

Homemade Music

Small, cozy concerts at some Central Texans' houses let listeners and musicians get up close and personal



By Denise Gamino

Musicians are making more house calls these days. House concerts are the next best thing to music around a campfire. The musician is close at hand, the audience is small and quiet, and the setting is intimate and relaxed.

A private house concert is, indeed, held in someone's home. Hosts remove or push aside their furniture to set up chairs. Friends and strangers alike are invited via email or social media, and the donation for entry goes directly to the musical guest. Not-for-profit house concerts are growing in popularity in Central Texas, and they feature both local singer/songwriters and out-of-state troubadours.

House audiences are well behaved — they don't text, tweet or talk over the music.

"House concerts have been around since the beginning of time," said Cheryl Duckett of Brenham. She and her husband, Glen, used to host concerts in their Washington County home, beginning in 1997 while raising three young sons. "If you go back to the 1800s here, people would visit each other and they would break out the instruments."

Musicians are fond of house gigs because



they are lucrative and laid back. They even can save money by spending the night with the hosts, and house audiences buy lots of CDs. Many guests pay more than the suggested donation.

And for a musician, bringing down the house is a matter of fact.

Above Mosaic Art & Home SMITHVILLE

Just two days after playing the Kennedy Center in Washington, virtuoso fiddler

Warren Hood of Austin performed in a living room above a corner store on Main Street here.

"It sounds better in here, believe it or not," said Hood, who's been touring since he was a teen. He likens the acoustics to a church.

The airy, second-floor home of Jeri and Walter Winslett has 12-foot ceilings and was built in the 1890s. The Winsletts run Mosaic Art & Home furniture and art gift shop downstairs. At times over the past 120 years, the store housed an undertaker,

a furniture store, a five and dime, a Piggly Wiggly grocery, an art gallery and a drugstore. The second floor has been home to law offices, a lodge hall, a dance studio, and dentists and doctors, which allowed doctors to send prescription slips to the drugstore through a hole in the floor.

At a recent Friday night house concert, many of the 65 guests sat in chairs the Winsletts bought at a Methodist church garage sale. Others sat on stools or on the family couch. Jeri Winslett perched on the kitchen counter.



Photos by Jay Godwin



Above, singer/songwriter Butch Hancock performs an Arhaven House Concerts show hosted at the Cedar Creek home of Joe and Bev Angel. At left, Lally Jennings hands out name tags as folks arrive for the show. At far left, Dana Cooper of Nashville entertains a crowd at the Elgin home of Randy and Julia Sulsar.

"My favorite part of playing a house concert is the intimacy with the audience," Hood said later. "Oftentimes the audience is so close they could reach out and touch you if they wanted to — but they usually don't."

Hood was accompanied by cousin Marshall Hood and friend Willie Pipkin, both playing guitars. The trio stood in front of large arched windows with blinds closed to the evening light of Main Street. A spotlight atop a bookshelf shone warmly on the performers.

They opened with Doug Sahn's tune "Is

Anybody Goin' to San Antone?" and the audience was hooked. One couple danced in the kitchen.

Guests for "Above Mosaic" concerts drive from as far as Houston (120 miles to the east) and Austin (45 miles to the west). During intermission, they mingle and nibble on potluck appetizers and desserts. The living room showcases Walter Winslett's grand piano and the kitchen is brightened by succulents and a mobile of toy airplanes.

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“You can tell the musicians really like being here, just by the way they play and how the audience responds,” said Craig Behn, a glass bender who lives outside Bastrop.

During the second set, Hood described a road trip visit to a Starbucks that had replaced a historic jazz club — the King of France Tavern, which operated from 1784 to 2003 in the basement of the Maryland Inn in Annapolis.

“With your help, this will never be a Starbucks,” Hood said of the Winsletts’ historic home. “Please don’t stop having concerts. It sure is nice to play in someone’s living room. Thank you for listening.”

The audience cheered in agreement.



Arhaven House Concerts CEDAR CREEK

Acclaimed Texas singer/songwriter Butch Hancock lives in the village of Terlingua, near Big Bend National Park. It’s far flung, so he picks gigs carefully because they often require long road trips.

Hancock has played the Kennedy Center, Carnegie Hall, The Late Show with David Letterman and A Prairie Home Companion. He’s played all over the world and on Rio Grande raft trips through Santa Elena Canyon.

To say he has venue choices is an understatement.

