



Tripp Horner of Toms River is picking and grinning at Albert Music Hall.

Pluckin' in the Pines

Saturday night is the time for down-home country music at Waretown's Albert Music Hall

By **SUSAN BLOOM**

Photos by **ARISTIDE ECONOMOPOULOS**

Long before the doors open at 6:30 p.m., a line has formed around Albert Hall in Waretown, deep in the Pinelands of South Jersey. Everyone's getting ready to jockey for a good seat because this is Saturday night and Saturday night at Albert Music Hall means one thing: old-time country music.

"We're about a whole lot of warm feeling and fun," says Elaine Everett of the Pinelands Cultural Society, which manages the music hall. "It reflects the hands-on nature and cooperation of a bunch of people getting together to have a good time, play music and pay homage to the unique heritage of the Pinelands region."

Often called "the Grand Ole Opry of New Jersey," Albert Music Hall was designed to look "like the porch of a cabin in the woods" and is decorated with musical instruments, farm tools, vintage quilts and other period memorabilia.

"From bluegrass and country music

to rockabilly, there's something for everyone here," says Albert Music Hall's lead sound engineer Tom Rouze, 48. "The bands change every week, but it's all about the music and it's good clean fun.

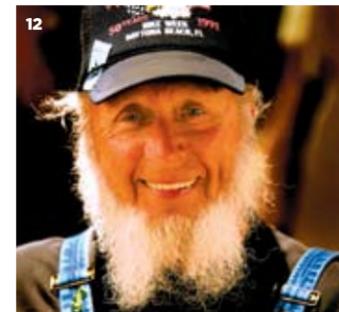
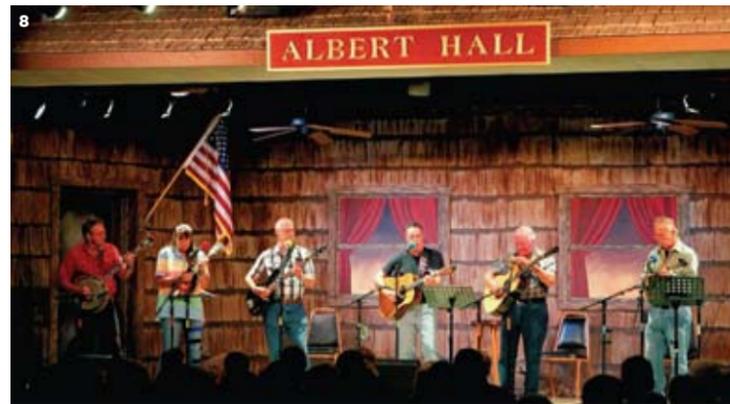
"It's the only place where musicians truly play from the goodness of their heart," says the Barnegat resident and former theater technician. "The music comes from a very pure place and there's a real connection between the musicians and the audience. Everyone loves being here."

Albert Music Hall got its start in the 1970s, when brothers Joe and George Albert's small deer hunting lodge began attracting musicians from throughout the Pinelands, a heavily forested area covering parts of seven southern counties. The cabin had no electricity, but the coffee, homemade cake and Piney spirit flowed every Saturday night until the wee hours. Hundreds of musicians and fans converged on the secluded spot to play the mandolins, fiddles, guitars, banjos, washtub basses and rhythm drums unique to the Pine Barrens region and sing tunes strongly influenced by 1800s Irish and Welsh melodies and old folk songs from the British Isles.

George Albert died in 1973, a year before the "Sounds of the Jersey Pines" moved to rented space in the Waretown Auction Hall to better accommodate the large crowds and the Pinelands Cultural Society started charging a small admission fee. Joe Albert died 1987.

In January 1997, the society opened the current 6,000-square-foot, 350-seat Albert Music Hall, named after the brothers who inspired it. Since then, the hall has welcomed more than 250,000 visitors, and musicians continue to play for free, with the \$5 admission going to PCS to fund maintenance of the facility and local student scholarships.

