

FEATURED

Back to his roots

Singer-songwriter Grant Maloy Smith will bring his music to the Courthouse Center for the Arts

By Helena Touhey/ Features Editor Jun 23, 2016



Courtesy: Grant Maloy Smith

Grant Maloy Smith is an American roots singer-songwriter who lives in South County and plays around the country and internationally.

Grant Maloy Smith will bring his American roots sound to Courthouse Center for the Arts in West Kingston Saturday night when he opens for Rita Coolidge.

Smith's newest album, "Dust Bowl," is due out later this year. That album was inspired by an idea Smith had for the lyrics "never seen the rain," which he knew he wanted to use as a title for a song. However, he said he thought about changing the wording since Creedence Clearwater Revival has a song with a similar name ("Have you ever seen the rain?"), but he never came up with a more fitting title.

"So I had to write a song that made that title make sense," he said. That led him to think about times when you would never see the rain, and he thought of the infamous Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

"The more I researched the Dust Bowl, the more I wanted to make a record about it," he said. He was drawn to the environmental factors during this time, and also the fact that the Dust Bowl forced people to disperse, making regional roots music into national American roots music.

"People emigrated out into four corners of the United States, and carried that music with them, [and] made it known nationally," Smith said. "[Dust Bowl] is a homage to that kind of music, and to Woody Guthrie, [who] originated my kind of music."

Smith, who lives in South County, writes all of his songs, which he said is "the thing I spend the most time on out of everything." He used to have more of a pop-rock sound with country flavor, but transitioned to American roots about three years ago. Growing up in the South, he inherited an appreciation for roots music from his grandmother, and later taught himself to play guitar. But, he said, "as a young guy, though, I wanted to be a big rock star and jump around on the stage."

He said he's never been a big fan of country music, but explained that he "likes the sensibility of what it can be if you do it right." For him, American roots music, which he considers a subgenre of country music, "is an attempt to pull it back to being more honest and not written by a committee like pop-country is today."

Unlike previous albums, Smith said “Dust Bowl” is a theme album – it’s more than “a bunch of songs” but not quite a concept album. While he said a songwriter shouldn’t have to explain too much about his music to listeners, Smith has provided some background information and historical perspective in the form of inline notes on the physical product. He also has filmed a documentary to coincide with the album’s release.

The most dramatic song on the album, Smith said, is “Old Black Roller” – “black roller” is what a lot of people in the ’30s called the dust storms that rolled across the prairie. The song has been going over well with crowds, he said, and will likely be among those Smith plays Saturday night.

Smith said he had a version of this album, and documentary, mostly recorded, but then an opportunity to record the album “in a big way” presented itself, and he found himself in New York City recording with Cyndi Lauper’s band and other A-list musicians.

This opportunity presented itself because of connections Smith has made as a member of The National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, also known as the organization that runs the Grammy Awards. Through this group, Smith is a voting member for the awards and attends the event. As exciting as that is, he said the real highlight of being a member of the group is the community of musicians it creates; it’s an advocacy organization for musicians, he said, focusing on fairer pay for artists, and also fostering music education.

“It’s fun to be part of that ... [and] it’s great to be affiliated with people who are like me,” Smith said. Since joining the Academy five years ago, he now has musical friends all over the country who help each other with projects. “[It] really opened up a whole new world to me.”

Before becoming a member, Smith said he felt alone in his musical endeavors, but getting exposed to Academy members altered the course of his musical career and life. His next big gig after the Courthouse show is July 17 at Nelson Mandela Day hosted by the United Nations in Washington, D.C.

“That would never have happened without the Academy,” Smith said.

His experience in that music network led him to co-found the Indie Collaborative last year with Eileen Sherman. The purpose of that group is to connect independent musicians and music professionals. Since its founding, the group has held six events, most recently June 13 in Chicago.

Smith said a focus of the Indie Collaborative is to help musicians make a living in an industry that continues to change. He said artists need to support each other, and also become more educated on how to get paid, among other things.

He remarked on how, in the ’70s, at the zenith of the music industry (in terms of selling records), albums were expensive and shows were cheap; groups lost money on shows and mainly performed live to sell records.

“Now it’s the opposite,” he said: you lose money to make a record, but need a record to go out on tour, and tickets to shows are more expensive.

“The last frontier for making a living in music is to play live,” he said, noting that the experience of a live show is not something that can be packaged with a CD or sold online to the masses. (He did note, however, that the internet has the benefit of instantly propelling music and artists to a global audience — there are two sides to every coin, he said.)

In 2017, Smith will go on tour for most of the year, starting in the States, and then crossing over to Europe, where he said his music has been well received.

“For some reason they get real excited if it’s a real American,” he said of European audiences. Smith is known for wearing a big cowboy hat, which he said is “the way I dress every day, since I was 8 years old.”

Last summer he toured through England and, in late winter/early spring of this year, he played in Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium.

Smith said he will have more flexibility for touring next year because music will officially be his full time job. Founder of Dewetron, a data acquisition company based in Wakefield, he has since sold the company and has five months remaining on his consulting contract.

“My plan is to just do music 100 percent,” he said. “Which I’m really looking forward to.”

artsliving@independentri.com

FYI

Rita Coolidge with Grant Maloy Smith

8 p.m., Saturday

Courthouse Center for the Arts

3481 Kingstown Road

West Kingston

Tickets \$35

courthousearts.org, 782-1018
