her singing career at the Birchmere.

And, the legend lives on.