

Grayson grand jury indicts 30

Charges include child porn possession, embezzling, drug crimes, fraud

By LARRY CHAMBERS Staff

INDEPENDENCE – A Grayson County Circuit Court has indicted 30 people on drug, fraud, embezzling, child pornography and other charges.

The indictments were handed down by the grand jury that met in Independence on July 24.

William Keith Collier, whose address was listed as the New River Valley Regional Jail

in Dublin, was indicted on 31 counts for possession of child pornography – second or subsequent offense; and one charge for the possession of child pornography.

An Independence woman was indicted for one charge of embezzling funds from the Town of Independence.

According to court records, between Aug. 1, 2017, and June 1, 2020, Sandra Colston did unlawfully and feloniously embezzle money valued at \$25,032.19 from the Town

of Independence by failure to remit meals tax from her restaurant, Roots at Grayson Bistro & Tavern.

Other charges include:

• Thurman Elmer White – driving after being found to be a habitual offender, second offense.

• Christopher Scott Hohnbaum Jr. – felonious damage to property; elude police, disregard command to stop.

• Meagan Cheyenne Hooven – possession

of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth); possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (hydrocodone).

• Charles Casey Baumgardner – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth); possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (hydrocodone).

• Jamie Lee Hancock – obtain money by fraud.

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Town won't issue flea market permits

Health department threatens action if Hillsville allows vendors to set up for Labor Day event that brings hundreds of thousands to town.

By ETHAN CAMPBELL Staff

HILLSVILLE – The Town of Hillsville announced late on Tuesday that it will not issue permits for the annual Labor Day Flea Market, due to the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) cautioning that it would take legal action if those plans continued.

The event would violate state requirements for events during the COVID-19 pandemic, spelled out in executive orders from the governor.

According to an announcement on social media posted by the town on Tuesday afternoon, "The Town of Hillsville will not be issuing permits or having involvement in this year's Labor Day Flea Market due to the receipt of a letter from the Virginia Department of Health." The town also will not be involved in the event's gun show.

According to the town's announcement, the VDH letter advised Hillsville that "if you contin-

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Missing N.C. woman died in car crash

Local woman missing since July 13 found in wrecked car

By LARRY CHAMBERS and SHAINA STOCKTON Staff

The search for a missing woman from Alleghany County, N.C., has come to a tragic end, with officers confirming that the woman was found dead in a wrecked vehicle in Iredell County, N.C.

The Alleghany County Sheriff's Department shared details of their search for Jessica Lee, 41. Lee had reportedly left her home in Sparta, N.C., on July 12 and was last seen in Charlotte, N.C., around noon on July 13.

At 6:40 p.m. on July 30, North Carolina state troopers responded to a call about a wrecked vehicle on Interstate 77 North near the South

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High Fidelity performs at the Blue Ridge Music Center.

Bluegrass BACK ON STAGE

By BRIAN FUNK Staff

Things are awfully quiet in Galax for the first week of August.

Since the 1930s – save for two years during World War II – the Galax Old Fiddlers' Convention has filled Felts Park and the whole city with the sounds of bluegrass and old-time music.

This year, due to the pandemic, the park is empty and the melodies of "Soldier's Joy" or "Cacklin' Hen" don't float on the summer breeze.

However, all is not lost. The Blue Ridge Music Center, that venerable venue on the Parkway near Galax, brought live music back to the stage last Saturday, for the first of five concerts.

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Eddie Bond of the New Ballards Branch Bogtrotters fiddles at the music center at the first concert of the season Aug. 1.

Gazette photos by Brian Funk



A safely socially distanced crowd enjoys the show on Saturday night.

Tree farm has 102 cases of COVID-19

N.C. health officials report outbreak at Bottomley Evergreens in Sparta

By SHAINA STOCKTON Staff

SPARTA, N.C. — Health officials confirmed this week that they are investigating an outbreak of COVID-19 at Bottomley Evergreens & Farms in Sparta, N.C.

To date, there have been 102 confirmed cases at the Christmas tree farm and results are still pending for some individuals, according to AppHealthCare. The majority of the positive cases are reporting no symptoms.

According to a news release, the company requested assistance when a few cases of the virus were discovered last week at the facility. Bottomley and AppHealthCare are working together to test the entire work force. Last week, 398 tests were administered.

"This type of response testing is needed to determine how far the virus has spread and prevent further transmission," the news release stated.

North Carolina TV station WXII-12 reported that most of those with the virus at Bottomley are asymptomatic, and some test results are still pending.

A statement from AppHealthCare commended Bottomley's actions, stating, "We appreciate the partnership with Bottomley Evergreens & Farms and have worked with them to coordinate and offer testing and review existing safety protocols in place to protect employees."

