

# DAILY NEWS

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## 'Itching so bad to play'

Local musicians ready to return to live shows after getting creative in the year of the pandemic

*By Brandon Schreur on June 07, 2021*

One year ago, local musicians were readying themselves for the summer season, which typically involves live performances at festivals and concert series.



Duane Weed readies for one of Jus Jammin's recording sessions. The Howard City-based band spent the pandemic recording a number of songs

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Now, with the loosening of restrictions, musicians are gearing up once again for the summer concert season — the difference this time being that, barring any unexpected or last-minute changes, they'll be able to see it to fruition.

Phyllis, the lead singer for the Messin' Around Band in the Greenville area, told the Daily News her band had numerous performances lined up for the summer of 2020 before COVID hit.

"We lost a lot of gigs last year," she said. "We stopped playing in March of last year. Out of a 52 week year, we probably do at least 35 weekends. We were literally left with nothing. It's a good thing we do it for the love of the music and not living expenses."

With some members of the band having underlying health problems, Phyllis said they were careful in how they practiced together in the months that followed.

"We were trying to practice while also social distancing with each other," she said. "None of us were willing to put each other at risk and, let's face it, practice areas are not usually very big. For us, it's in one guy's basement."

Phyllis said her band did perform at one venue during the pandemic — River City Saloon in Grand Rapids.

"They were very generous to us and very respectful of COVID restrictions," she said. "We played there maybe three or four times over the course of COVID and we did one private party at the Sheridan Community Center, but that's basically all we've done since we were shut down."

Right around the time the vaccine started to roll out, the Messin' Around Band began to feel a little more hopeful about the 2021 concert season.



Mike Nulph, Dan Salas, Bill VanOss and Duane Weed make up Jus Jammin, a band based in the Howard City area. During the pandemic, Weed said Jus Jammin posted recordings of songs on a Facebook page called "Welcome to my Basement." — Submitted photo

"All four of us (band members) are vaccinated, now," Phyllis explained. "We're still practicing social distancing and wearing our masks when we're carrying equipment in and out of a room. Playing outdoors obviously looks different than indoors, but I think we're all feeling more comfortable with the safety level."

One of Messin' Around Band's upcoming performances will be at Greenville's Rhythm on the River 2021

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"It's been kind of nice to have weekends off, but I think we're all a bit of sick of being inside and would like to get out again. We're just looking forward to seeing the local folks from Greenville, again. We hope they'll come out and have a good time," Phyllis said. "The Rhythm on the River is such a cool experience, too. It's family-friendly and there's usually a food truck there selling hot dogs. It's just great to see all the kids sitting out on the lawn and dancing. Kids don't get a whole lot of live music. It's kind of cool see everyone, from 4 to 80 years old, all hanging out and listening to music."



Mike Taylor, left, and George Nichols playing one last outdoor summertime show at Driftwood Bar & Grille prior to the COVID lockdown. — Submitted photo

For the past 30 years, The Guinness Brothers Band is group of musicians that's played around the area. Currently comprised of Mike Taylor (who writes a weekly column for the Daily News), Rocky Jette, George Nichols, Annette Powell, Byrd Richards and Dave Clelland, the band's 2020 schedule was completely cleared out when March hit.

"We were all disappointed when the live music scene tanked," Taylor recalled. "I've been playing live most weekends since I was 16 years old, so I didn't really know what to do with myself. I mean, what do normal people do on a Saturday night?"

"We did rehearse a couple times, but it was more out of boredom rather than a desire to work up new tunes. We knew by the time the live gigs started happening again, we'd have forgotten everything we rehearsed."

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performed solo this past Saturday at the Turk Lake Inn.

Taylor says The Guinness Brothers Band is starting to get back into the swing of things as they're booked at several outdoor festivals, music in the park-type concerts and at The Driftwood Bar & Grille in Newaygo a few dates per month.

"After all these months off, I was nervous about getting up to play music in front of people again," he said. "Crazy, since I've been doing it all my life and would have assumed that, like riding a bicycle, it's one of those things you never forget. In fact, I was sure the first couple shows were going to be rougher than sandpaper, but it turned out it is like riding a bicycle after all. The entire band just fell right back into the groove as if we'd never had a weekend off.

"It feels good to be playing live again," he added. "Making music is always fun, but, until COVID, I never realized how much I enjoy hanging out with the audience members on break and after shows. A lot of those folks who come out to see us have become good friends over the years and I really missed them this past winter."

Greg Hamblin of the band On Edge says he's looking forward to performing at places like the Smyrna Bar & Restaurant and Belding's Music in the Park this summer.



Annette Powell, left, and George Nichols performing at a pre-COVID indoor venue. — Submitted photo

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nothing big that was going on other than that. All the festivals were canceled. We're super excited to get back out there and do something big."

Hamblin says the band was able to make the transition to a more acoustic-based set with relative ease.

"We enjoy playing acoustic instruments anyway, so we were able to pick it up pretty quickly," he noted. "The one thing was that we did have to add a different song selection. Playing on the patio is a little different than rocking a festival. We had to add some lighter music into the mix."

Now getting back into the swing of performing in front of some larger crowds, Hamblin says he's excited for the upcoming shows.

"It'll be nice just seeing family and friends out again," he said. "Most of us are local, here. When we play events like this (Belding's Music in the Park), we get family and friends that always come. It's nice to see everyone."

For Duane Weed and the other three members of Howard City-based Jus Jammin — Mike Nulph, Dan Salas and Bill VanOss — their quarantine experience looked a little different from some bands.

For the past couple of years, Jus Jammin has regularly posted a series of songs onto a Facebook page called "Welcome to my Basement."

"Three of us in the band have been playing for a couple of years, now, with the Jus Jammin in the basement type of thing," Weed said. "We had the fourth guy join us right at the time of COVID. What we are doing, we record a bunch of songs in our basement and then we post them onto this (Welcome to my Basement's Facebook page). If you go and look, you'll see everything from 'Smokin' in the Boy's Room' to ZZ Top and some Bob Seger.

"We've all been in bands before and have done a lot of things," Weed added. "This particular group of four people has not played out (at a live venue), yet. Right before COVID, that's what we were aiming for. Every place we were going to look at had to shut their doors, just like everyone else."

Weed said the band used quarantine to continue doing recordings in a basement so that their Facebook page could essentially become Jus Jammin's demo reel.

"We took a two-month break, but we started to come back even during quarantines," Weed said. "We were practicing outdoors at that time. We wanted to protect each other, but we were also itching so bad to play.

"At one point, we recorded a song called 'Coronavirus Blues.' This was like three months into quarantine. It talks about being in quarantine and how we can't wait to get out and start doing these things again. That was the one recording session we did outside, but we were still doing all the practices outside."

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“We want to play. Don’t get me wrong, we want to play. We also want to make sure we’re safe and the places that we’re playing are safe,” he said. “This is music therapy. This whole thing started off as music therapy. It’s just musicians getting together and playing.”

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