

A slice of Americana

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Published on 9/26/2008 in [Home](#) » [Features](#) » [Features Main Photo](#)

It's hard to remember a time when there wasn't a Blue Collar Happy Hour at the Bank Street Café. Technically, it's only been two years since Preston Frantz and Ken Atkins came up with the idea of showcasing various country and roots acts - performing before the sun sets on Fridays in appreciation of Older Music Fans who are in bed by 10 p.m.

So it's probably appropriate that Saturday's First Annual New London Americana Music Festival starts at 1 p.m. and ends at 9 p.m.

Eight of the most popular Blue Collar Happy Hour acts will perform.

"I actually thought of doing something like a day-long event during this last Sailfest," says Frantz, who ran the soundboard all Sailfest weekend for the live music stages in the Hygienic Arts Park. "I kept thinking, boy this would be a great venue to get all the Americana/Blue Collar bands together. Ken and I talked about it, and we spoke with (Hygienic representative) Rich Martin, and it came together."

In addition to the early-bird scheduling, one of the keys to the popularity

of the series is the appeal of Americana - a broadly defined niche that embraces all kinds of indigenous roots music from pure country and heartland rock to bluegrass, blues and gospel.

Atkins' and Frantz's bands, for example, represent the purest form of honky tonk while the Village Jammers and Sandy Allen show serious affection for bluegrass. The Rivergods and Dogbite are influenced by such alt-country icons as the Jayhawks, and the Hoolios are reminiscent of the subdudes, John Hyatt and Marty Robbins. And Brockett blends punk, rockabilly and Grand Ole Opry.

"Americana has it all," Frantz says. "That's appealing in itself to people. I think people who listen are fairly educated and ambitious music fans. There's a lot of different kinds of music on this bill, but it works together and we all appreciate each other's work. It's a great opportunity to see how it all works together and how all the styles come together."

Speaking of styles coming together, it's been interesting to observe a stylistic crossover in New London since the Happy Hours began. New London's established indie bands - chiefly through the efforts of established, "New London scene" Rivergods and Brockett - have begun interacting with the Americana folks, both in terms of venues and shared bills.

"I kept hearing about the Happy Hour, finally got to check it out, and knew it would be a great fit for us," says Rivergods leader Ben Parent. "Preston and Ken are seasoned musicians and scene veterans who inject a lot of energy and passion into a great series they built themselves. I think, for a city this small, it has pretty big ears. There's just a lot of diversity in music around here now, a lot of camaraderie and support."

"There is so much good local talent in this area," Frantz says. "The musicians work hard in whatever style and are open to other styles and art forms throughout the region. So I can see why there's an across-the-board popularity and acceptance going on."

Indeed, that the festival is taking place at the Hygienic Arts Park - the showcase venue for the so-called New London music scene - is a solid indication of the joining of forces. "Rich Martin and (Hygienic official) Sherry Stidfole were all over this when we brought it up," Frantz says. "We wanted an outdoor venue for a fall day, and we'll have beer and wine, but it's also going to be very family-friendly. The Hygienic folks did plenty of behind-the-scenes stuff with the city and other venues to make sure it could work. Great people."

Martin says the Hygienic is delighted to be involved. "We're psyched to have the Americana festival at our park. Obviously, the Happy Hour has built a great following down at the Bank Street Café, and if they need a bigger venue for their show, we think it's a great fit. The music crowds in New London obviously loves good bands of any kind, and the crossover between the scenes is only growing and making the city stronger."

New London



Paul Brockett of The Paul Brockett Roadshow Band.