Noting that COVID-19 spreads most commonly through respiratory droplets when someone coughs or sneezes and is in close contact with others, AppHealthCare said that when there is a confirmed case in a setting like the tree farm, "we want to work quickly to offer testing to everyone since the virus can spread easily in these environments due to people working and living in close proximity

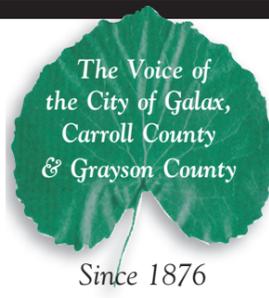
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INSIDE TODAY

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Bluegrass

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The Aug. 1 show was the closest thing you'll get to the fiddlers' convention this year, featuring frequent band category champs New Ballards Branch Bogtrotters and High Fidelity, whose fiddler is also a past winner at Galax.

The music center scheduled, rescheduled and re-scheduled its season this year due to the pandemic. What it settled on was a month of Saturday shows, with safety measures in place to protect performers, fans and staff.

Opening the show, Fries fiddler Eddie Bond of the Bogtrotters announced their first selection on a hot August night was... "Breaking Up Christmas?"

His explanation made perfect sense: "A lot of people are saying, 'why can't we just fast-forward to Christmas and be done with 2020?'"

Later, Bond lamented that the coming week would traditionally be spent among hundreds of musicians and thousands of fans in Galax.

He reminisced about playing into the night around Oscar Hall's green pickup in Felts Park. Hall – a longtime member of the Galax Moose Lodge, the convention sponsor – was in the crowd. He was possibly enjoying the only time in decades when he's had a night off this particular week of the year.

Both play very traditional bluegrass and play it well, and the "Trotters got toes tapping as always. Though the dance area in front of the band was closed off, a few folks paired up at an acceptable distance from others and shook a leg beside the stage.

Corrina Rose Logston, fiddler and front-woman of High Fidelity, told the crowd that Saturday was the first time the band had performed on stage since March.

Logston said it was nice to be in front of people for the first time in a long time, and joked that her stage banter was rusty, as she got tongue-tied a few times.

The band only has one other live show this year, in Missouri. "So if you want to take a road trip..." she said.

High Fidelity took the crowd through a set of both secular and spiritual music, in the style of The Stanley Brothers and Jim & Jesse. Songs included a rollicking romp through "Turkey in the Straw" and several originals from their latest album, "Banjo Player's Blues."



Corinna Rose Logston of High Fidelity (above); New Ballards Branch Bogtrotters perform (right).

Gazette photos by Brian Funk

A highlight of the performance was when band members Kurt Stephenson and Daniel Amick took up twin banjos for a few songs.

Speaking of twin banjos, the music center reminded fans in the most charming way possible about social distancing, with a sign cautioning them to stay "two banjos apart," the equivalent of six feet.

Marianne Kovatch, assistant director of the music center, said the staff had no problems from fans with the requirement to wear masks in congested areas, and noted that they respected the social distancing rules. Seating areas in the amphitheater were marked off with six feet of space between, and fans on the hillside kept their blankets and folding chairs apart.

The center has also resumed its Midday Mountain Music shows, featuring more intimate performances on the outdoor breezeway at the visitors center. On Aug. 2, the Fisher Peak Timber Rattlers played to a small crowd – mostly masked, and spaced one seat apart – on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

A downpour on a Sunday to start the week of the Fiddlers' that would have been, and bluegrass in the Blue Ridge. Some things even a pandemic can't change.

Upcoming Concerts

- **Aug. 8:** Amythyst Kiah + Shay Martin Lovette
- **Aug. 15:** Chatham Rabbits + Liam Purcell & Cane Mill Road
- **Aug. 22:** Becky Buller Band + Luke Morris & Madison Elmore
- **Aug. 29:** Bill & The Belles + Dori Freeman



Kurt Stephenson (right) and Daniel Amick of High Fidelity pick twin banjos, while dancers move to the music off to the side of the stage.



The Fisher Peak Timber Rattlers perform Aug. 2 at the music center for the Midday Mountain Music program.

Blue Ridge Music Center photos (left and above)

Farm

Continued from Page 1A

to others."

Jennifer Greene, health director for AppHealthCare, said that, due to the nature of this virus, "we are concerned with the number of individuals who are positive and living and working within close proximity to others."

Greene said health officials are working with the farm to implement control measures to limit further spread of the virus. "We have provided public health and infection control guidance and will continue to work in partnership with them to prevent further spread. We urge everyone to practice kindness and think of others by practicing the 3Ws – wear a face covering, wait at least six feet from others and wash your hands often or use hand sanitizer. These are actions that can be taken to prevent further spread and protect the Bottomley Evergreens & Farms workers and the entire Alleghany County community."

Paul Harrison, spokesperson for the company, said "The health and safety of our employees and the community are our priority... Safety protocols include symptom screenings before every shift, education about the spread of COVID-19 and providing protective equipment. We have isolated individuals who are sick and those who have been determined as close contacts are in quarantine. We are committed to protecting our community and will do our part to prevent additional spread of this virus."

How to Protect Yourself

AppHealthCare shared the following reminders of how to protect yourself and others from COVID-19:

- Wear a cloth face covering
- Wash hands often or use hand sanitizer
- Wait at least six feet from others

- Stay home when you're sick
- Keep distance from others who are sick
- Avoid touching your face
- Avoid crowded areas
- Clean and disinfect high touch surfaces in common areas like doorknobs, remotes, light switches, tables and handles.

