

Don Brown returns with his classic country

County resident has been playing since the 1960s

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The voice is deep, rich, and weathered. The hands may show some age, but they glide over the strings of the old Gibson guitar effortlessly, like they have maybe a million times before. Don Brown is not the same young man who first graced a noisy barroom stage in Cloquet nearly six decades ago, but his country music remains much the same.

Brown started “playing out” with a friend about 1961.

“I think the first place we played was down on Dunlap Island in Cloquet, at a little place on the corner called Woody’s Bar,” he said. “I think we got five bucks a night and all the 3.2 beer we could drink. So, I was really appreciative,” he said with a laugh.

After a 31-year recording hiatus (Brown released his only previous album, “Roarin’ Again,” in 1987), Brown compiled some of his favorite recordings from his long career into an album called “The Keeper.”

Home influence

Looking back at his roots in country music, Brown spoke of being born and raised in a farmhouse on the same beautifully wooded shoreline property his current home occupies.

“My mom and dad were huge Grand Ole Opry fans, and I still remember sitting in the old farmhouse on Saturday nights with a big old radio, and my dad tuning in to the Grand Ole Opry,” Brown said.

Watching the recent Ken



Don Brown, left, and Doug Soukkala rehearse recently at Brown’s home on Chub Lake. Brown has a new album out of country music and will play with Soukkala in Carlton Sunday. *Timothy Soden-Groves / Pine Knot News*

Burns series, “Country Music,” on PBS brought back some good memories for Brown, who has continued to play the same style of country music since the very beginning of his life in music.

“When I first heard Johnny Cash back in ’54, or whenever it was, I was so hooked then, and that was my big thing,” he said. “What I still do is basically Haggard and Cash and Waylon and Charley Pride,” Brown said.

Just then, Brown’s big black Lab appeared at the door of his house overlooking Chub Lake. “That’s Cash, the dog in black,” Brown said, sharing his easygoing humor.

After graduating from high school in Carlton, Brown attended the University of Minnesota Duluth for a while, then worked for 12 years at Weyerhaeuser in Cloquet. While going to school and working, he continued to play in various country music bands throughout the 1960s. In the early 1970s, he teamed up with friend and lead guitarist Doug Soukkala to form the nucleus of the Last Stand Band.

Soukkala himself had started playing guitar at 12 or 13 years old with a local rock and roll band called the Del Mars.

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If you go

What: See Don Brown, right, and Doug Soukkala perform live (no cover charge)

Where: The Elmwood Inn, 2145 State Highway 61, Carlton

When: 3-6 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 27

Find Brown’s new CD, “The Keeper,” at B&B Market and Outdoor Advantage in Cloquet, Harold’s Service and Carlton Self-Serve in Carlton and the Wrenshall General Store.



Fun with family is like great background jazz

One of my favorite vintage jazz songs is “All the Things You Are,” Jerome Kern’s 1939 composition with Oscar Hammerstein’s lyrics. It floats down the keyboard: B-flat, E-flat, A-flat, G7 — challenging for a piano player. It was on my mind last week while I was exploring our region with our two grandkids, 4-year-old Lou and 2-year-old Mosey, and their parents.

The first afternoon, we climbed all over Cromwell’s Kaleb Anderson playground, four adults trying to keep up with the ecstatic Lou and coaxing Mosey to try the steeper slides. Once school got out, a gaggle of kids arrived with their parents, adding to the fun. One family of Smiths arrived with their seven daughters. It seemed as if they were all dancing, from one structure to another, their laughter a musical backdrop.

The next morning, we ventured to the Cloquet library, stopping by the downtown Pine Knot office to introduce them to the staff and see the art exhibit of

Karen Savage-Blue’s work.

Our daughter-in-law, Allison, loved the library’s kids’ collection, dubbing it the best she’s ever seen. While she chose a dozen books, the boys played with other kids building a brilliant large plastic block structure. I found some excellent language tapes to help me refresh my Spanish.

On to the Duluth’s Great Lakes Aquarium. Dedicated mostly to Great Lakes flora and fauna, it is beautifully composed, with sleek water-living creatures swirling around water-loving plants. It’s what my husband Rod calls “eye candy.”

