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Bringing It All Home

Stone River Music Fest returns for round 2 with Dustin Pittsley and friends

BY G.K. HIZER

If you thought festival season was over now that autumn is upon us, think again. If anything, the break in temperatures signals one final spring to the finish while it's still mild enough to enjoy being outdoors before our first freeze.

We do know that October weather is unpredictable, however, so aside from Oktoberfest, it's hard to make solid plans.

That makes Stone River Music Fest one of the great music festivals of the season to get your fix going into the fall. It returns this weekend, Sept. 23-25, for a near perfect celebration of both local music and the change in seasons.

If you're not familiar with Stone River, you can't really be faulted. Now in its second year, the festival started fairly quietly as a gathering of friends that was opened to the public. With a grassroots campaign amongst the bands to get word out, it was a successful event in its initial incarnation, drawing a respectable crowd and providing what most agree was one of the most relaxed and enjoyable weekend festivals of the year in 2010.

Hosted on the land of Dustin Pittsley's family in Chandler, which is roughly an hour outside of Tulsa, Stone River is just far enough away to separate yourself from work stresses for the weekend, yet close enough to not be exhausted when you return. For local music lovers, it's a great way to recharge and get your music fix as summer ends and the fall officially arrives.

A couple things separate Stone River from other festivals to make it truly stand out from the pack. First is the setting: situated on 40 wooded acres of private land that has been personally cleared and developed, the setting feels more like park and return to nature than most festival grounds, which are often set up in an open field.

Second, this is truly a family (and family friendly) event. Essentially run by the Pittsley family with a few outside volunteers and located on the land of Jim & Vicki Pittsley, Dustin's parents, everything about the weekend has a personal touch and feel. Even the lineup has a family-like feel as all of the acts are friends and have known each other for years.

"Jeff Martinson and Dustin asked if they could use the land to do something last year and we said sure. We didn't expect it to turn into anything like this, but the family really got behind it and made it happen," Vicki Pittsley said, referring to how the festival got its start.

"This year has a lot of the same bands as last year," said Dustin Pittsley. "I basically gave the people who played last year first pick of if and when they wanted to play again this year because they helped us by being a part last year and almost everyone came back."

There are a few additions this year, including Brandon Clark Band, who plays at 10pm on Friday night. "Brandon and I have played together a few times and he showed some interest, plus the band really seems to fit the bill, so we were glad to add him to the lineup," Pittsley said.

This should prove to be true as Clark and his band may play a different set of clubs than most of the bands on the roster, but they all share similar styles.

Other additions to this year's roster include Brad James Band and Chris Becker, both of which blend nicely with the rest of the bands while adding something new to the mix.

The music officially kicks off at 8pm this Friday night, giving anyone a chance to get home from work, change, head out to the festival ground and set up camp without feeling too rushed. Chris Becker opens the show at 8pm, followed by Dustin Pittsley Band at 9pm, Brandon Clark Band at 10pm and Randy Crouch at 11pm.

Although the music is only officially scheduled until midnight, you know the evening will extend out until 1am or after. That's part of what makes it so enjoyable: although, the weekend stays pretty much on schedule, it also lets the music flow.

Saturday afternoon's lineup is primarily acoustic with Scott Aycock, host of the Folk Salad radio show, opening at 12:30pm and hosting or announcing most of the daytime performances. The acoustic portion of the day includes Desi & Cody at 1pm, followed by Wink Burcham at 1:40pm, Sage Flower at 2:30pm, Jeff Martinson at 3:15pm and Klondike 5 String Band at 4pm to provide a transition.

Pilgrim then kicks off Saturday evening at 5pm, followed by Brad James Band, Red Dirt Rangers (with Randy Crouch), Steve Pryor and Tom Skinner in hourly slots. The evening's lineup then wraps up as Dustin Pittsley, Jesse Aycock, Paul Banjaman and "friends" take over at 10pm for what will undoubtedly be an extended jam session between everyone who has stuck around over the weekend. These are the moments that make a weekend like this a special musical event for both the artists and the fans, so you'll want to plan on staying late and enjoying every moment.

For those who do stay over, Sunday afternoon wraps up with a "Gospel jam" hosted by Tim Skinner, Don Morris and friends from noon until 2pm, allowing time to tear down camp and return home with time to settle back in before returning to work and life at hand.

Anyone who's followed Pittsley's career knows, he started at a young age, playing out when he was 16 years old and he remembers what it was like starting out and everyone who opened doors for him. When asked about his relationship with Pryor, Pittsley shared that "he was always really accepting of me. Tom Skinner and Steve Pryor both were. They didn't care that I was young. They always helped me out, so it's always fun to get to see and play with them again."

Things have grown in 2011 with more land cleared, more trails, even a general store and sound booth built to help accommodate all that's needed for a full weekend. Food vendors, including Josh from The Doghouse and an additional caterer are returning for a second year and will be present with a full menu of food options for the weekend. Beer and wine will also be available options and a variety of arts and crafts vendors will be present to give the weekend a true festival feel.

Primitive camping is included in the weekend with your pick of camping spots, ranging from cleared and open space to wooded areas.

"This really is different than any other festival. Imagine forty acres of land with miles of trails and creeks and nature all around. It's like a National park," Pittsley said.

Tickets are \$15 for Friday, \$20 for Saturday or \$25 for the entire weekend if you purchase in advance, with a \$5 premium (\$20/\$25/\$30) if you pay cash at the gate. All of the details you could want including maps and directions can be found at stonerivermusicfestival.com.

Send all comments and feedback regarding Music to ghizer@urbantulsa.com.