COVID-19 Symptoms

Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure. According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), people with COVID-19 have had a wide range of reported symptoms. These include:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache

- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

If you believe you may have been in close contact (six feet or less for 15 minutes or more) with someone known to have COVID-19, it is recommended that you be tested and quarantined for 14 days from the last exposure with the confirmed individual to prevent further spread of the virus in the community. During this time, avoid contact with others, stay home and monitor for COVID-19 symptoms.

For more information related to COVID-19, including local data, visit apphealthcare.com. Their COVID-19 call center is available during regular business hours: (828) 795-1970; and concerns can also be emailed to preparedness@apphealth.com.

Indicted

Continued from Page 1A

- Tina Marie Muller – obtain money by fraud; uttering a forged document; forgery.
- Anthony Todd McCraw – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (oxycodone); possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (oxycodone – acetaminophen).
- Roger Wayne Adams – sale, gift or distribution of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).
- Eric Jordan Stowell – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).
- Jeremy William Shaffer – shoplifting (third offense).
- Dustin Smokey Bobbitt – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth); possession of a firearm within 10 years after having been convicted of a felony.
- Jeffrey Lynn Newman – possession of a firearm within 10 years after having been convicted of a felony.
- Dylan James Dean – sale, gift, distribution of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).
- Dana Lynn Kilby – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).
- Christie Campbell Farmer – felony child abuse or neglect.
- Andrew Clay Farmer – felony child abuse or neglect.
- Elizabeth Annette Hayes – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).
- Ronald Nelson Poole – sale, gift or distribution of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).

tion of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).

- Codey Zane Grimes – possession of a firearm while also possessing a Schedule II controlled substance (meth); possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).
- Nicole Marie Burcham – DWI (third offense).
- Terry Fabian Kelly – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).
- Brittany Donual Payne – two charges for grand larceny of a motor vehicle.
- Jacob Levi Crigger – two charges for threat or false communication.
- Katrina Richardson Stanley, Fries – welfare fraud.
- Dora Samantha Houk, Galax – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).
- Gordon Scott Gibson, Galax – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).
- Jeremiah David Isom, Fries – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (hydrocodone, acetaminophen).
- Mary Susan Richardson, Elk Creek – possession of a Schedule II controlled substance (meth).

An indictment indicates that a grand jury found sufficient evidence for a case to go to trial, and does not indicate guilt. All of those indicted are innocent until proven guilty.

Lost couple, 70 miles from home, found safe in Galax

By SHANNON WATKINS Staff

Charles and Ruby Wilmer of Buchanan County, an elderly couple who went missing on July 29, were found safe in Galax the next day.

According to news sources, the Wilmers were on their way to an afternoon doctor's appointment in West Virginia, but never arrived. That afternoon, they said they were lost and asked for directions in Bluefield, W.Va., according to a police officer who helped them. That night, they were spotted in Montgomery County near a restaurant.

Then on July 30 at 4:30 p.m., they were spotted by a citizen at the Circle K on East

Stuart Drive in Galax, who recognized them and called the police, said Capt. James Cox of the Galax Police Department.

"Sgt. Alley went over there and when he ran the tags on their vehicle, it came back that they were missing," said Cox. "They were safe. They stated they had gotten lost and had been driving since [the day before]. They spent the night in a motel. They didn't realize where they were, and stated they had ridden to Tennessee and back."

Galax police contacted the Buchanan County Sheriff's Office, who had reported the couple missing and issued a bulletin. Then, Cox said, "A relative or friend from Buchanan came and picked them up."

Found

Continued from Page 1A

Yadkin River in Iredell County. According to the police report, a passerby spotted the vehicle overturned in a median at the bottom of an embankment.

Officers identified Lee's body at the scene.

According to a police report shared with the Statesville Record & Landmark newspaper, the Ford Ranger pickup appeared to have been heading north at a high speed when it ran off the left side of the highway.

The report states that police believe the truck ran over the embankment and jumped the South Yadkin River before landing in heavy brush.

North Carolina Highway Patrol Sgt. Chad Crouse told the Landmark that he believed the wreck occurred around mid-July; and that it was fortunate that the southbound motorist had spotted the wheels of the truck while traveling through the area.

Arts Council cancels garden party

Staff Report

Due to concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic, the Arts & Cultural Council of the Twin Counties has decided to cancel its annual garden party, said director Laura Romanowski.

The "Garden Party with a Twist" was to be held Aug. 8 at Dream Rock Silo & Suites.

She said the event has been cancelled, "in light of the ongoing health crisis, and in deference to the health and safety of our patrons... We want to thank all of our supporters and we hope to see you in happier and healthier times."

Romanowski took an optimistic view of the future. "We look forward to bringing back the fun and food and music in 2021," she said.

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Galax switches to all-online classes

Due to health concerns, school system scraps plans for in-person instruction

By **SHANNON WATKINS**
Staff

The Galax City School Board voted unanimously to make fall classes at all three schools virtual for the foreseeable future at Tuesday night's meeting.

