

Freedom Fest helps Gallup celebrate Independence Day weekend

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Juggernaut Music's first two-day outdoor festival in eight years

On July 3 and 4, the Gallup Flea Market North Stage will be the site of the Freedom Fest, sponsored by Juggernaut Music.

Live performances are scheduled from 6 pm-11 pm for each day. Performances will span the genres of traditional Navajo music, hip hop and metal.

July 3 performances will include 3YE, War Motor, Death Mantra, Shadow Remains, and Alchemy.

Scheduled for July 4 are Pete Sands and the Drifters, Def-I, Sage Cornelius, the Martin Sisters, Sunburnt Stone, Cody Kelly and Arizona Dreamerz.

Ernie Santiago, owner and proprietor of Juggernaut Music, said the Freedom Fest will be the second show he has promoted at the Gallup Flea Market.

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When McKinley County entered into turquoise status from statewide COVID-19 restrictions, Juggernaut Music hosted three shows. The concerts brought about 55 to 60 attendees to the venue while still observing COVID-19 protocols.

“Our capacity at the Juggernaut was down to 33 percent, which was about 70 people because of COVID-19,” he told the *Sun* June 30. “We saw it as a great opportunity to do bigger shows at the Flea Market North Stage and get everybody together safely.

“It was a community effort,” he said.

For the first time, Juggernaut Music got local businesses to sponsor the event, including Clayton Homes, NNCT CDL Training, Del Taco, Tenadore Jewelry Designs, and in-house Juggernaut promoter Brian Donnelly.

The headlining acts for the Freedom Fest are from out of town, Santiago said, with local bands and performers slated as opening acts.

“Even though everything goes back to normal July 1 as far as capacity and restrictions, we’re still going to keep doing shows at the flea market rather than jamming them into the building,” he said.

People will have the option of driving into the flea market and viewing the show from their vehicles while the performance is broadcast live on a radio frequency, or they will be able to participate and watch the show at the front stage.

“People are invited to bring their own chairs if they want to sit down,” he said. “There’s going to be food trucks out there, including Smoky D’s and an ice cream truck.”

Juggernaut Music has been planning the Freedom Fest for about three months. It is the first two-day outdoor festival they have hosted since opening their doors for business eight years

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ago.

“Juggernaut originally started out on the north side and we’ve been going strong since then,” Santiago said. “There was a period of time where we didn’t have a venue location, but we did shows on the west side and in Window Rock [Ariz.] with Rancid Savage Productions.”

Santiago said his business is now recording artists under the Jugg Life record label, which will also be launching a new website soon at jugglife.com, featuring biographies of artists recording with the independent label, merchandise, videos, tickets, and concert dates.

“We’ve recorded a handful of local artists here exclusively. We just finished Death Mantra’s album recently and my album (under the Earn1 moniker), “Dura \$ell.” We also have Chief Maker’s album, “Gutta Town” coming out this summer,” he said.

Keeping the music alive in Gallup is a labor of love, Santiago said, adding that it’s a rollercoaster and that you have to stay on the ride to make it to the end. He said the pandemic shut down a lot of bands, promoters, and venues.

“We had a chance to give up during the pandemic, but we didn’t. We like to encourage people and artists, we like to nurture their talents,” he said. “We’re Juggernaut Music and we’re just getting started, Baby.”

One performer scheduled for July 4 at Freedom Fest is renowned across the Southwest.

Def-I, whose given name is Christopher Mike-Bidtah, is a member of the Navajo Nation. Hailing from Albuquerque, he is an emcee, producer, and artist-educator with 10 albums under his belt. He is currently on tour with Sage Cornelius for the Red Chile Run, a nine date tour which began June 25 in Amarillo, Tex. and will conclude July 10 in El Paso, Tex.

His prolific musical output and non-stop schedule has garnered him a reputation as one of the

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Southwest's most active and prominent touring artists, ranging from hip hop, spoken word, to contemporary Native American acoustic.

"My mom was a major influence in my musical career because she taught me to read and write at an early age. I grew up listening to her music," Def-I told the *Sun*.

Sage Cornelius is Def-I's cousin and has been creating music as a member of the duo for years. Def-I said his music features messages of Native empowerment and unity. This eclectic style has provided opportunities as he has been featured on a long list of media networks and programs including "Sway in the Morning," National Public Radio, BBC, "Democracy Now!" RT America, HipHopDX, Vans Warped Tour, PBS, and more.

"People can expect to see a live musical performance. We don't come in with pre-recorded tracks or beats," Cornelius said.

Another Navajo performer who will appear at the Freedom Fest is Pete Sands, who calls his band's musical style 'Outlaw Country.' Pete Sands and the Drifters were featured on "Studio 49" on FNX TV in 2019.

Sands said he began performing music in Montezuma Creek, Utah on the Navajo Nation. He gave credit to his grandmother's vinyl record collection as the catalyst for his musical career.

"You can't be afraid of getting out there and performing at locations that are out of your comfort zone," he said, noting that he's played at dirt floor venues and popular concert halls alike. "That kind of sounds funny considering that we don't even have an album out yet."

Pete Sands and the Drifters plan to release their first album in August and will be performing some tracks off their debut recording at this weekend's Freedom Fest.

Tickets for Freedom Fest are available at the gate and at Juggernaut Music. One day

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passes are \$15; two day passes are \$25.

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