

CATHARINE RICHERT: In Southern Minnesota along the Des Moines River, there's a small town called Jackson. This weekend, it will become alive with the rhythm of the River Music Festival. It's in its 20th year, and its founder and organizer, Kathy Franzen, joins me now to tell me all about it. Hello, Kathy.

KATHY FRANZEN: Hi, Catharine.

CATHARINE RICHERT: All right, how did this festival come to be? Twenty years ago, what was the idea behind it?

KATHY FRANZEN: Well, I'll give my husband credit for that, because it was his idea. It was an all-school reunion happening, and he said, we should have a festival that celebrates the musicians that have come out of Jackson or have a connection to Jackson in some way.

Well, I kind of ran with that, and we contacted people who had been in a band in high school and still had bands, and we ended up with two days of a festival. Some bands reunited after 20 years out of high school. [LAUGHS] And it was fun.

It was supposed to be a one-year gig, so we didn't have anything in 2007. And they asked us to come back in 2008 and do it again. And here we are today.

CATHARINE RICHERT: Now, how has the festival grown over the last two decades?

KATHY FRANZEN: Well, what we've really seen-- we've seen our audiences love the music more than they did at the beginning. We've introduced people to different genres they may have not listened to in the past. And we really have an attentive following that really, they appreciate the music that we're bringing to town and to Southwest Minnesota.

CATHARINE RICHERT: All right, so set the scene for us. Where does this festival take place? How many stages are there?

KATHY FRANZEN: We have two stages. One is-- and we're at the historic Fort Belmont, which is actually up on the hill. We left the riverbanks in 2018 because of the river flooding. So we went up to Fort Belmont on the hill, and we stayed there because we've got ample parking, we can have camping up there and just absolutely stunning sunsets behind the stage.

And then we have a smaller stage that is actually an old rural church, the Delafield Church. And it might seat 50 people. So between the main stage acts, we have a songwriter or a duo perhaps perform in the nice, air-conditioned church. We have children's activities, art vendors, food vendors, alcohol vendors, and just a great combination of people enjoying music.

We've been called a microfest. We're not very big. We've had other musicians call us or tell us that we've just hit the sweet spot as far as size goes. So we love it.

CATHARINE

RICHERT:

That's a great compliment. OK, now we're going to listen to some of the music that will be featured this year. This next song happens to be one that I know and like very much as someone who grew up in North Carolina. This is Minnesota band Pert Near Sandstone with the song "Appalachian Girl."

[PERT NEAR SANDSTONE, "APPALACHIAN GIRL"]

Blow a kiss to the moon

If you're lonely this June

I'll catch it in the Southern sky

'Cause here, the stars are the same

And my feelings won't change

I'll love you every day till I die

Appalachian girl, Appalachian girl

You're the only one I got in my eyes

CATHARINE

RICHERT:

All right, Kathy, tell us about this band.

KATHY

FRANZEN:

I have to smile every time I think of Pert Near Sandstone. I have a wonderful memory of them. The first time they came to Rhythm of the River was 2008. And they were a young-- I think they'd only been together for a couple of years.

I remember them stuffed into a little van, all four or five of them, and with such joy on their faces. And they wanted to sleep-- they wanted to go camping at the local state park after the festival. So they were just down-to-earth, and they still are, just wonderful.

The first time we had them, there was a little toddler, just really getting into the music, jumping up and down. There was an 18-year-old girl so absorbed in the music. I was about 50 years old then and loving every moment of it. And I turned behind me, and there was an elderly woman sitting in a chair, tapping her feet and tapping her cane. And I thought, this is what we want. This is exactly the type of music we want to attract, all generations.

CATHARINE

RICHERT:

Oh, that's a great story. It really spans the age spectrum there with what you do. OK, here's another band in the lineup for this coming festival. From Illinois, this is Chicago Farmer and the Fieldnotes. This is their song, "Everybody in this Town."

[CHICAGO FARMER AND THE FIELDNOTES, "EVERYBODY IN THIS TOWN"]

I woke up this morning with the last night's blues

Tied one on, but I lost my shoes

I don't need a paper to know the news

Think I'll just go uptown

Everybody there's throwing around my name

Seems like I'm always catching that blame

It's just another one of them small-town gangs

I think I'm going to lose this round

CATHARINE All right, tell us more about Chicago Farmer and the Fieldnotes.

RICHERT:

KATHY Well, the lyrics to that song are pretty much one of the reasons that we were attracted to them in the first place.

FRANZEN: We first heard them in Illinois at Moccasin Creek Festival. And we've heard them several times.

And again, this is their third time to Rhythm of the River because the audience loves them. Rural Minnesota can relate to those lyrics. They sing a lot about farmers and the change that farmers are seeing these days with the factory farm becoming a thing and taking some of the energy away from the family farm.

They just have real meaningful lyrics. And again, just like all the bands we call back again, they all have such wonderful personalities. They're great to work with. And we just really enjoy having them.

CATHARINE Well Kathy, I'm curious. You must listen to a lot of music. You just mentioned that you go to other festivals and check out bands. I mean, how does this all work? How do you find bands to bring, or do they ask to come?

KATHY Well, we joke a lot and say, it's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it. Somebody's got to go out--

FRANZEN:

CATHARINE [LAUGHS] I don't know if it's that bad.

RICHERT:

[LAUGHTER]

KATHY It's not that bad. I remember the first time we had a band actually email us and say, can we come? And that was like we felt we had turned a point there. And that was-- and now it happens so much that we hate telling people that we're full. But especially this year, we are only bringing back musicians who have been to the festival in the past because of our 20 celebration.

FRANZEN: And, yeah, that turning point where people really start to want to come to your festival, that makes a difference in your energy level as far as the planning, the 11 months of planning that go into it. And we're all volunteers, so yeah.

CATHARINE Well, what do you think keeps bringing people back year after year to the festival?

RICHERT:

KATHY Well, the quality of the music, and again, the different genres. We're pretty eclectic, and we aren't stuck in one spot, which is great. We love those festivals as well, but we have a great variety.

FRANZEN:

We also have a beautiful setting to be in. And like I said before, I think the sunsets at Fort Belmont are just priceless.

CATHARINE
RICHERT:

Yeah. Now, how do you hope the festival continues to grow in the next decade?

KATHY
FRANZEN:

Wow, you just hit the question there because actually, we're trying to figure out who can take over. I've done this now for 20 years, and we've seen committee members come and go. And my husband has done this side by side with me.

And our daughter was intentionally going to take over the chairmanship of the festival. In fact, she has. But life changed for her, and she's not in a position right now to be able to do that either.

So we will be something next year. We don't what, but this will likely be the last two-day festival at Fort Belmont that you'll see. So kind of tears me up to say it.

CATHARINE
RICHERT:

Yeah. Well, then all the more reason people might want to go this year. We have about a minute left. But, Kathy, if someone's listening, and they want to go, what should they know about getting there?

KATHY
FRANZEN:

Just go to RhythmoftheRiver.org. You can find the information on ticket sales. Or we have another app. It's ROTR.app, A-P-P, and you can go there.

But you can find all the information about how to get here. Our prices are very reasonable. And tickets, the price will go up on Friday, so it's time today to get your ticket if you want to come.

And there's still a few camping spots left, I think. We do have some hotels and another campground in town, so if anybody's interested in that.

CATHARINE
RICHERT:

All right, wonderful. Well, thank you so much, Kathy. Kathy Franzen is the organizer and founder of the Rhythm of the River music festival in Jackson, Minnesota.