This pushes back opening day to Sept. 8, just after Labor Day, and will give the schools more

time to prepare for fully online classes to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

All members presented voted to switch from a hybrid schedule of virtual and in-person classes to all online instruction. Vice Chairman Jim Adams was absent from the meeting.

The decision was reached after a lengthy presentation by Schools Superintendent Susan Tilley, detailing two options for the school year.

The first option, presented as it was at the last meeting — albeit this time with a few tweaks — involved allowing students to learn in specifically chosen groups, having all their meals brought directly to the classroom to avoid any large gatherings, running twice the number of bus routes so that only half the usual amount of kids we be on board, maintaining social distancing in the hallways and

following a detailed drop-off and pickup system using codes that would prevent students from congregating together. Sanitation stations, water bottle-refilling stations and a walk-through temperature sensor were all part of the plan. Students who wished to take virtual classes could do so, however.

See ONLINE, Page 2A



The commerce park is a joint project of Carroll and Grayson counties and the City of Galax. In development for several years, the site still has no tenants.

Carroll, authority at odds over Wildwood payments

The county and the Blue Ridge Crossroads Economic Development Authority have different takes on who is responsible for paying utility costs at regional commerce park.

By **ETHAN CAMPBELL**
Staff

HILLSVILLE — Carroll County leaders and officials with the Blue Ridge Crossroads Economic Development Authority (BRCEDA) disagree on who is responsible for the payment of utility costs at the Wildwood Commerce Park.

The park is a joint endeavor of Carroll and Grayson counties and the City of Galax, and the property off Interstate 77's Exit 19 in

Carroll County is owned by BRCEDA. In development since 2008, Wildwood has yet to land its first tenant, but utilities have been built to service the property.

Discussions this week raised the issue of each locality's responsibility for investment and revenue from the regional project.

Carroll contends that its citizens are not directly benefitting from the project, while BRCEDA's chairman says that Carroll's water and sewer infrastructure issues are not connected to Wildwood or the authority.

At its meeting Monday night, the Carroll County Board of Supervisors received a funding request from county's Economic Development Authority (EDA) in the amount of \$703,704, for payment of an invoice sent to the EDA from the Carroll County Public Service Authority (PSA).

See CARROLL, Page 2A



Kiah brings soulful blues to BRMC stage

By **BRIAN FUNK**
Staff

From the depths of the human heart to the center of the solar system, Amythyst Kiah tackles everything from the African slave trade to astrophysics in her songs.

While the summer sun showed no sign of going supernova last Saturday night as it shone over the hills at the Blue Ridge Music Center, it was so sweltering that you'd believe it could.

Blazing even more intensely was Kiah's performance, as the Tennessee-based singer-songwriter's powerful vocals resonated through the outdoor amphitheater on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

It was Kiah's third appearance on the music center stage, and each visit has found her evolving her sound

See MUSIC, Page 2B



Amythyst Kiah and her band (top) and Shay Martin Lovette (above) perform Saturday at the music center.



Kiah's powerful vocals resonate in the amphitheater (left); Lovette's steel guitar player Aaron Ballance picks an instrument he built himself.

Gazette photos by Brian Funk

Reform bill creates code of conduct for police

Some Virginia law enforcement agencies oppose proposals, which will be heard at a special session of the General Assembly next week

By **NED OLIVER**
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RICHMOND — Senate Democrats unveiled police reform legislation Aug. 6 they hope to adopt during a special session of the General Assembly that will convene next Tuesday.

Endorsed by the caucus' 21-member majority, the 33-page bill proposes a range of new policies from the creation of statewide standards for police officers to a ban on departments obtaining surplus military equipment.

"You've heard us talk before about the fact that the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery have awoken Americans and Virginians to a longstanding problem that has existed in this country," said Sen. Mamie Locke (D-Hampton), who will patron the bill. "And just because something happened in Minneapolis and Louisville and Georgia does not mean that Virginia is immune from those kinds of activities."

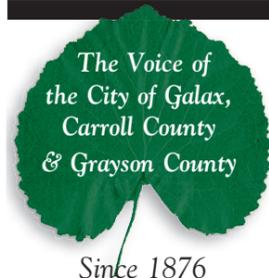
As a recent example, she cited video of a state trooper telling a Black motorist, "You are going to get your ass whupped," before violently pulling him from a car.

The legislation includes a range of new rules governing how police officers do their jobs. In addition to banning departments from obtaining surplus military equipment from the federal government, it would require officers to get a judge to approve any warrants executed at night or without knocking and identifying themselves first.

"If you go in someone's house at night, bad things are more likely to happen and there ought to be special circumstances," said Sen. Scott Surovell (D-Fairfax).

