

CLASSIC COUNTRY, ROCK 'N' ROLL

Says Local Musician Junior Fields: 'I Sing What I Can Do'

BY SUSAN USHER

Music is the constant, like a ribbon woven through the fabric of Junior Fields' life. It's never far away.

He "sang a few songs" for the grand opening of his compact disc business this past summer in Shallotte. And he performs about once a month in the "social quarters," not the big room, of the Shallotte Moose Lodge.

And he'll be singing Saturday afternoon at the N.C. Oyster Festival. Fields' one-hour show will feature a mix of classic "older" country tunes as well as the rock and roll from the 1950s and '60s he once played while fronting for Bill Haley.

"I'm country," he says matter-of-factly. "I sing what I can do."

That eliminates some newer tunes with higher pitches. He prefers to sing in the smooth, low tones best characterized by "For The Good Times" Ray Price, his No. 1 performer any time.

"He's my all-time favorite. I don't go to concerts. But if Ray Price came to town for a concert I'd

go to it."

"He's my all-time idol, my hero, in music," Fields says, taking a break at the table in back of the music store he and his partner, Susan Herlocker, operate in Shallotte. His voice pours rich, low and on the slow side, thin blackstrap molasses.

His appearance is also low key and comfortable: blue jeans, an open-necked knit shirt with a thin gold chain barely showing, a heavy gold watch and few rings. The salt and pepper mustache and beard are trim, hair neatly combed and shoulder length in back.

Fields is a native of coal mining country, Man, W.Va., but has spent most of his time on the East Coast, often in the auto body shop business but dabbling in other interests as well.

Always, though, Junior Fields returns to the music he loves with its stories of love and loss, hard times and good times.

After getting out of the U.S. Army Engineers in New Jersey, he stayed, building a life that others may have envied. At one time he owned two body shops in different

towns, a taxi service and a restaurant. And there was always his music. Weekends he played smoke-filled clubs along the East Coast circuit.

Along the way he worked briefly with Bill Haley & The Comets, fronting, warming up the band before Haley's shows when he toured two months or so out of the year. Other times Fields played with the same band, but had to use a different name.

"We were 'Junior Fields & The Night Owls,' but everybody knew it was them," he said.

In the early 1970s he was helping the Sunset View Inn build from a show audience of 100 or so on a good night to major club status featuring top name country shows. He had the house band, playing front for the likes of Barbara Mandrell early in her career to Grandpa Jones, Ernest Tubb and Hank Snow.

"I would take a gamble on anything that had a chance of making any money," he said of those "wild and young" days. But running on 15 hours of sleep week after week took its inevitable toll.

"I had a wife and three children. They had everything they wanted except a father and a husband." It wasn't enough.

A second, 17-year marriage brought him to Goldsboro, where he ran a body shop business, and later to the Shallotte area. He teamed with his brother-in-law to learn the electrical business as employees of a Greensboro contractor. A declining economy nipped the idea of opening a business of their own.

Single again, Fields maintains the paperwork end of a vinyl siding venture handled by another partner, and finds time to serve on the Brunswick County Board of Health, addressing controversial issues such as a proposed county-wide smoking ordinance.

Mainly, though, music is his business these days as well as his avocation.



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

OYSTER FESTIVAL ENTERTAINER Junior Fields will share the music favored by early "baby boomers," classic country hits and the rock 'n' roll sound that propelled Bill Haley & The Comets into the limelight.

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