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Concert benefits school arts, rec programs

By Willis Jacobson, Staff Writer

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Tony Balbinot and Charlie Uhrig started their first rock band together in the early 1980s as young musicians looking to explore their talent.

The longtime friends were back on the same stage – along with other renowned musicians – on April 14 in an effort to help today's up-and-coming artists.

Uhrig, a Solvang community resource deputy who fronts the band Right as Rain, and Balbinot, a singer/songwriter and guitarist with the Cadillac Angels, performed with their respective bands in a benefit concert, along with the Strata-Tones, at the Solvang Veterans Memorial Hall. The three-band show – which also featured Terry Lawless, a longtime keyboardist with U2, playing with the Cadillac Angels – helped raise funds for the Solvang School Education Foundation (SSEF), which pays for a lot of the costs associated with the school's arts and music programs, and Uhrig's Recreation and Team Sheriff (RATS) program.

Uhrig, who put the show together, said afterward that he didn't know the exact amount raised at the concert, which was attended by about 100 people. The concessions were sold by representatives of Solvang School, so those profits went directly to the SSEF, according to Uhrig, while the final ticket tally wasn't yet available.

Most at the show seemed to have had a good time as many danced and others sat back and enjoyed the rock and blues tunes. Uhrig said the only disappointment was the relatively low attendance, which was likely hurt by the concert taking place during spring break for the Santa Ynez Valley Union School District.

"I didn't realize that when we picked the date it was over spring break, so a lot of the kids were gone," said Uhrig, who opened the show with Right as Rain. "Everybody that was there enjoyed it, though. A lot of people came up to say the music was great and that it was too bad there weren't more people there. But it was fun. We had a good time playing, and it was nice to meet people."

Lawless, who has toured the world with U2 over the past 11 years, said he wasn't bothered by the crowd size, noting he gets the same thrill from playing a smaller room as he does a full stadium. Lawless showed his range as he played the keyboard, saxophone and accordion while on stage with the Cadillac Angels.

"I always say I don't have a nickel show and a 25-cent show," he said. "People that work with me know that I give them 100 percent all of the time because every job is just as important as every other job. I say to myself before I go on stage, wherever I am, 'What if this is the last chance I get to go on stage and make some music?'"

Lawless, who has lived in Santa Maria for the past 22 years, said that having the concert benefit school arts programs was just icing on the cake for him. He said he often speaks at schools when he's on the road touring and stresses the importance of keeping the arts – as well as other extracurricular activities, like sports – alive in public schools.

"For the kids, it's about trying to keep them inspired about learning music in schools because it's so important for overall growth," he said. "It's one thing to eliminate programs that are costing you a lot of money, but in this case, with the arts, you're eliminating an entire half of your brain. If you only teach right-brain subjects, then you're not getting a full education." And he knows from experience.

"My career, for whatever it's worth, would be nothing if I didn't have a great education as a kid and great music teachers," Lawless said. "I owe everything that I am to the teachers that I had in high school and college."

Uhrig, honored by The Valley Foundation as last year's youth volunteer of the year, said the concert, which was the first of what he hopes will become an annual event, was the springboard for a "Concerts in the Park" series he is starting this summer along with the "Movies in the Park" that has become a tradition. The summer concerts will feature local bands and singers, including current middle and high school students who have benefited from local music and arts programs.

"I've got some kids that I want to get out and get them playing," Uhrig said.

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Terry Lawless - Photos by Willis Jacobson



Charlie Uhrig, center, performs with Right as Rain