The legislation also calls for the reconfiguration of the

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ARTS & MUSIC

Art school offering classes on YouTube

Staff Report

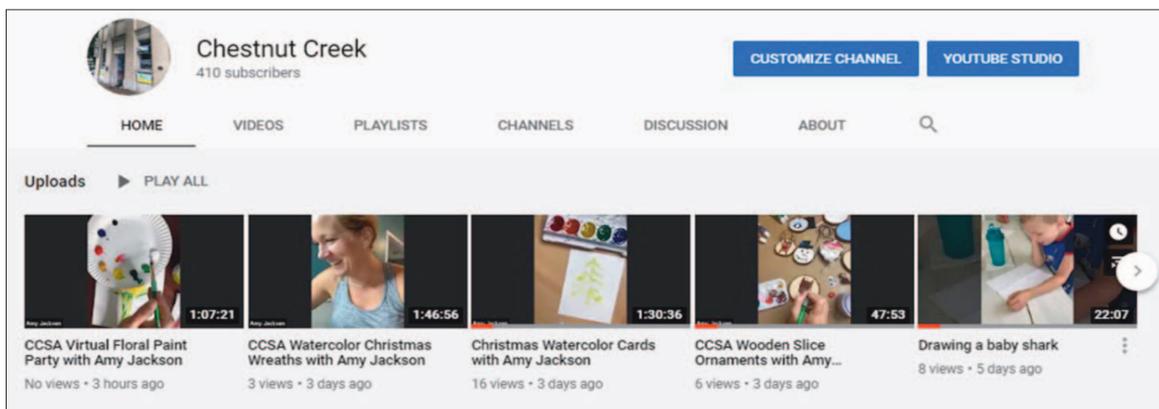
Chestnut Creek School of the Arts (CCSA) is posting new virtual classes to its YouTube page on Thursday evenings.

The postings will give everyone a chance to learn and expand on their artistic skills safely and at home during the pandemic.

If you plan to view the classes, register via email to amy@chestnutcreekarts.org so the school can submit numbers for grants, which will help keep the CCSA funded and able to offer more classes.

Classes are free, but donations are welcome. Suggested amounts are \$10 per class or \$25 monthly at chestnutcreekarts.org/donate, or call (276) 236-3500.

The CCSA YouTube channel can be found at tinyurl.com/y2xyhawk/.



Music center cancels Aug. 15 show due to weather

Staff Report

The Blue Ridge Music Center announced Thursday that it has cancelled the concert scheduled for this Saturday with Chatham Rabbits and Cane Mill Road.

According to a statement from the center, "The weather forecast for Saturday is heavy

rain, lightning and thunderstorms. While we normally go on rain or shine, the forecast for lightning and over 1.5 inches of rain do not go well with additional protocols and safety measures related to COVID-19 and social distancing."

The music center said it hopes to reschedule this concert for late September and will

make a formal announcement of rescheduled date as soon as possible.

"The health and safety of our patrons, musicians, staff and volunteers is our first priority," the announcement concluded.

The other two concerts planned for the center this season include Sierra Ferrell with Luke Morris & Madison Elmore on Aug. 22

and Bill & The Belles with Dori Freeman on Aug. 29.

The Blue Ridge Music Center is located at 700 Foothills Road near Galax, or milepost 213 on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

For more information, visit BlueRidgeMusicCenter.org or call (866) 308-2773, ext. 212.



Shay Martin Lovette (above) proved why his songwriting has earned such acclaim; Amythyst Kiah (left) rocks out with one of the new songs from her upcoming 2021 album.

Gazette photos by Brian Funk

Music

Continued from Page 1A

as she takes the timeless art of the blues in bold and exciting new directions.

Starting off the evening was Shay Martin Lovette from Boone, N.C., who demonstrated why his country-folk songwriting has been acclaimed in contests at MerleFest and Telluride. His songs are warm, sweet and easy like a summer breeze, but that doesn't mean they're lightweights. Lovette exhibits the hallmark of any good songwriter — personal lyrics that are universally relatable.

His set of original material showcased the band's skills well, especially Aaron Balance's steel guitar, which becomes a third "voice" in many songs, joining Lovette and bassist Brandon Holder's harmonies. For his part, Lovette takes the lead on guitar and harmonica.

Both Kiah and Lovette said the Aug. 8 show in Galax was their first performance in front of a live audience since February.

Lovette told the safely spaced and socially distanced audience that he was glad to be out of house after months of quarantine, and Holder joked that Lovette "made me wear real pants tonight, because basketball shorts wouldn't cut it."

Lovette and Holder live near the Parkway in Boone, and said they'd found unique ways to pass the time while not touring, such as growing heirloom tomatoes and skateboarding on the Linn Cove Viaduct — a high-altitude bridge that wraps around a mountain — while it was closed to traffic.



Kiah in a quiet moment (above, left) and with her band (below, left); Lovette with bassist Brandon Holder (above, right).

"We're not sure when we'll be able to play another show, so this means a lot," Lovette said. "We hope to find another outdoor venue to play."

"Otherwise, we'll be at our house," the bassist added.

Lovett said living along the Parkway inspires many of his songs, and closed with the appropriate "Parkway Bound." Its hopeful lyrics were particularly relevant at a time in our lives when we often have to improvise or adapt to a changing world. "We'll find us a good time some way," he sang.

Kicking off her set with the blues rock of "Wilbeest," Kiah performed favorites from her first two recordings, like

"Trouble So Hard" and "Another Man Done Gone," as well as the apocalyptic "Myth," which is about the sun expanding into a red giant and destroying the Earth in the future.