Yet he chooses to drive more than 500 miles to be a repeat guest at the country home of Bev and Joe Angel off Texas 71 near the Colorado River west of Bastrop. Their Arhaven House Concerts, started in 2011, regularly draw about 70 music fans, and there’s not a bad seat in the family house. Guests see shelves of books and a Kachina doll collection.

“People who attend house concerts come to listen,” said Joe Angel, a retired research geneticist. “All the chattering and getting food and drinks takes place in the breaks. During the performance, it is usually so quiet you can hear the proverbial pin drop.”

Or, an electric mixer. At Hancock’s show, guests heard Bev Angel whipping eggs in the kitchen as the Lubbock-born musician tuned up for his second set. She was making quiches for the post-concert potluck meal. In her stocking feet, Bev Angel, a retired schoolteacher and lawyer, brings an informal and festive atmosphere to the shows.

“House concerts build community and it’s always a joy to watch everyone standing around before the concert



Above, Bluebonnet Board member Debbi Goertz enjoys a performance by Austin fiddler/songwriter Warren Hood, top left, and band at the Smithville home of Jeri and Walter Winslett. Top right, Larry Ouellette and Sarah Lewis chat with Hood during a break in the show.

or during the break visiting with each other knowing that many of these folks first met one another at a previous concert and, over time, have become friends,” Joe Angel said.

Hancock played unplugged. “Having a mic up there just puts a wall between the audience and the performer,” Joe Angel said. Hancock stood just inches from the first row of chairs in the vaulted ceiling living room. It was two weeks after Hurricane Harvey hit Texas, so Hancock opened with Johnny Cash’s “Five Feet High and Rising.” Then Hancock used his trademark wit to break up the somber moment.

“Well, I’ll tell you what,” Hancock said. Then he paused. “What?” someone in the au-

dience finally asked. “When you grow up in Lubbock, you’re not expecting an answer,” Hancock said. “The extended version is, ‘You can tell me this and you can tell me that, but I’ll tell you what.’”

Hancock is known for his whimsical wordplay and ad lib digressions during which he ponders life’s amusing mysteries. His songs have been recorded by Jerry Jeff Walker, Emmylou Harris, Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Billy Joe Shaver.

He introduced his “West Texas Waltz” by saying, “Someone wanted to hear this. I’ll sing it anyway.” At the line about milkshakes and soda pop, everyone popped balloons at the word “pop.” It’s a tradition at his shows.

At show’s end, Hancock said, “This has been wonderful. Let’s do it again tomorrow.”

“We’ll be here,” Joe Angel said.

House Concerts in the Arbors ELGIN

The front porch of Julia and Randy Sulsar’s house looked like an umbrella shop, but inside singer/songwriter Dana Cooper of Nashville was singing about “the sun coming up like a medicine ball.”

Two dozen guests were singing and whistling along to Cooper’s “Great Day in the Morning.” They had the best seats in the house — directly in front of the fireplace where Cooper stood. One woman was so comfortable she slipped her shoes off.

For Cooper, the rainy day house concert in a neighborhood off Texas 95 outside Elgin was a nice wrap-up to a 13-day tour through Louisiana, Texas and New Mexico. Five of his eight gigs were house concerts.

“House concerts are kind of the ideal gig,” he said, because they are private performances that allow the musician to pocket all of the entry donations and sell CDs to supportive guests.

The Sulsars are live music fans who regularly attend the Kerrville Folk Festival, where they have met many musicians. After moving from Lockhart in 2016, they decided their Elgin house would make a good concert venue. They call it House Concerts in the Arbors. Guests see Amado Peña posters, a glass case filled with African violets and orchids, and a nice view of the green backyard.

“The requests to play come in regularly” from eager musicians, Julia Sulsar said. “Our 2018 (schedule) was fully

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Want to find an area house concert?

