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Orange Blossom Opry

by
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Oh, the places we go and the people we see when we get out and about. How many of you have been to the Grand Ole' Opry in Nashville ...a great place with great music and a great big price to make the trip there. Wouldn't it be great if we could get the same caliber entertainment locally without the trip to bother with? Well that is not only a possibility but a reality, and for those that like Country, Bluegrass, and Gospel there is a place just down the road a piece that has all that and more.

For many years in Weirsdale, FL, the gymnasium of the former Weirsdale Elementary School sat empty and the only sounds that came from within were little critters scurrying across the floor, or if you listened real close, you might hear the cries of those fans long gone cheering their basketball teams to victory, or groaning in defeat. Cheers and applause ring loudly from there today, however, because several years ago it was turned into a country music happening place, and after going through several names and owners the last two years Earl and Estelle Benson have had the reins of the operation, now known as the "Orange Blossom Opry." This family friendly, smoke free, alcohol free, venue of the best Country Music available, has their own resident band called fittingly, "The Orange Blossom Opry Band," or as some refer to them, the "Opry Cast." Six individuals make up that band and they are as professional and talented as anyone who would ever grace the stage of the Nashville based "Opry."

Nick Nicholson seems to be the head dog of the group and he plays Bass Guitar and sings as well as cracking jokes where needed. Darrell Morgan is on Lead Guitar and sings beautifully as well. He owns a fantastic voice as well being able to make the guitar talk whatever language he asks of it. Buddy Davis is on drums and he, as most drummers out there, doesn't get near the attention he deserves. They do throw him a bone now and then and allow him a solo that has the audience whistlin' and stompin' in response.

Darryl Thomas is on keyboard and at his fingers' command he can create the sound of any instrument coming out of his keyboard. He can make you think he's got a banjo player hiding inside when the group get down on a rocking blue grass tune. I kept looking for the banjo until I realized it was coming from the keyboard. Darryl also sings backup with the group.

A fellow West Virginian is on the fiddle and he is great. Tommy Cordell wears a big 10 gallon hat that covers most of his face during all the songs except when he doffs it for the gospel songs, and he stands tall. He must be at least 6'5" and you almost lose the fiddle in his hands. I kept referring to him as a gentle giant because the few words he does say are quiet and when he's not playing or

singing he's usually sitting on a stool or bench with his head held down. But can he saw that fiddle... When a bluegrass tune begins you can almost picture the late Bill Monroe standing at his side saying, *"You make Bluegrass people proud Tommy."*

The last member of the "Opry Cast" of characters is nowhere near the least. Lorri Gill is the Vocalist, MC, comic relief of the group and she is fantastic. She keeps the show moving with her introductions and at times comes on dressed even more outrageously than the famous Minnie Pearl, and her wit, both scripted and impromptu, is just as funny. All that aside, it's her voice that brings you to your knees. With the dark, bayou huskiness of Patsy Cline and the passionate emotion of Celine Dion, Lorri's voice is huge and soul stirring. Her stage presence is like that of one who knows she belongs up there and in the space of an hour's show she makes at least 3 or 4 wardrobe changes giving a new look with each genre of songs. Lorri is a star and will not disappoint even the most particular listener.

All these fantastic talents make up the "Orange Blossom Opry Band" and you owe it to yourself to make the short 15 minute trip from the Villages out Rt. 42 to Weirsdale to see what they have to offer. There are special guests with all types of music most every week, i.e., Charlie McCoy will be there November 26, 2005, and other coming attractions include Bill Anderson, The Bellamy Brothers, The Original Drifters, Connie Smith & Marty Stuart and the proverbial "host of others." This is a definite must see attraction right here in your area, so do it. Get more details at www.obopry.com.

For those not familiar with the Lake Weir area one of its claims to fame, other than wonderfully friendly residents, is that the infamous Ma Barker Gang met their end in a shootout with the FBI at a cottage on Lake Weir back in 1935. I think they have a re-creation of that event each year so you might want to contact the Weirsdale folk to find out the dates of that happening.

Get out and enjoy your life... it's the only one you've got.

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