Nobody ever said the blues was cheerful, and Kiah proves that prophecies of cosmic doom are just as rich a lyrical vein to mine as bad break-ups and social injustice.

Pausing between songs, Kiah smiled at the crowd gathered on the hillside. "Whenever we got this gig, I've been counting down the days to be in front of people again," she said.

The music center show afforded her a chance to play live some of the songs she's recorded for her

eagerly anticipated third album, due in 2021. Like her earlier work, its all steeped in country, old-time, roots rock and R&B.

Switching from electric to acoustic guitar, she debuts "Firewater," an introspective song about writers block and turning to self-destructive influences to break it; and the heartfelt ode to heartbreak, "Ballad of Lost."

Other new material included "Sleeping Queen," ironically named, because it rocked; "Opaque," a groovy tune about a strange dream, Kiah explains; and "The Worst," which she described as "a really weird love song," which would sound right at home on a honky-tonk jukebox.

Then there's "Wild

Turkey," a new song about a traumatic experience that she doesn't elaborate on further. She said it's about "giving my younger self permission to be OK."

She closed with the song that's gained her the most acclaim, including a Grammy nomination — "Black Myself," from the album "Songs of Our Native Daughters."

The collaboration with Rhiannon Giddens, Leyla McCalla and Allison Russell uses the African slave trade as its focal point, with each musician contributing pieces to a musical quilt.

The song shifts meaning as it moves through history, from a time when being Black in America meant a

life of servitude, the lyrics comparing slaves to "work horses;" to an era of growing civil rights; to our present moment, when "I'm surrounded by many lovin' arms, 'cause I'm Black myself," Kiah sings.

"I washed away my blood and tears, I've been born brand new," she says in the final chorus. "There's no more work horses, But there's still work to do."

And fine work it is; important work.

The red ball of the sun has sunk behind the hills by this point, but you can still feel the heat baked into the ground.

Heat lightning flashes in the distance and now it's the cicadas' turn to sing on this summer night.

LIVING

B

INSIDE: CHURCH BRIEFS: 4B • CLASSIFIEDS: 5B-7B • FARMING: 3B



ABOVE: Dori Freeman
RIGHT: Bill and the Belles



PEAK PERFORMANCES



Madison Elmore & Luke Morris
Gazette photos by Brian Funk

At Blue Ridge Music Center, artists find a rare opportunity to play live when the pandemic has forced most venues to shut down

By **BRIAN FUNK**
Staff

America's national parks have always been a refuge; not only for wildlife, but also for humans who need to get away from civilization and closer to nature.

This year, more than any other in recent memory, parks and wild places have called to us to escape the confines of quarantine and breathe free.

At the foot of Fishers Peak, nestled among the wooded hills, the Blue Ridge Music Center provides a sanctuary for a different kind of endangered species – the professional touring musician.

With gigs and festivals cancelled, venues closed, and sometimes uncertain safety at indoor stages that do remain open, musicians have been mostly confined to their dens and warrens this year, poking out their heads only to perform online. While that might provide ample extra time for songwriting, it doesn't put food on the table or give musicians a way to share their creations with fans in a live setting.

So, the music center's outdoor amphitheater on the Blue Ridge Parkway near Galax has been a blessing to those who make music, and those who want to hear it in person.

"I can't express the gratitude for getting to play live music that's not in front of a screen," says Kris Truelsen of the band Bill and the Belles. "It's feeding my soul."

The Bristol-based band is playing on the music center stage to an appreciative audience on this late August night, with fans spread safely apart and wearing masks when they have to get closer than six feet.

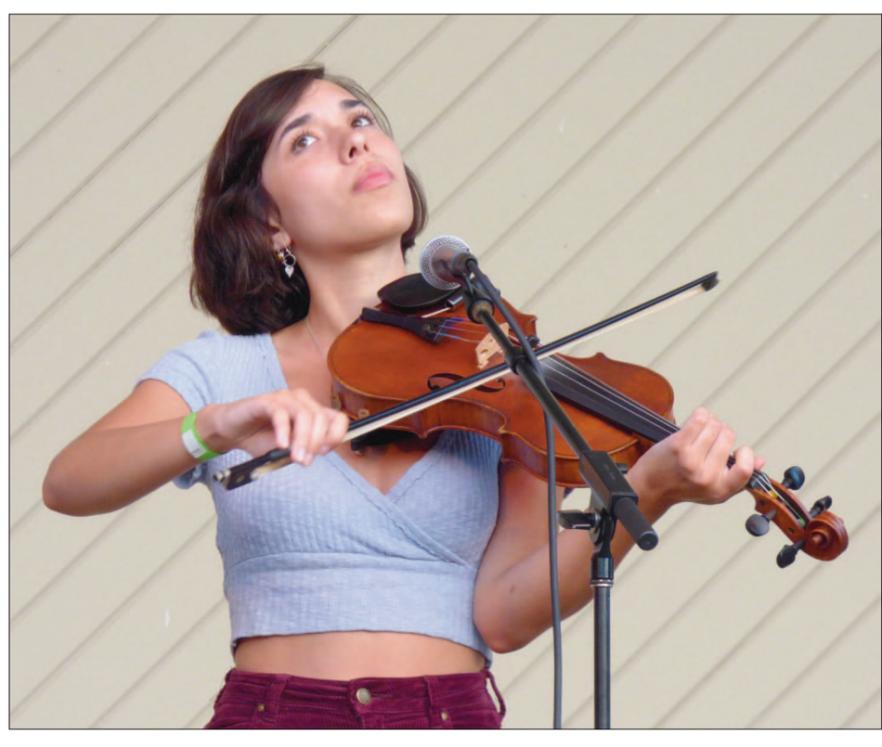
"Real live people!" Truelsen again marvels, after playing a few introductory tunes. "This is like starting from scratch. We forgot how to do this."

