

Gallup's piano man: Ramon Chavez spotlights local talent

Written by By Melinda Russell Sun Correspondent
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It's Saturday night at Coal Street Pub. There's live music being played by the local folk band, 10 Minutes Max.

Ramon Chavez, Coal Street owner, is a musician who plays drums, piano and vocals. His love for music is obvious in his support of local acts that entertain the patrons of his pub.

"I started playing snare drum at Washington Elementary with Ken Holloway. He was my music teacher almost every year until he retired," Chavez said, as he reminisced about his formative years in music.

He remembered a time when Mr. Holloway threw a chair across the room. It reminded him of the movie "Whiplash," a story about a tumultuous relationship between a student drummer and his director.

"His class was almost like boot camp."

Chavez was awarded All-State drummer his junior year in high school, in 1985 under Holloway's direction.

Chavez didn't start playing piano until he joined the Navy.

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"I had to play some kind of music and I couldn't take my drum set on the ship with me."

So he bought a small keyboard and started teaching himself how to play. He never learned how to read music so everything he plays is by ear.

The best gig he ever played was a concert on his ship, the USS Constellation during Desert Storm. Their down time was billed as a "steel beach picnic."

He and five other guys were a 1980s rock band playing covers for Van Halen among others. The guys on the ship, all 6,000 of them, were thrilled to listen to a rock band where all the members had the same haircuts as they did. They also played at many ports including Australia, Thailand and the Philippines.

The worst gig he ever played was in the Gallup High School marching band.

"We marched from the East Y to Rio West Mall, Chavez said. It was during the balloon fiesta, wet and freezing.

Chavez played about 10 years with his dad's band, Dickie Chavez and the Gallupenos, after coming home from the Navy. They played Tejano music from Grants to Window Rock and everywhere in between.

Now, he says, the piano is his favorite. He plays with several groups at the pub, including 505 Blues Band and Benny and the Jets. Tanya Gomez, half of the singing duo Dey & Nite sings with the band once each month.

As for his favorite artist, Chavez says, without question, it's Billy Joel.

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“Close your eyes and listen to the words and there’s a movie already going in your mind.”

That’s how Joel writes. Nobody writes like that anymore. Everything today is about the beat. But Chavez says, Joel was all about the story.

Coal Street Pub allows locals to showcase their talents every Wednesday during Open-Mic-Night. Fridays and Saturdays it features a range of local talent from the rock variety group 3 Blind Mice to 505 Blues Band.

“My favorite is The Billyhawks Band from Ramah,” says Brittany Lujan, server at Coal Street. “They have a drummer, guitars and a banjo.”

Besides the music, Coal Street Pub and Chavez are probably best known for their Crab Boil. Served every Saturday night, patrons are encouraged to roll up their sleeves and dig in. Combine that with live local talent, it’s a recipe for success.