The boys and their elders especially loved the replica of the Great Lakes water system. Lou and Mosey grabbed colorful plastic 8-inch boats and shepherded them through the locks. They closed the upper Sault Sainte-Marie Soo Lock doors to lower their boats from Superior to Huron and Michigan. Several lakes later, they navigated the dramatic series of locks that allows huge ocean-going vessels

to avoid Niagara Falls. We had a hard time coaxing them to leave.

It was a blustery day. We decided to walk the pier out to the lighthouse in Canal Park. The waves crashed against the canal walls, spewing spray all over us. Lots of sidestepping, lots of giggling, adults as well as kids. We dried off in the spectacular toy store on the second floor of DeWitt-Seitz, J. Skylark. We spent most of an hour in there, enjoying the array of stuffed animals, the games, books. Each of us carrying something out. Mine was “The Poet” edition of 300 magnetic words for composing poems on the refrigerator.

On another rainy day, we headed for the Children’s Museum. Imagine four adults chasing and playing with two kids. Climbing fun structures, including a small airplane you can sit in and fool with instruments. A mini café with a fully equipped miniature kitchen, where kids can prep and serve a (plastic) meal on a table so low you’ll cramp your legs. A machine that blows air to launch lightweight balls up to the ceiling, challenging your catching skills.

Afterward, we waited restlessly in the foyer of the OMC Smokehouse to indulge in a very delicious smoked and barbecued meat-intensive meal.

The rain continued — no more playground athletics. After a delicious Sunday breakfast at Carlton’s Streetcar Kitchen & Pub, we headed to Duluth’s Depot. While parents and grandparents clamber up and down engine stairs, Mosey and Lou head for the kid-height wooden train replicas that allow them to be the engineers and track maintenance guys. Midday, we took the North Shore Scenic Railroad to Lester River, a narrated trip that delivers a lot of Northland history. I never knew, for instance, that the great fire of 1918 reached all the way to the Lakeview neighborhood on the far northeastern side of Duluth.

On home days, we read books, made music, cooked delicious meals, and visited with neighbors who stopped by. This was the first year David, Allison, Lou and Mosey visited in the fall. Prior summers, they came in early August. Once they began parenting, we deferred Boundary Waters Canoe trips for cabin-vacationing

on the Gunflint Trail, taking day trips paddling Clearwater Lake and climbing every hill reasonable for a toddler. Hopefully we’ll not be too old to resume canoe trips when the kids are older. This year, it was fun to explore what our community and nearby towns and cities offer for kids.

“All the Things You Are” keeps running through my head. I’m trying to master it on the piano. It’s a great metaphor for our region, full of variety and surprises. Last summer, we enjoyed McGregor’s Wild Rice Days. If they visit in the spring, we can go birding in the Rice Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Run the Tamarack River from Cromwell to Wright in canoes. In winter, ice skate on Island Lake, sled on local hills, and cross country ski in the Fond du Lac State Forest. More than we’ll ever manage, but anticipation is one spice of life.

Ann Markusen is an economist and professor emerita at University of Minnesota. A Pine Knot board member, she lives in Red Clover Township north of Cromwell with her husband, Rod Walli.

ON THE MARK



Ann Markusen

Don Brown ...

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He wasn't too sure about making the switch to country music when Brown approached him with the idea.

But Brown persisted, and their collaboration became a long-running success. The Last Stand Band was good, often playing to large crowds devoted to their style of traditional country music.

They worked hard at their musical craft, and the hours were long.

"We used to play from 9 to 1, and then still go to play at somebody's house," Soukkala recalled. "They'd invite us to stay for breakfast and we'd still be playing at 5, 6 in the morning."

Brown remembered playing at the Register bar in Scanlon.

"Boy, that was a beautiful place to play," he said. "It had a huge stage, and a huge dance floor. They opened up about 1980 or so. We played there six nights a week for a year."

Forged stories

Having been through good times and bad together, stories of the band's adventures and misadventures during its 15-to-20-year run flowed from these two old friends in a stream of shared consciousness. The late nights on stage, traveling to and from shows, setting up and tearing down gear, the guys in the band, and the crowds — all remembered, treasured, and shared freely.

Brown told the story of how a man came into the Register one night, introduced himself as Phil Goodman, and soon joined the band. "Phil was a fantastic steel guitar and five-string banjo player. We were a pretty good band back then, and Phil just added to it, even teaching my son Greg some guitar," Brown said.

