

Christmas Eve Music and Fun from Our Valley to Your Radio

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Tuesday, 13 December 2016 10:42



The Big River Radio Wave will present a show on Wisconsin Public Radio this Christmas Eve that is a combination of music, comedy and rural holiday wisdom. The show includes the rich local talent from western Wisconsin – names that many in the area will recognize.

ALMA, WI - Looking for a homegrown Holiday treat for Christmas Eve? Look no further than your radio for a special holiday performance from Wisconsin's beautiful west coast.

Big River Radio Wave's Christmas Show airs on Wisconsin Public Radio across Wisconsin on Christmas Eve. The show comes straight from our valley to your radio.

The show originates at the renovated Big River Theater in Alma, Wisconsin. In fact, the creator and host, Mac Cherry, is my neighbor.

This year's Holiday show weaves local musicians, storytellers, and comedians with their very special bit of advice. The show is upbeat, funny and filled with rural holiday wisdom, like comedian Tim Harmston's counsel for "navigating the political divide at Christmas."

Big River Radio Wave Christmas Show features the La Crosse band String Ties. Voted "the Best Band of the Coulee Region," their music celebrates the hills of the upper Mississippi (according to their Facebook page) through an acoustic blend of Gospel, Swing, Folk and Old Time Country.

I caught up with Mac Cherry when we were both snowbound on a recent Sunday afternoon.

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I asked Mac about the origins of the show. He told me, “We had the theater for a few years. We had different types of talent appear, good names in the area...having lived in the Twin Cities and moved from Milwaukee, I was surprised and impressed with all the indigenous talent...plus we had national talent coming from the Cities. Folks, who wanted to come to our area, perform and stay for a while. I thought it would be kind of fun to do a variety show with so much rich talent available.”

Mac and his band, the River Benders, “played a little bit” and came up with the concept of the show. What came about was a creative mix of local talent, a few Twin Cities comedians with Wisconsin roots and entertaining stories that captured the life of Alma and other river towns.

The show needed a house band. For five years, the River Benders filled the role including Brian Schellinger of Trempealeau County, Patty Carlson and Mike Congdon from near Black River Falls and Mac Cherry of rural Alma.

This year Mac said it was “a fun experience to allow other musicians from the river area to show their talents.” He invited a local band, String Ties, to fill the house band slot. String Ties includes Coon Valley native Dan Sabranek (guitar), Winona’s Wayne Beezley (mandolin), Tom Pfaff (banjo) and Larry Dalton (bass).

A regular on the show is internationally recognized Alma naturalist Kenny Salwey. Mac describes Kenny as the “backwoods Buddha,” a hunter, trapper, philosopher, and storyteller. He’s known as the Last River Rat – the title of both his book and a BBC film about his life.

Two nationally known comedians with Wisconsin roots perform as part of the Big River Radio Wave - Tim Harmston and Mary Mack. Tim credits sitting around Wisconsin campfires with his uncles and father for his wry sense of humor (according to the website Cap City Comedy). Folk humorist Mary Mack credits her very funny mechanic dad for her wit. She grew up in Webster, Wisconsin where her sister owns a bait shop (as mentioned in a 2011 piece in the Star Tribune).

Special guest and “formidable musician” Michael Johnson rounds out the evening performers. According to Mac, Michael Johnson is a classical guitarist and a singer songwriter who played with John Denver and recorded the 1980’s hit “Bluer than Blue.”

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Local Christmas Eve listeners will also recognize the distinctive voice of Al Johnson, who announces Big River Radio Wave. Around Eau Claire, Al is known as “the WPR radio voice of western Wisconsin.”

Big River Radio Wave is a “fun venture,” Mac told me. “Everyone enjoys the performance and the performers really enjoy performing.” We, in Alma, are very proud of Mac, who in his spare time renovated the Big River Theater (now in new hands) and ran the Chamber of Commerce a few years back.

Join us for the Big River Radio Wave Holiday Special performance on Christmas Eve at 7:00 pm statewide on Wisconsin Public Radio stations.

As Mac Cherry said to me, “It’s our gift to you.”