

Never underestimate the power of a good idea, especially when it's shared among three friends.

Back in April 1994, as Charlie Hall tells it, Hope Grietzer first mulled the thought of a place where folks could perform in

The Black Rose

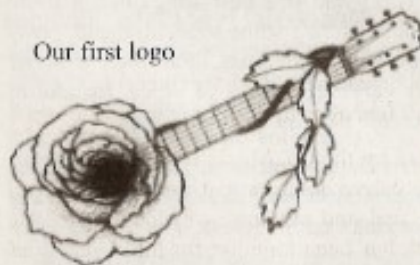
Black Forest Upcoming Events—Continued

front of a listening audience. Soon after, Charlie found out that Murry Stewart had the same idea. The three set out to make it happen.

The idea was a simple: Music lovers would gather in the old Black Forest Community Center, and anyone who wanted to could take the stage. Admission would be affordable, Marcia Hall would make and sell brownies, and everyone would pitch in, folding up his or her chair at the end of the night. In the beginning, they called it the Black Forest Music Society.

The first Open Stage drew about 35 people, who paid \$1 each to get in. Among the performers were Sue Coulter with Rob Tobiassen and their band; Hope and Charlie; Murry and the County Engineers, with Dick Carlson, Rock Spencer and Dave Gallupe; and Nancy Alexander.

"The rent was \$20 an hour, and it went for about four hours including jam," Charlie says. "Murry, who still has the first dollar he ever made, made up the difference without ever telling us."



Our first logo

Soon Murry suggested a more distinctive name: The Black Rose Acoustic Society, after a similarly named group he knew in Mississippi. And that's been the moniker ever since.

The first several months were true "open stage" events; anyone who wanted to perform could jump on stage. By late summer, "we snagged a few touring performers for \$50 and got the idea of hiring a featured act," Charlie says.

In time, the crowd grew and Black Rose gained a reputation for top-notch entertainment, a crowd intent on truly listening, and a building with acoustics, as guitarist Pat Donohue described it, "like playing inside a guitar."

During Open Stages, the old log walls at the Black Forest Community Center would be lined with acoustic-instrument cases; they belonged to the die-hards who would jam another couple of hours after the show. The jams were a joyful cacophony of all things acoustic, especially guitars, fiddles, mandolins, banjos, and basses. There would be Western swing in the kitchen, country in the southeast corner, bluegrass in the bathroom, old-time on the back deck, and folk songs somewhere in the middle. You'd hear everything from "Don't Fence Me In" to "Old Joe Clark" to "Orphan Girl," with harmonies rising and falling throughout the building.

If you do the math, in 20 years there have been about 460 open stages, over 1,000 opening acts, and more than 57,000 guests (many of them regulars/repeats), most of whom have made the old building rumble with the "Black Rose Stomp" to show appreciation for particularly good performances. And that doesn't

even include all of the special concerts. Or the number of people, from kids to old-timers, who have taken a group lesson, fulfilling—or reviving—a lifelong dream to make music, with the extra benefit of meeting some like-minded souls.

In two decades, there have been countless exquisite moments, from watching a trembling first-timer on stage deliver a riveting performance, to seeing some of the greatest bluegrass, folk, Celtic, country, swing and roots musicians worldwide—who often fill much bigger halls—delight in playing this cozy room for a rapt audience.

Hope, who now lives in New York, says one of her favorite moments was a Volan, Uveges and Sokol show of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young music. "The entire audience joined in singing along on 'Our House,'" she says. "It gave me chills to hear the log building resonate with so many voices. People spontaneously singing together in public is so rare in our culture; it was a very special moment."

For Charlie, it was Black Rose's first special concert, with Tim and Mollie O'Brien. "We had no idea what we were doing, but got 250 people into the community center," he says. "At the end of the show, we were all yelling for an encore, and Maria, my daughter who was five at the time, wanted them to sing 'Shut De Do,' which is usually done with a minimum four voices. She dragged her mom back to ask Mollie, and Mollie tried to explain that there weren't enough of them. Maria started wailing, and since you don't want to make the promoter's daughter cry, Mollie said, 'You know, sweetie, that's JUST what we're going to sing right now!' And they got up and sang it, and we were thrilled to see that so many people knew it from their album that we all provided the missing vocals."

