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THIS WEEKS COVER

Blown Away

Posted by Carl Kozlowski | Jul 9, 2015 | 0 🗨️ |

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The Beach Boys may be the traditional sound of summer in Southern California, but on Saturday a completely different kind of music will fill the air in Pasadena when the Masters of Musical Whistling International Festival (MMW) show brings together

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some of the most melodic whistlers on the planet. Created by longtime Monrovia resident Carole AnnE Kaufman, two-time world champion and the International Whistling Entertainer of the Year in 2012, the festival is a unique event that showcases world-class musical whistling and creates a space for self-expression and artistry.

It's also designed to save the day for whistlers worldwide, as the long-running International Whistler Convention (IWC) was forced to skip its annual competition for the first time in decades. With performers coming from as far away as Europe and Japan to the MMW instead, Kaufman promises a day filled with auditory wonders.

"The IWC didn't get funding this year to continue the event in North Carolina, where it was for the past 40 years, so I decided the show must go on," says Kaufman. "We want to expose the world to the amazing beautiful instrument that whistling actually is, and Los Angeles County is the best place to do it. It has the best audiences and the most people so we can expose our art."

Indeed, Kaufman is quick to note that whistling is a versatile medium, which some historians consider to be the first musical instrument played by people. There are several types of whistling, many of which will be performed at the festival, including puckering, palatal whistling, throat whistling, hand whistling, and finger whistling.

Kaufman says that the IWC had been experiencing a boom in popularity over the last several years, due to social media enabling people all over the world to notice and appreciate the art form. The convention had been held since 1973 in Louisburg, North Carolina, where several enthusiasts hoped to revive the ancient art, and attracted whistling superstars from all over the world including Chris Ullman, Steve Herbst, Jason Serinus, Kimiko Wakiyama and Geert Chatrou.

The spectrum of whistling experience on display by these performers is vast, with Herbst having the longest career at more than 50 years and status in the Whistlers Hall of Fame. Meanwhile, Max Saltarelli is a young gun, making his competitive debut here despite the fact he has already been whistling in numerous professional settings, including a national Target commercial.

One performer who brings a non-vocal instrument to the stage is Francesco Bonifazi, who plays guitar to create his own impressive brand of Americana music that incorporates folk, country, rock blues and a bit of jazz. One of the international performers is Yasunori Okuno, who is only 30 but already has won a slew of IWC awards in addition to many in his native Japan.

While many performers are content with their amateur hobbyist status, Gaizka Lasa aspires to be a

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recognized figure in the art of whistling. Working in the oil and gas industry in Texas means that he has frequent long road trips to perform in his car, in addition to performing for his family and practicing in his empty apartment, so he is excited to perform for a crowd on Saturday.

“The golden age of musical whistling occurred from 1920s through the 1950s,” explains Kaufman. “There were many famous whistling artists who toured and performed with big bands. After the invention of portable radio and other music devices, the popularity of whistling declined.”

Saturday’s event will have three major phases: a group whistle that anyone can join, akin to an open mic; a pre-recorded whistling concert from 1 to 4 p.m. in which performers will whistle over pre-recorded backing tracks; and a live-band concert from 6 to 9 p.m. in which the performers are backed by a four-piece band.

There are at least five past world-champion whistlers scheduled to take the stage at the shows, a fact that Kaufman hopes will blow away audiences and lead to new legions of fans for whistling. She considers whistling to be a “world class instrument, up there with any wind instrument in existence.”

The live-band concert that concludes the day’s events will feature 15 different songs, each featuring a different world-class whistler. The song selection for the show is eclectic as well, not just relying on old standards like “Summertime,” but also featuring such modern tunes as “Chandelier” by Sia, “All of Me” by John Legend, and “Queen of the Night” from the hit play “Phantom of the Opera.”

The winners of all divisions will be awarded trophies, and the winner of the evening live band concert will be named the Masters of Musical Whistling World Champion. Kaufman, whose segment on one of the legendary local TV host Huell Howser’s shows remains in perpetual reruns, knows firsthand the thrill of being honored for the skill.

“I was like most people and learned to whistle from my dad, so I was a performer my whole life,” says Kaufman, who also produces the Monrovia Days Music Festival annually in addition to running the Studio C Hair Artistry salon in Monrovia.

“I went to the IWC and won my first prize. I kept competing until I won in Japan in 2008, where whistling is really becoming a fast-growing trend,” says Kaufman.

Looking ahead to a whistle-packed weekend, Kaufman is undeniably proud and excited to open local eyes and ears to the often-overlooked art.

“Whistling, when done correctly, takes a lot of precision, practice and expertise,” says Kaufman. “The best whistlers I’ve met really dedicated

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themselves to be world class musicians. Everybody whistles, so the fact is that it's not that unusual. It's music, and you can't believe the emotion that whistling can evoke. We've done so many shows where people are emotional in the audience. We want to contribute something the world that's beautiful and real." n

The Masters of Musical Whistling competition takes place from 1 to 9 p.m. Saturday at the Ahiah Center, 277 N. El Molina Ave., Pasadena. Tickets are \$8 in advance and \$10 at the door. Visit mastersofwhistling.com.

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