

Songwriters in the Round

Tales of Nashville told in the Smokies

BY CHRISTI MARSICO

Balsam Mountain Inn's Songwriters in the Round offers a special evening of music from some of Nashville's finest.

On top of featuring a full spread gourmet buffet, the evening brings excitement and authenticity, according to Innkeeper Kim Shailer. After all, he adds, these are the people who created the thoughts of country music made famous by others.

Since the summer of 2004, Shailer and his wife Sharon have owned and operated Balsam Mountain Inn and Restaurant, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Built in 1905 by brothers-in-law from Georgia, the inn became known as "The Grand Old Lady of Balsam," adorned with a 100-foot-long porch, 107 rooms, and dazzling mountain views.

"Welcome to our home," Kim announces as he introduces the Songwriters in the Round on a breezy April evening. "Tonight we have top-selling songwriter Casey Kelly, Grammy Award-winning vocalist Leslie Ellis, and Grammy nominee Todd Cerney."

Circled around the songwriters, the listeners nestle into their chairs as the music begins. It's clear the Nashville trio enjoys each other's company as much as the audience enjoys their music. The performers do what they love—sing, tell stories and share all they can to make each other shine.

Casey Kelly has been coming to Balsam Mountain Inn for years, enjoying local hikes, the serene atmosphere, and those claw-foot bath tubs.

For more than a decade, Kelly has coordinated the Songwriters in the Round evenings, bringing three to four songwriters from Nashville to the mountains about a dozen times a year.

"The nature of the show is presenting hit songs and sharing the story behind the music," Kelly said. "I realized the additional entertainment [of] hearing and seeing the original song provides people a chance to see the personal aspect and expose the audience to the songwriting process. We have something very special here."

Kelly grew up in Baton Rouge, La., and has been writing songs since the fourth grade. As he got older, he started playing in rock 'n roll bands and moved to New York and Los Angeles. The songwriting profession made its mark on Kelly while he was working with Tom Rush, who discovered artists such as Joni Mitchell and James Taylor. Eventually making Nashville his home, Kelly now has a long list of credentials that include session musician, singer, songwriter, arranger, music publisher, record producer and record company executive.

"I wanted to sing and say something in a way that everybody wishes they could have said," Kelly said.



Gifted performers (from left) Casey Kelly, Leslie Ellis and Todd Cerney share personal stories about songwriting and music at the historic Balsam Mountain Inn (below). DONATED PHOTOS



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— Casey Kelly

Among his many hits are the number one songs, "Anyone Who Isn't Me Tonight" by Kenny Rogers and Dottie West, "Soon" by Tanya Tucker, "Somewhere Down the Line" by T.G. Shepherd, and "The Cowboy Rides Away" by George Strait.

Todd Cerney, another guest songwriter at Balsam Mountain Inn, sports shaggy hair and a mustache. He considers himself a writer for hire. Born in Detroit, Cerney grew up in Ohio and has been living and working in Nashville since 1974.

Cerney was a Grammy Award nominee in the Best Country Song category for "I'll Still Be Loving You" recorded by Restless Heart. His songs have been recorded by a variety of artists including Lynyrd Skynyrd, The Four Tops, Aretha Franklin and Reba McEntire. Cerney finds inspiration in songwriting by practicing spontaneity and co-writing with others.

"There's strength in numbers," he said.

Meanwhile, Grammy Award winner Leslie Ellis writes from personal experiences. Fusing her vocals with a lyrical melody, Ellis revels in co-writing as well. Inspired by the writers Nashville draws, she moved to the Music City and has appeared in film, television and the Broadway stage, bringing a vivacious voice and energy to the evening's ambience.

The songwriters' personalities and talents are complemented well in the historic inn. As they take turns sharing stories and singing songs, their camaraderie draws the listeners in.

Cerney took the "For Sale" sign off his house when his song "Good Morning Beautiful" went to number one on the country music charts for five weeks.

When Kelly had long hair, he was stopped by a police officer in Hattiesburg, Miss., and was let go because the cop thought he was a woman. This incident inspired his song, "You Can't Get There From Here."

A year after Ellis moved to Nashville, she woke up at 4 a.m. and wrote "The Flyer Song," which is about loving a person for everything he or she is even if that's the hardest thing to do. This song was adopted by the U.S. Navy and was made into a video paying tribute to American troops and their families.

After their spring performance, the writers mingled with the crowd, signing CDs and discussing their latest endeavors or the sentiments of their lyrics. As the evening came to a close, Cerney asked Ellis and Kelly, "How many more rounds can we make them stay for?"

The three smiled at each other as their tales of mishaps, lost loves and almost-famous moments will surely be savored for years to come.

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