

The search for live entertainment in Robeson County

Darlene W. Natale Special to the Robesonian - June 16, 2023



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The singer-songwriter Scarlet Tantrum entertained a receptive audience with her alternative pop stylings as they dined and sipped drinks on the patio at Your Pie in Lumberton.

The 19-year-old has two new singles releases, and her set was diverse, covering tunes ranging in style from Billie Eilish to Fleetwood Mac.

The Carthage performer plays about four gigs a week, mostly in Moore County and within about a 90-minute drive, including the Triangle and Wilmington.

She said she was excited to find Your Pie because she contacted most of the bars and restaurants in Robeson County in search of venues.

"Your Pie is the only one in Robeson County that does consistent live music," Tantrum said.

"One thing we did when we opened up is we wanted to make sure that we created a kind of place for people to come together and gather – a family-friendly atmosphere with live music," said Kevin Fraley, the Operating Partner of Your Pie. The Pizza restaurant on Fayetteville Road,

has live music on Thursday nights when the weather permits, usually from March into November.

Last Thursday, families, couples, groups of friends and even a dog availed themselves of the music-filled patio atmosphere.

Fraley said there is a lack of live music venues in Robeson County.

“Our thing is we wanted to do live music out on our 2,500 square-foot patio when the weather is nice. Everybody has their little niche,” Fraley said there are some places in town that do karaoke once a week. He said Your Pie is committed to live entertainment. “It continues to build. I don’t know why other restaurants don’t do it – maybe the space is the issue.”

Lauren Busch, the Wing Company general manager in Pembroke reports that they plan to start musical entertainment around the 4th of July. She said they just moved to this new location in the Thomas Center Building and wanted to give the staff time to acclimate before launching the music.

The Wing Company in Lumberton features live entertainment provided by customers, aka Karaoke, each Wednesday at 8:30 p.m. Manager Sunshine Santos said they are talking about adding other live music soon.

ECONOMICS

“I think it [lack of live music venues] is not a Robeson County problem, this is at the very least a United States problem,” said Aaron Vandermeer, an associate professor of Jazz Studies and the Music Industry at UNC Pembroke.

“Smaller businesses and restaurants operate on margins,” said Vandermeer. He explained that Moore County is wealthy, and the towns are travel destinations with vibrant downtowns with many venues in Southern Pines and Pinehurst. Vandermeer said that unlike Robeson County, Moore County has more tax revenues and arts organizations.

Most of the performers at restaurants, bars, wineries and brewpubs are single guitarists because the cost of bringing in a quartet or combo is prohibitive.

Vandermeer said that for musicians (jazz combos, classical string quartets) to be any good, they must spend thousands of hours practicing their instrument to play in a group and make a sound that is reasonably pleasant to the human ear. Vandermeer explained that popular music is simpler to perform.

"There is a ton of live music around here, but it is all singer-guitarists because that is the least expensive musical configuration for a restaurant to be able to afford and there are a plethora of people who do that because it does take practice to be able to do that but not nearly as much as playing a string quartet or being a jazz musician which requires virtuosity," Vandermeer said. He said we have some very good singer guitarists in the area and the type of music is more popular.

Vandermeer said the economic factor is the big one, along with the easy consumption of any music any time, along with population density and the small margins of businesses.

MUSIC IS EASY NOW

He said that live music is not highly valued by the youngest generation because music consumption has become easy.

"We have been able to have music anywhere and everywhere that we want," Vandermeer said. "Even if we are in some remote place off the grid, we always have music and now it is so easy to hear."

He explained that with an Apple Music subscription and an iPhone, you hear pretty much anything that has ever been recorded anytime you want.

"Because of these choices, it greatly lessens the mystique and the desire for live music," Vandermeer said.

He said music education is less prevalent and people don't know how difficult it is to perform quality music. The students don't have that experience today. They are consumers of popular music and have experiences going to mega concerts at arenas with intricate lighting and pyrotechnics.

"That is their concert experience," Vandermeer said. "But going to see a live act at a restaurant or a small arts venue or a winery or whatever, that is something that is very foreign to them. They have better things to do."

Tantrum explained the difficulty of live performances in small venues.

"A lot of people don't even realize this is a real person singing," Tantrum said. "They don't process it. Because there are a lot of times, I'm at a grill or a bar or something, and they're not paying attention to me. I'm just background music. Now, if I play that one song that they love, you know, then I get their attention. But, you know, they're just there to have a fun time and all of that, but I also want to be heard as a musician, you know, I want to be heard I want to be appreciated."

OTHER OPTIONS

Robeson County has options beyond bars and restaurants. The Givens Performing Arts Center at UNC Pembroke offers top-notch live entertainment throughout the year.

The Friends of Main Street provides its "Alive After 5" on the Dick Taylor Plaza in Lumberton through the end of June.

The Inner Peace Center for the Arts will offer musical entertainment with brunch on July 30 on North Chestnut Street in Lumberton.

Vandermeer takes his UNCP Jazz Combo class students to around 24 performances a year, including River Voices.

The Pembroke Wing Company offers DJ Bingo at 7 p.m. on Thursday nights for fun that isn't live music.