"We're a historical society chartered to preserve the cultural history and musical legacy of South Jersey. And Albert Hall aims to carry on the structure, spirit and camaraderie of the weekly music gatherings held at



the Albert brothers' cabin," says PCS president Roy Everett.

The hall is located on Wells Mills Road in a town so quiet that it only recently received its own exit off the Garden State Parkway (69), despite its close proximity to the popular Shore destination of Long Beach Island.

Yes, there's a show every Saturday night, weather permitting, except for two weeks during the Christmas and New Year holidays, when the building is shut down for annual maintenance. And, as live performances go, it has to be one of the best values in the Garden State. The \$5 fee (\$1 for children) buys a three-plus-hour show featuring six to seven bands, each playing 30-minute sets, and music rarely ends before 11:30 p.m.

In addition to the onstage talent, outdoor attractions include "porch pickin'" in the adjacent 600-square-foot "Pickin' Shed," as well as jam sessions in the parking lot that bring professional musicians and novices together.

"What you hear out there happens spontaneously, and it's a great cross-section of different musical genres in an environment that supports live acoustic music and encourages and highlights local talent," says Manasquan resident Heidi Olsen, 52, lead singer and banjo player for the bluegrass band Heidi Olsen and The Night.

"There's no better feeling in the world than making music with old and new friends. Albert Music Hall brings together like-minded people and helps people learn, jam, and make musical connections," she says.

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Look for a photo gallery at nj.com/inside-jersey.

- 1) Co-founder Joe Albert's washtub bass.
- 2) Promotional buttons are on display in the hall.
- 3) Laughter on the porch during intermission.
- 4) Bill Gilsenan checks on musicians warming up backstage.
- 5) Rob Swain, on bass, visiting from Alexandria, Va., joins an impromptu ensemble.
- 6) Cake enjoyed alfresco.
- 7) Pie and cake are for sale at the food booth.
- 8) Bluegrass band Timber Creek.
- 9) The overflow crowd at the Pickin' Shed stays late into the night.
- 10) A steel guitar in the Pickin' Shed.
- 11) Timber Creek on the main stage.
- 12) Peter Borchester of Forked River has been coming to Albert Hall for years.
- 13) Getting grub at the food booth.

Soulful British Import

MUSIC | Alas, Beyoncé won't be touring mid-sized New York City clubs in 2013. Luckily, we've got a reasonable facsimile

coming to the East Village in January. **Emeli Sandé**, a singer-songwriter raised in the bucolic Scottish countryside, can't dance like Beyoncé, but she shares more with the American superstar than an accent mark. In her native United Kingdom, Sandé is already a celebrity — "Our Version of Events," her first album, topped the charts. "Heaven," "Read All About It," and the very Beyoncé-like "My Kind of Love" were all European hits. Her best track, though, is the soulful "Next to Me," a piano-pop stomp with a near-gospel chorus and a passionate lead vocal from the young singer. This is a voice that America ought to know better; chances are we will, so catch her in a reasonably sized theater while you can. Appearing Jan. 17 at Webster Hall (125 E. 11th St.) at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$25. Visit websterhall.com. — Tris McCall



WHILE YOU'RE VISITING | Little Italy might be smaller than ever, but it will never disappear if Rich Torrisi and Mario Carbone have anything to say about it. Their **Torrisi Italian Specialties** brings excitement to Mulberry Street with its casual take on Italian fine dining. For \$75, the seven-course prix fixe gives you the full grandmother treatment: appetizers for the table, house-made pasta, a choice of meat or fish and an assortment of

desserts to finish it off. But it also shows you how something as seemingly simple as scrambled eggs can be cooked with enough care to legitimately share the table with an elegant duck rillette. Down the street at their other restaurant, **Parm**, they flip the script by taking the simplest of Italian-American fare — chicken parm, fried calamari, baked ziti — and making it seem special and revered. Visit torrisinyc.com and parmnyc.com. — Brian Stitt

