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From the Campfire to the Brew Pub

· After traveling thousands of miles over the years, J. Peter Boles brings his old guitar and vast repertoire of 'folkabilly' to Ojai.

By BILL LOCEY, Special to The Times

J. Peter Boles, a local country-flavored folkie of vast experience, will appear tonight at the Ojai Brew Pub, aiming to play some tunes from his vast repertoire and sell a few copies of his brand new self-titled album.

The venue has only been open a few months, but the brewmaster has already demonstrated a mastery of his craft, the food is decent and it offers live music several nights a week.

Boles, who attended Holy Cross School in Ventura, has a local history dating to the early '70s, when he played with Chris Byrd, now half of the Tijuana Hound Dogs. Boles either appears solo at his gigs or he plays with Jim Monahan--the guitar player from the Desert Rose Band and not the politician--or Dan Wilson of Rincon Ramblers and Tatters fame.

This free gig at the pub will feature Boles along with Monahan and fireman and flute player Steve Baker. One thing musicians are good at is helping each other, and Boles had even more musical friends appear on his album, including the likes of Chris Hillman and Alan Thornhill.

"I started playing with Dan Wilson five years ago, along with a guy named Todd Nelson at State & A in Santa Barbara," Boles said.

"Then Wilson and I started playing Cafe Voltaire, and I met Jim Monahan," he added. "We'd play a song and he'd ask whose song that was and I'd say it was mine. Then one day, he suggested we do a record. He just pretty much made it happen and produced it. My music pretty much relates to the old country stuff. I call it 'folkabilly.'"

Folk singers are like firemen and clowns--everybody likes them--but the jury is still out on rappers and tow truck drivers.

While Boles' concoction of folk and country influences sounds seamless, he's fully aware of the nuances.

"A folk song is any song that contains the phrase 'Oh, Lord,' played on an out-of-tune guitar," he said. "The perfect folk song is usually about hookers or hoboes. On the other hand, the perfect country song is about dying, dogs, mama, trains and drinking."

And for a Ventura guy, Boles has quite the twang--almost as if he sprang from the southern part of somewhere really southern, but that's because he's traveled extensively. He's worked in the oil patch mostly, but he's also mined for gold in Alaska and built boats in Washington and homes in Hawaii. "I took my twang out of the oil fields, but I got started at campfires," Boles said.

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"I spent 15 years of my life during mining season, from May until October, living in a tent in Alaska," he added. "We had a real social camp that was like a gathering place for a hundred-mile radius. We used to trade songs, plus my big brother used to sing and taught me songs. I used to go to other camps and play for the miners, which led to me playing the clubs in Anchorage."

All those road miles and campfires make for a serious repertoire of songs.

In fact, Boles could probably play longer than the Grateful Dead in their heyday.

"There's not that many of my own songs, probably 20 with another 20 in the works," he said. "I know quite a few songs. I could do 16 sets without repeating any songs--that's about 300 songs."

While venues come and go and the scene rages or stinks, Boles, for one, seems satisfied with the current local music scene.

"It's pretty hard the way music is these days to not live in the past, but I'm really happy with what's going on," he said.

"I really like Zoey's in Ventura. Man, I've driven to Austin to find venues like that. I think the scene is getting better, but it's always what you make it. Music is all about sharing emotions--the feeling. That's what folk music is all about, spreading compassion for other people's hardships."

DETAILS

J. Peter Boles at the Ojai Brew Pub, 423 E. Ojai Ave., 9 p.m. today; free; 646-8837.

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