Later, he jokes that the band is "happy to be here for our show of 2020. 's the busiest we've ever been."

The band actually has been a bunch of busy beavers. They've spent their quarantine months writing new songs and even recorded a new album, which they hope to release before the end of the year. Not being able to perform to pay the bills (or belles) has delayed the release. "As a touring band it's been difficult, because making a record costs a lot of money," Truelsen tells the audience.

Their set is a fun and spirited romp through the golden age of American popular music, the

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ABOVE: Aila Wildman
LEFT: Sierra Ferrell (center) with Nate Leath (left) and Audrey MacAlpine (right)
BELOW: Victor Furtado (left) and Nick Falk





From left are Victor Furtado, Nick Falk, Dori Freeman, Aila Wildman and Eli Wildman.

Sierra Ferrell

Music

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1920s-1940s, with covers of old songs and originals in a style combining old-time country, jazz, ragtime and vaudeville. The band is named for 1920s performers Bill and Belle Reed.

They debut some songs that will appear on the new record, including “Never Get Along With You” and “That’ll Be Just Fine By Me.”

Their style also evokes an old-time radio show, with the band singing commercial jingles for sponsors like Marion’s famous Dip Dog stand. “It ain’t a corn dog, that’s a fact/it makes your lips go smack, smack, smack,” they sing in praise of the battered and deep-fried wiener-on-a-stick that is most definitely some type of corn dog.

They follow that up with “Old Salty Dog Blues,” for what Truelsen calls the dog-themed portion of the show.

Another jingle for a brewery is about a beer-drinking sea mammal. “The only thing I could think of to rhyme with ‘pale ale’ was ‘whale,’” Truelsen admits.

In the song, Andrew Small does his best impression of a deep, reverberating whale song on the bass.

Fiddle player Kalia Yeagle explains that the tune is about Appalachian mountain whales: “You can find them in East Tennessee, in the woods.”

The commercial jingles were recorded for their Radio Bristol show – now a PBS television show – “Farm & Fun Time.” The second season will air soon.

The rest of the performance is a mix of upbeat originals, mostly sung in three-part harmony around a single microphone, and covers that include Jimmy Rogers’ “Carolina Sunshine Girl.”

Truelsen also debuts his original talking blues song, “Sobbin’ The Blues,” the chorus of which consists of mournful wailing. He asks the audience to sob along with him, a cathartic moment for our multiple dilemmas of the moment.

Another cover is what Truelsen deems “one of the most gorgeous melodies in the American songbook,” Leon Redbone’s version of “Please Don’t Talk About Me When I’m Gone.”

The irony is that it’s hard to leave a Bill and the Belles show without having plenty to say about them – all of it good.

Dori Freeman

Opening for Bill and the Belles this evening is Galax singer-songwriter Dori Freeman, joined on drums by husband Nick Falk and backed by members of the up-and-coming old-time band The Wildmans, Victor Furtado on banjo and Eli Wildman on mandolin.

This regional “super-group” of young talent has been holed up together “in a little bubble” during quarantine, Freeman explains, writing music and wishing they had a place to play it other than on a Facebook livestream.

“It’s one good thing about having nothing to do and being stuck at home for months,” Nick says of the extra time to create.

As they take the stage – staring into a blazing sunset while a butterfly flits around the band, seemingly riding the breeze of a melody – they play Freeman’s ode to parenthood “Like I Do.”

“We don’t get to do this much anymore,” Nick says between songs.

Dori adds that the music center show is one of the only times they’ve played live since the pandemic hit, and she’s taking the opportunity to debut some new songs. “We’re using you as our test audience tonight.”

The willing guinea pigs try out new songs ranging from the encouraging and uplifting “Don’t Let the Storm Win” to the jaunty, danceable, gospel-influenced old-time tune “Over There,” which includes a line about walloping the devil upside the head with a two-by-four.

Aila Wildman joins the band to sing “Rid My Mind,” which Freeman wrote for her, and to play fiddle.

They also debut a new song written by Falk, “Almost Home,” which will be on Freeman’s next album, to be recorded later this month.

Sierra Ferrell

The week before, The Wildmans also joined headliner Sierra Ferrell for a song or two at the music center.

The West Virginia native is a rising star on YouTube, known for her quirky alt-country and Americana songs; a talent so fresh that she doesn’t even have an album or any songs streaming on Spotify yet. From her performance on Aug. 22, though, it’s clear that the music center was lucky to catch her now, before she outgrows their stage.