Over the years a little structure shored up the fledgling group, and change came with the times. Charlie created a one-page newsletter, a board was formed, sign-ups began for the opening acts, 501c3 status was attained and the music school was formed. The after-show jams fell away, and now there are weekly Thursday-night jams and Saturday kids' jams twice a month. At the 10-year mark, Black Rose set up offices and lesson spaces at Benet Hill in central Colorado Springs; it moved out a few years later when the building was sold. Now group lessons are held at various studios, and there are First Friday shows at The Perk Downtown.

In June 2013 the community watched in horror as the Black Forest Fire ravaged the forest, taking the lives of two residents; destroying the homes of musicians, members and friends; and threatening the Black Forest Community Center. Somehow, the rustic 1930s building survived, and weeks later, it brought everyone together for much-needed music and fellowship again. A few months later, Black Rose and Wonderland Ranch hosted the Benefit for Black Forest, an all-day festival of music that raised money for those who were displaced by the fire.

One thing that hasn't changed: Volunteers and generous spirits make it work, from setting up the chairs to baking and selling

Upcoming Events - Continued

brownies and other baked goods. Sometimes the kitchen's sales have been the difference between breaking even and losing money.

More broadly, Black Rose's effect on the area music landscape is a force for good. As Murry predicted, opening-act performers have improved with the opportunity to perform. Some of the kids who once played in the kitchen during open stages are now young adults performing on stage. Black Rose even sparked sister organizations: Mountain Area Music Association (MAMA), Canon Rose, and Buffalo Grass acoustic societies. The founders didn't expect this simple idea would have such huge reverberations.

"I am proud of the opportunities that the Black Rose has created for people," Hope says. "I don't mean for the people with polished voices and slick licks, but for the people who get up on the stage, nervous as heck, and sing or play their hearts out to the best of their ability to an audience that is listening to them. For the person who in mid-life is encouraged to pursue their dream of trying the guitar, or the fiddle, or to sing a song. For the kid who sees another kid on stage and thinks, 'maybe I could do that.'

"Engaging in music taps deep into our core, allowing us to share ideas and emotions and plain old fun on a level far beyond words, creating bonds of community," Hope says. "From Day One the Black Rose has fostered those opportunities for community with passion and commitment, and I believe there can be no higher calling for an organization."

Charlie thinks back to a haunting comment from the beginning. "Two of the first attendees were Ray and Ina Patterson, who performed for over 40 years," he says. "At the first BRAS, Ina came up to me and asked, 'Do you have any idea what you've started?'"

"I didn't know what she was asking, but the question always stuck with me. Twenty years later, I think she was saying that this was going to make a difference in local music," Charlie says. "And no, I really had no idea."

Jane Turnis



The Railsplitters April 25

In 2006, bluegrass musician and writer Jon Weisberger told me that polls indicate that bluegrass fans want (1) something besides the same old thing and, well, (2) nothing new. Tall order. But let's say that what we're really looking for is new music and new influences, but with an organic, traditional sound. OK... let's try that, and there's no better place to look than the Lyons/Boulder area and The Railsplitters.

Winners of the 2013 RockyGrass bluegrass band competition, The Railsplitters are a high-energy quartet that blends soaring vocals, instrumental fireworks and fine new songs into a show that you won't want to miss. There's some straight-ahead, powerful (pronounced "paaahr-ful") bluegrass, and there's some stuff that weaves together varying textures of voice, mandolin, banjo, guitar and bass to create new musical tapestries.

Of them, Jeff Burger of No Depression says, "That high, lonesome sound has rarely sounded better," and Bluegrass Today calls them "A fresh, modern take on bluegrass."

Join us on April 25 for The Railsplitters. In the meantime, check out their many videos at therailsplitters.com.

Charlie Hall



Special 20th Anniversary Event Info

On Friday, April 11, we'll celebrate 20 years of Black Rose Acoustic Society fittingly, with a show featuring some of our founders, some of our very first performers, and a few longtime favorite musicians, followed by a jam like in Black Rose's early days. Joining us will be Phil Volan & Jolcen Bell; Murry Stewart (many will remember his sweet vocals to "Ashokan Farewell"); Joe Uveges; Charlie Hall, Dick Carlson, and Marianne Danchy. Bring your acoustic instruments, drink a little extra coffee, and join in on the playing and singing right after the show.

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