"He played with us until one night, he just didn't show up. The next morning he calls me, 'You

gotta help me out, man, I'm in jail,'" Brown said. "Then, on the front page of the Duluth Tribune, we saw that the FBI arrested one of its national Ten Most Wanted in Duluth. And there was a picture of Phil Goodman, only that wasn't his real name. The guy was a career hustler, a crook."

And so, the band had lost its pedal steel player, but Brown remembered him as a great guy and a great bandmate, one that wouldn't harm a flea.

Soukkala recalled how a trailer they purchased dirt cheap fell apart just as they got it home one night, miraculously avoiding serious injuries and the loss of all the band's gear on Thompson Hill.

Brown recounted how a man armed with a rifle came into a bar where the band was playing and fired a round in anger. The band, responding as one, took quick action. "You never saw four guys dive behind a piano so quick," he said.

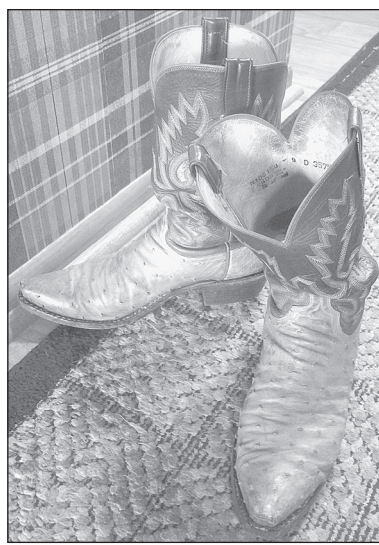
Denouement, then ...

After many years of playing together, and following the death of a bandmate and dear friend, the band members drifted apart. The Last Stand Band faded into local country music history.

Soukkala went on to play with Mahtowa's highly acclaimed Holy Hootenanners band. Brown, now retired from a career in law enforcement with the Carlton County sheriff's department, still plays as a solo act at nursing homes and assisted living facilities around the area.

Drawing from his late brother Keith's extensive recorded collection of original country songs, and his own original music and past recordings, Brown paid a visit to Kerry Rodd at KDAL radio in 1987. Rodd spun the tunes and interviewed Brown, providing the interesting on-air dialogue. That is the format for Brown's new CD, "The Keeper."

Brown's son Greg, an established Nashville music producer, took Brown's compiled recordings and the Kerry Rodd radio



Doug Soukkala's comfortable old cowboy boots sit in a hall at Don Brown's home recently. *Timothy Soden-Groves / Pine Knot News*

interview and produced the CD.

Album in hand, Brown then called his old friend and musical partner Soukkala. The two had not played together since the breakup of the Last Stand Band in the late 1980s.

Brown proposed they play as a duo one evening — 5 to 8 p.m. — at the Chickadee coffeehouse in Barnum. But, things had changed since the late-night gigs of the old days. Soukkala replied, "Don, I've got my pajamas on at 8 o'clock."

On the road again

Undaunted, the two forged ahead with the plan, and even scheduled a rehearsal. Brown recalled the get-together: "So, he (Soukkala) brought his guitar over, and we sat there. All we did was laugh about old times, sang maybe one or two songs, and said, 'the hell with it,' Brown said. "So, at the Chickadee, well, we bantered a lot there. Doug used to just stand and play lead guitar. But now, he tells stories about the old days, you know, so many stories."

Brown and Soukkala estimate they have more than 200 country classics in their well-played repertoire, so rehearsal takes a back seat to spontaneity, while requests and questions from the



In the early 1970s, Don Brown, right, teamed up with friend and lead guitarist Doug Soukkala to form the nucleus of the Last Stand Band. They posed for a photo after a gig at the Chickadee Coffeehouse & Deli in Barnum. They play in Carlton this weekend. *Contributed photo*

audience are welcomed.

Their show at the Chickadee was packed, with people begging them to book a larger venue.

"After that, Don called me up and said, 'Doug, don't you think we should play a little bigger place?' I asked him, 'Well dang it, Don, what time is that from?' and he said, 'Well I don't know, what do you think?' I said, 'Well, maybe 3 to 4?'"