xx Marks the Mix

MUSIC | **Jamie xx** handles samples and wisps of melody like a scientist handling trace amounts of a dangerous chemical. When he drops them into his tracks, the result can be quietly explosive. Baria Qureshi has been dropped from the lineup, and her moody six-string no longer

throws soft reflected light on The xx's mixes. But the other three members of the group are still chasing dreams down mirrored halls. Bassist Oliver Sim and synth player Romy Madley-Croft write 4 a.m. poetry about heartbreak and longing, and they sing it all in twin haunted deadpans. Most importantly, producer Jamie xx, who made "Take Care" for Drake and Rihanna, remains in the fold, and he's ventured even deeper into artful minimalism on "Coexist," the British group's latest album. The group is touring with Chairlift, a fine Canadian duo with songs that resemble Eurythmics at its earliest, and iciest. Appearing Jan. 27 at Electric Factory (421 N. Seventh St.) at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$30. Visit electricfactory.info. — T.M.C.



WHILE YOU'RE VISITING | David Ralic, of Haddonfield's Ralic's Steakhouse, plans to cross the Delaware this winter to open **Ralic's on South**, a seafood joint in the old Black Angus Steakhouse location at 117-119 South Street. Ralic, whose weight loss surgery still has him shedding the pounds, partnered with Rachel Klein of Miss Rachel's Pantry to develop vegetarian and vegan options for the menu, not

always a given at a fishhouse. And yes, that's an octopus bursting from the restaurant's second floor balcony, a sign designed by Burlington-based Bieling's, known for their amusement ride artwork. Ralic just named John Anninos the restaurant's executive chef. Anninos recently spent two years working on a commercial fishing boat after five years as chef-owner of the Morning Catch in Audubon. — Beth D'Addono

Albert Music Hall

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"People show their appreciation here," says Matt Morris, lead guitarist for the band Southern Specific, a play on the Southern Pacific railroad line and "the many train references that appear in country songs."

His four-man band, a regular at Albert Music Hall since 2005, is known for its toe-tapping covers of tunes from country legends such as Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis.

"They dance in the aisles and holler requests, and when you go offstage, people greet you and give you the thumbs up and tell you how much they enjoyed you," says Morris, 49, of Langhorne, Pa.

"There are no barriers here like at other venues—bands come through the front door like everybody else and walk through the crowd to leave. That intimacy with the crowd is part of what makes Albert Hall what it is — a group of people who truly love and enjoy this music in a genuine way."

Josh Werner, an 18-year-old guitar virtuoso from Forked River, has played alongside musicians far older than himself in more than 300 shows. "Getting the audience engaged means so much to us and we feed off that," he says.

"I've been coming here for 12 years, two or three times a month," says Anna Mae Moore of Tuckerton. "I love all the country music, the different instruments and the songs, and everyone is so friendly."

Woodbridge resident Kay Majek, 69, who regularly hits the country music circuit in Branson, Mo., also finds Albert Music Hall appealing. "It's just so wonderful to see the people here with all of their musical talents. This place is really something special," she says.

For Peter Borchester, a retired Lacey Township public works supervisor, the simplicity and authenticity of the music played is what repeatedly brings him back. "The music is different every week, but it's always great and the musicians are near-professional. In this area, this is really as it was and what they played, no electronic stuff," he says. "Just good, basic music."

Surrounded by a welcoming crowd and a fellowship of musicians, says guitarist Werner, "there ain't no better way to spend a Saturday night." @

IF YOU GO:

Regular Saturday night shows begin at 7:30. There are two special Sunday shows dedicated to bluegrass music — one in February and one in September. Be sure to check out Albert Music Hall's annual anniversary show on Jan. 5. Doors open at 6 p.m. and a special pre-show film on construction of the current building at 131 Wells Mills Road in Waretown begins at 7 p.m. Visit alberthall.org.