

## Abilene: A celebration of longevity, friendship and music



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It makes sense to Lee Calabro, Joe Pacuska, and the rest of Abilene to play at The Citizens' Voice 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Bash.

The country-rock band – the members then shaggy-haired, cowboy-hatted and in their 20s, - helped the newspaper raise money for The Citizens' Voice employees who faced an uncertain holiday season in 1978.

“There was always a sympathy there and support,” said Calabro, 55, the bass player in the band. “The Voice has been decent to us and we’ve always been good to them.”

Abilene will open The Citizens' Voice 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary party at 7 p.m. on Oct. 9 at the Woodlands Inn & Resort in Plains Township. Following their performance, Flaxy Morgan and the Little River Band will also take the stage.

Tickets to the event are free, but must be picked up at the Gerrity's Shuresave in Hanover Township, Wyoming, Luzerne and West Pittston, the Bedroom Warehouse, Mundy Street or the Woodlands Inn & Resort prior to the show. At the door, tickets cost \$15.

The first chapter in the story of Abilene started two years before The Citizens' Voice began, when the band formed in 1976, and the young, enthusiastic group opened for Billy Joel at the Scranton CYC.

After that performance, the southern rock and bluegrass group became a huge draw in Northeastern Pennsylvania, getting record-breaking crowds at fair after fair, and nightclub after packed nightclub. The band opened for The Charlie Daniels Band, The Flying Burrito Brothers and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band.

“It was a pure chemistry thing. We caught lightning in a bottle,” said fiddle and banjo player Joe Pacuska. “Within a year after playing our first show, we couldn’t meet the demand.”

The band toured the Northeast region, playing shows four or five nights a week, for seven years. In 1983, when music clubs started to close their doors and the circuit of touring musicians quieted down, the band members hung up their instruments and wandered into the “real world” to start jobs and families.

Between 1983 and 1991, the guys played occasional shows, but a new chapter in the band’s history started in 2006, when Wilkes-Barre celebrated its bicentennial.

Some people, including Wilkes-Barre mayor Tom Leighton, urged the band to get back together, promising them people would come to the show, but Calabro wasn’t buying it. He didn’t think anyone would stick around after a headlining act to see a band that was – in his words – “a bunch of local yokels.”

Taking the stage almost an hour after the Beach Boys’ set at the bicentennial celebration, a reunited Abilene played for 3,000 fans, a lot of them balding or going gray, just like the band. Calabro said he had to eat his words. People would and did come to see them.

“We’re like, ‘These people are re-living their 20s and 30s with us,’” Calabro said. “To Abilene, it is amazing for us to get back on stage.”

Since, Abilene has re-established itself in the Northeastern Pennsylvania music scene, mostly playing to crowds reminiscing about the good old days of the ‘70s and ‘80s.

“When we get on stage now, it is all that original energy we had back in 1976,” said Pacuska, 54, of Wilkes-Barre.

Through the years, the members of Abilene all remained friends with one another and usually met for dinner once a month before playing again in 2006. When they decided to re-form the band, the members agreed on a strict code: gigs and practices could not interfere with family gatherings or work schedules.

Whenever the band rehearses, they call it “bowling night”, because like other men their age going to bowl, they consider Abilene to be just a hobby and not a job like it was back in the old days.

“We had kind of hoped the reaction would be good. But we really never expected it to be what it was,” Pacuska said. “The crowd reaction was far beyond what we expected.”

After the band realized it could still draw crowds, they decided to play about once or twice a month and for special events. People can often catch them at Rhythms and Brews in Luzerne, Spurs in Pittston, or Shadowbrook Inn and Resort in Tunkhannock.

The current lineup of the band includes keyboardist/guitarist Joe Andes, guitarist Bob Bartoli, lead singer/guitarist Larry Zick, mandolin/guitarist Mike Garzella, drummer Jim Musto, Pacuska and Calabro.

Both Pacuska and Calabro stress the importance of friendships and musicianship have played in the band. Back in the band's heyday, Abilene was labeled a "musicians' band", meaning a band that musicians would try to see on their night off. Before the band reunited, each member wanted to make sure the quality of the music was perfect. When the band played together again in 2006, it was like they hadn't missed a beat.

The band today doesn't plan on stopping anytime soon, and are enjoying reliving the youthful days of Abilene. Nothing keeps them going more than the grins in the audience and on stage whenever the band plays a show.

"I don't think any of us could have pictured ourselves playing this music in our mid-50s," Pacuska said. "Going back when we started playing, we were all young guys in our 20s. I don't think any of us would have thought about it."

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