The veteran country music duo is booked to play at the Elmwood Inn on Sunday from 3 to 6 p.m.

"Don and I, we will never change because that's what we were brought up with — we're going to keep playing (the original, classic style of country music) until we die," Soukkala said.

There should be plenty of stories too.

"He's more like a brother to

me than a friend," Soukkala said. "We went through a lot of stuff together, but we pulled through. And thank God, because otherwise I think we'd both be dead right now if we'd kept on the pace we were going. That's why this is a blessing to me, that I can do this with Don, because I didn't think I could ever do this again."

When Soukkala arrived at Brown's place for a recent get-together, he took off his old cowboy boots and walked in.

Going over some of the music for the Elmwood Inn gig, they covered old songs from Rosanne Cash, Charley Pride, Don Williams, Gram Parsons, George Strait, Merle Haggard and, of course, Johnny Cash.

Just a couple of guys about as comfortable playing with each other as an old pair of well-worn cowboy boots.

Cloquet senior gets a bite of New York fashion world

Caleb Swanson

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Cloquet High School senior Sydney Hall is a typical student in most aspects of life besides one — fashion.

Fashion has been a focus since she was little. At some point, planning cute outfits took priority over homework, to her teachers' dismay. This habit evolved over the years to a full-fledged passion for fashion.

Going into her senior year at Cloquet High School, Sydney was talking to her hairstylist uncle, Jason Backe, who told her he was going to New York Fashion Week. Sydney's mom and Backe's sister, Jennifer Hall, came up with the idea of Jason bringing Sydney along and finding her an internship for the week. (Jason graduated from Cloquet High School in 1987.)

Backe reached out to someone he had collaborated with in the past. Kelly Cutrone, the founder and head of the public relations agency People's Revolution, agreed to take on Sydney as an

intern for the week.

Former Pine Knot News intern Caleb Swanson (also a senior at CHS) sat down with Sydney to find out more about her adventure in New York.

Q What was your specific job?

A I helped in the People's Revolution office making seating charts and assembling backstage passes for both the "I Love Pretty" and Hogan McLaughlin shows. I also attended the "I Love Pretty" show and helped hand out backstage passes at the door and set up seats with numbers and gift bags before the show.

Q Did you have any time off from the internship?

A At times where I wasn't interning with Kelly, I assisted my uncles, Jason Backe and Ted Gibson, of the Ted Gibson Artistic Team. I attended model castings, helped set up hairstyling stations, gathered media content for members of the team, ran any



Cloquet High School senior Sydney Hall was attending the Sherri Hill fashion show when she met Ibraham Kamara, the face of Gucci, during New York Fashion Week earlier this fall. *Photo by Jennifer Hall*

errands After all the work put into each show, I got to attend the shows in whatever seats were available. I helped and attended seven shows between interning and assisting.

After one show, I was approached by a local NYC photographer who asked me to model. My mom and I met him on the last day of the trip at the Brooklyn Bridge. After the shoot, he told me he wanted to work with me because of my light complexion.

Q Can you tell us a little bit about your experience in the city?

A The first day I toured the Fashion Institute of Technology, which is where I hope to attend college. I toured the museum at FIT as well. I loved everything about the campus and the city as a whole. It is a very inspiring place to be. Lots of very long days ending with dinner at 10 p.m., which I was a huge fan of.

Silver Rose Fashions [in Cloquet] also asked me to represent their store at the Sherri Hill show, since they weren't planning to attend this Fashion Week. I took a taxi by myself to meet two other girls representing Silver Rose.

This show was much different from the other ones I attended, as the other ones were more up-and-coming designers and Sherri Hill is already extremely established. It was a very classy venue and it was a dream to see the beautiful couture dresses up close. Halima was the star model and Bebe Rexha sang on the runway. It was truly an honor to represent Silver Rose and I am so thankful for the experience.

I'd also like to thank my uncles, Kelly Cutrone and People's Revolution, and the photographer Duane A. Lyken.

Q If you could hang out with any three people, who would they be, and why?

A Billy Porter, because he is my favorite fashion icon and an all-around awesome human. Anna Wintour, because she's the editor and chief of Vogue, so I could learn a ton from her. Alexander McQueen, because he was the first designer who fascinated me and is extremely inspiring.