CEDAR CREEK

Arhaven House Concerts, arhaven.org

ELGIN

House Concerts in the Arbors, arborhouseconcerts.org

LOCKHART

Evenings with the Songwriter is a free monthly song swap and Q&A with a singer/songwriter. It is at 7 p.m. on the last Tuesday of the month at the Dr. Eugene Clark Library, 217 S. Main St., eveningswithsongwriter.com

LULING

Ainsworth House Inn; check its website for concerts, ainsworthhouseinn.com

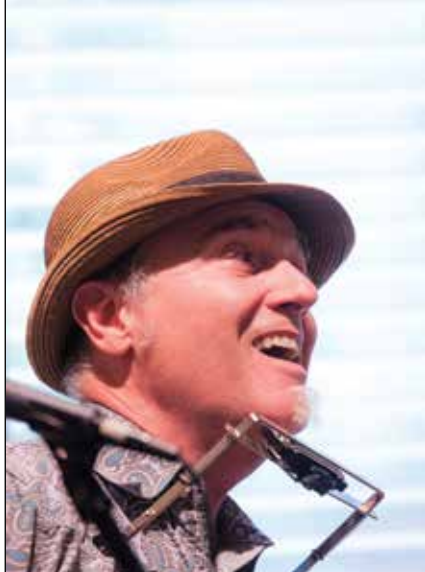
SMITHVILLE

Above Mosaic Art & Home on Main Street, mosaicartandhome.com



Above, host Bev Angel watches Butch Hancock perform at Arhaven House Concerts. Below, Fletcher Clark, left, and Craig Hillis of Austin, who in the 1970s played guitar with Jerry Jeff Walker and Michael Martin Murphey, entertain at the Dr. Eugene Clark Library in Lockhart for the Evenings with the Songwriter series. Clark hosts the event on the last Tuesday of every month at 7 p.m.





Singer/songwriter Dana Cooper of Nashville puts on a show in Elgin.

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booked by February (2017). We're getting requests from all over the United States and Europe for the opportunity to play."

Cooper has played guitar for 50 years and considers himself a road warrior. He knows how to read and connect with an audience, no matter the size or situation. At one point, one of the strings on Cooper's Gibson guitar broke and the small audience was close enough to see the string fly over his right shoulder. Ever the pro, Cooper continued with five strings. "It sounds pretty primitive," he said, but no one minded.

After Cooper finished another song, the guests in the Sulsars' living room clapped and then went silent.

"Well, you guys are quiet here in Elgin," Cooper said.

"We're serious listeners," said Javier Chaparro, one of the Sulsars' neighbors.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Cooper said in jest.

Chaparro, however, wasn't kidding. He plays violin professionally and is concertmaster for the Brazos Valley Symphony Orchestra in College Station. He is also an official Texas Commission on the Arts Touring Artist for 2016-2018.

And, naturally, he hosts house concerts in his own home. ■

OFFICE CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet offices will be closed Jan. 1, Jan. 15 and Jan. 18 in observance of New Year's Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day and a company-wide meeting. Report outages at 800-949-4414, bluebonnet.coop or via our mobile app. Pay your bill any time online, on our mobile app or by calling member services at 800-842-7708.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Deadline to apply for Board seats approaching

Three seats on Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's Board of Directors are up for election, which will be held during the co-op's Annual Meeting on May 8, 2018. All candidates' petitions, filing fees and application for nomination forms must be submitted at any of Bluebonnet's five member service centers no later than 4 p.m. Feb. 7, 2018.

Candidates represent one of seven districts and can be nominated either by presenting an application for nomination with at least 50 signatures from co-op members in their respective districts, or by paying a \$250 filing fee in certified funds.

The 11 members of Bluebonnet's Board of Directors serve staggered three-year terms. The three seats up for election in 2018 represent District 1 — Caldwell, Gonzales, Guadalupe and Hays counties; District 2 — Travis County; and District

3 — Bastrop County.

Board candidates must be at least 21 years old, a co-op member in good standing, agree to a background check and meet other qualifications outlined in Bluebonnet's bylaws, which are available at bluebonnet.coop. For more information about eligibility and the application, hover your cursor over the About tab on the home page, click on Leadership in the drop down bar and then click on the Becoming a Director link.

Application for nomination forms are available at the co-op's member service centers in Bastrop, Brenham, Giddings, Lockhart and Manor. You can find a form online at bluebonnet.coop: Hover your cursor over the About tab, select Reports & Forms in the drop down bar, then scroll down to Applications.

For more information, call a member service representative at 800-842-7708.

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Application deadline:

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To learn more,
contact Karen Urban at
karen.urban@bluebonnet.coop
or 512-332-7961



The **Government-in-Action Youth Tour** will send two service-area high school students on a trip to the nation's capital. Each tour winner will also get a \$1,000 scholarship and a tour of the Texas Capitol and the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum.

Application at bluebonnet.coop under Community/Scholarships.

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