

Celebrating song: Competition attracts musicians near and far

By Jimmy Jenkins

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BLOOMINGTON — Local musicians supporting themselves with their art — a far-fetched notion in these times? Perhaps.

But it's Suzette Weakley's goal. One of many.

A lifelong musician, Weakley is the driving force behind the Blooming-Tunes singer/songwriter project, which includes cash prizes for songwriters, a concert at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater and a compilation CD.

Weakley has always had melodies in her head. Growing up in Smithville, she toured the Midwest, singing at county and state fairs with her little sister. She played percussion in junior high, high school and at IU, and would go on to be a keyboard player in several local rock and roll cover bands. Later in life, she turned to the guitar and began composing her own music but found that venues supporting original tunes were few and far between.

"To play original music at an open mic, you had to go to Nashville or Memphis," Weakley said in a recent interview. "There wasn't a place around here that supported a writer-in-the-round type of situation." So with the efforts of other local musicians, she helped start the Songwriters Showcase at the Players' Pub.

"In Nashville, they have bumper stickers that say 'Everything Begins With a Song,' but I say 'Everything begins with a songwriter.'"

As she honed her own songwriting skills, Weakley started entering songwriting contests and winning.

"It's tough to lose, but when you win, you know you're on the right path," she said. "It's so powerful to hear what others have to say about your music."

With these thoughts in mind, it seemed only natural to develop a contest centered in Bloomington. Blooming-Tunes was born.

Now in its second year, the songwriting contest invites musicians from all over the globe to submit songs of their composition that are under five minutes in length and are suitable for a "family-friendly" audience.

Weakley received 110 entries this year (up from 80 in 2009) from Canada to South America, while a majority of the entries came from south-central Indiana. She enlisted the help of four judges (three professional musicians and one "man on the street" judge) whose task it was to narrow the list down to their 10 favorite selections.

Last year, entries leaned more toward country and "Americana" music, while this year saw more jazz, as well as rock and folk entries.

Entries were judged, without knowledge of the composers' identities, based on creativity, originality, entertainment values and appeal, and lyrics and melody. Weakley then compiled the results and picked the top 15 vote getters to receive a \$100 cash prize as well as a spot on the 2010 Blooming-Tunes CD which was locally produced and pressed.

Repeat Blooming-Tunes winner Daryl Robinson echoes Weakley's thoughts on the power of encouragement and being recognized by your peers: "Having songs selected to be on the Blooming-Tunes CD the last two years has been a confidence booster for me as a writer. That recognition along with the encouragement of my wife has prompted me to stop the procrastination and begin recording a CD of my own."

Another one of this year's winners was local jazz artist Monika Herzig, who won with a song entitled "The Hill Country."

"Being a jazz artist, the songwriting world is quite a different genre and I always admire their craft and skills with weaving music and words. My song is a tribute to Bloomington and our beautiful hilly environment and friendly atmosphere, and I'm glad to add that tribute to the collection," Herzig said.

To fund the project, Weakley has received financial assistance in the form of Bloomington Entertainment & Arts District grants from the City of Bloomington as well as support from local sponsors. That money goes toward paying the judges, producing the CD, and renting the Buskirk Chumley for a performance featuring contest winners and other prominent musicians.

"I think the event is great for the community," Weakley said. "It brings people in, which is good for our businesses, and it's also good for local artists looking to share their art with more notable headliners on a big stage."

For local artist Tim O'Malley, who won this year with his song "Black Cadillac," the camaraderie of Blooming-Tunes is an important aspect.

"The main thing about this night for me is that I get to meet a bunch of people kind of like myself, who for whatever reason feel compelled to write songs and get out in front of people and perform."



Suzette Weakley, founder of Blooming-Tunes, says that the saying is everything begins with a song, but she believes it all starts with the songwriter. Heather Brogden | Herald-Times

If you go

WHAT: Blooming-Tunes 2010, presented by Friends of Bloomington Songwriters Showcase

WHO: Winners of the local song competition, and musicians Tim Grimm, Jan Lucas, Jason Wilber, Lazy Saints, Laurie McClain and more

WHEN: Sunday, Oct. 17. Doors open at 2:30 p.m., with the first set at 3 p.m. Before the second set, there will be a meet-and-greet intermission with the featured artists

WHERE: Buskirk-Chumley Theater, 114 E. Kirkwood Ave., Bloomington

TICKETS: \$10 general admission