Like other recent performers, Ferrell expresses appreciation for the opportunity afforded by the outdoor venue: “We’re so grateful for places like this.”

Her set is eclectic: western swing and waltzes mixing with honky-tonk country and some Eastern European fiddle influences that sound like Kitty Wells sung around the campfire of a Romany caravan.

Ferrell plays guitar and mandolin and, joined by fiddler Nate Leath and bassist Audrey MacAlpine, the band has gorgeous harmonies as they lean in to sing around a lone microphone; punctuated by Ferrell’s endearingly old-timey vocal quaver.

They sing favorites popular on her YouTube channel, like “Bells Of Every Chapel” and “Jeremiah,” and debut some new material, including “Why Haven’t You Loved Me Yet?”

The songs will appear on the debut album Ferrell is recording for Rounder Records, set for release in 2021. She says she’s excited by the guest artists she’s line up, especially the one who will join her on the song “Made Like That.” Ferrell won’t name names, she says. “I don’t want to jinx it.”

There’s the aforementioned quirk of songs like “Ding Dong Daddy” and “Chitlin Cookin’ Time in Cheatham County,” contrasted with the lovely “Whispering Waltz” and “Elk River Blues.”

Ferrell can skillfully pendulum between the silly and serene, evidenced by her pairing of two particular songs.

“During these trying times, I got spiritual and wrote a gospel song,” she tells the audience before launching into “Praise You and Stand,” with a singalong chorus and hand claps.

She moves quickly from the church back to the barroom with “Wine In My Cup,” which is probably not about communion.

Luke Morris & Madison Elmore

Opening for Ferrell on this night, in addition to the woodland chorus chattering away in the trees after a rainstorm, are singer-songwriter duo Luke Morris and Madison Elmore.

Morris, of Galax, is a member of local bluegrass group ShadowGrass. He has been writing and performing with Elmore since 2018, and their set featured several originals – some of them brand new.

“Childhood Room” was one of them, performed live for only the second time, Morris said.

“Like most of our songs it’s depressing and sad, but the music makes it sound happy,” he says before singing “Father Time,” about the years stealing our minds away.

Morris promises the next tune will be happier, and it is. His and Elmore’s voices meld beautifully in the harmonies, and Morris’ mandolin picks up speed while Elmore’s guitar propels the bluegrass jam.

They cover two Townes Van Zandt songs – “I’ll Be Here in the Morning” and “White Freightliner Blues” – and give a stripped-down guitar and mandolin spin to Fleetwood Mac’s “Rhiannon.” The acoustic sound is ideal for a tale of Celtic witchery.

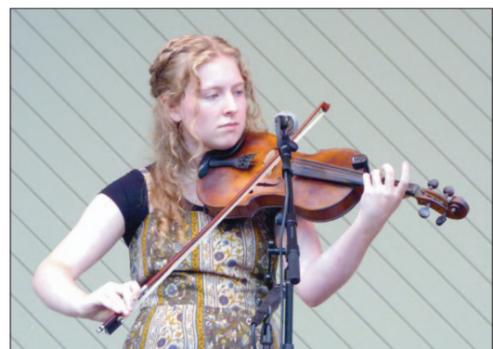
Similarly spooky is their version of one of the oldest of old-time tunes, the ghost story “Little Margaret.” Elmore switches to fiddle for the ancient and haunting song from the hills of Appalachia.

Her songwriting skills are showcased in “Room for Slow Songs,” which Elmore explains was inspired by a Mandolin Orange concert at the music center. “It was rainy and they were playing slow songs,” she says, and Elmore wanted to capture that feeling. It’s especially effective on this similarly damp night under slate gray clouds.

Morris and Elmore close with their debut single, “Take Me Back to the Blue Ridge,” which sounds perfect played on a stage on the Parkway. As Morris sings about longing for a lost home, the plaintive melody of Elmore’s fiddle soars like a bird over those misty mountains.

Musicians have been searching for a home this year, too. Luckily for them, the Blue Ridge Music Center was there to welcome them.

The music center has one more show this season, a rescheduled concert with Chatham Rabbits and Liam Purcell & Cane Mill Road. The show was set for Aug. 15, but had to be cancelled due to weather. The new date is Sept. 19, from 6-8 p.m. For more information, visit blueridgemusiccenter.org.



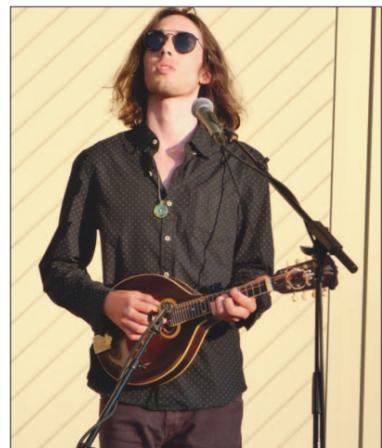
Luke Morris & Madison Elmore



Bill and the Belles



Nate Leath



Eli Wildman



ABOVE: Dori Freeman

LEFT: The crowd keeps a safe distance from each other while enjoying the music.

Gazette photos by Brian Funk