

Island Music

The members of Molasses Creek celebrate Ocracoke's community — in song.

by Bryan A. Oesterreich

Gravel crunches beneath our feet as we walk from the car toward the Ocracoke Community Center. The parking lot is full — mostly pickup trucks with salt spray on their flanks, surf-casting rods on their front bumpers, and license tags that read OBX. A Day-Glo orange poster stapled to a wooden stake out by the road announces “Tonight! The Ocracoke Opry!”

We enter the one-story, wood-sided building and search hard for an empty seat. Along the back wall, a bar-shaped counter displays a variety of home-baked goods for sale. A line of folding chairs, filled with people of all ages, dressed in casual clothes, face the modest stage. Two bleached-blond toddlers chase each other up and down the center aisle. The lights dim as a voice announces: “Good evening. Please welcome — Molasses Creek!” Sunburned hands come together. Kitty and Gary Mitchell and “Fiddler Dave” raise their instruments — and island magic ensues.

North Carolina's Outer Banks are famous for pristine beaches, world-class fishing, charming villages, and — especially here on Ocracoke Island — music. The barrier island is also known for what it's not: It's not Myrtle or Daytona or Virginia beaches. If you're looking for fast food, trendy boutiques, or a neon-lit T-shirt store, you won't be happy here. But if you're looking for a respite from life-in-the-fast-lane.com, drive aboard one of the ferries from Cedar Island, Swan Quarter, or Hatteras, and immerse yourself in a community where most people who live here are from here. And, if you treat their diminutive island with respect, they'll make you feel welcome.

The island — barely 16 miles long — has a legacy of commercial fishing, community (permanent residents number less than 1,000), and a true “island spirit.” Here where storms come ashore, people come together. They also come together to celebrate their lives in song. The members of Molasses Creek decided they wanted to be a part of preserving the music and culture of the Outer Banks and Ocracoke. “We hope our music allows residents to connect with their shared experiences, and visitors to vicariously share those feelings,” says Gary Mitchell.

Putting it all together

Gary and his wife Kitty had been playing together since the mid-1970s when they came across Fiddler Dave Tweedie in 1993. Tweedie was taking classes at Davidson College in Davidson when the duo convinced him to join them and move to Ocracoke. Tweedie, a native of Oklahoma, says all it took was a weekend on the island. “How can anyone not fall in love with Ocracoke?” he says. The fiddle he plays was his grandmother's. “I think of her every time I perform — she's always with me.”

Gary Mitchell plays acoustic guitar. Before crafting melodies, he worked as a carpenter building homes. He says those long days and hard work prepared him for the work it takes to be a successful musician. “Both careers take determination to finish what you start,” he says.

Kathy Mitchell plays bass. For years, she has taught art, music, and Spanish at Ocracoke School. She’s also coached a cross-country team and started a music club. She took up bass playing when, she says, “Gary said he needed a bass player.”

The three collaborate on lyrics and harmonies. Seven albums so far attest to their chemistry and musical talent. Molasses Creek describes their sound as “high-energy/acoustic folk-fusion/bluegrass and ballads — with wacky humor.” Their songs deal with the basic human experiences of faith, work, nature, love, and family. And their “sound” has appealed to folks far-removed from Ocracoke. The band has performed in South Carolina, Virginia, New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Their most memorable, however, may be their gig on “A Prairie Home Companion” with Garrison Keillor.

Syndicated by National Public Radio, the show was broadcasting from New York City in April 2000. The band played in a live competition heard by three million listeners. After audience voting, Molasses Creek came home runner-up.

Enhancing the community

Molasses Creek is about much more than musical talent. For one thing, they’ve created a venue where residents can enjoy not only the Creek’s performances, but local talent as well.

The Deepwater Theater is nestled among lazy live oaks on School Road. The intimate theater seats 100 and gives island residents and visitors the opportunity to hear music “in a theater environment as opposed to a club atmosphere where distractions detract from the experience,” says Gary.

Local talent, such as the Mitchells’ 15-year-old daughter, Katy, is frequently showcased at the theater because Ocracoke has an abundant supply of talent — so much talent that the island holds an annual Ocracoke Music and Storytelling Festival, set this year for June 5 and 6.

Another dimension of Molasses Creek is an interest in education. While the trio enjoys traveling to perform at festivals and concerts, they also like appearing at schools of all grade levels. “We love to show students how our music takes form,” says Kitty. She says the students always find their instructional workshops enlightening. “They like to see how it comes together. I tell them my motto — ‘never let a lack of talent stop you from playing.’”

Last year, they embarked on a learning curve of their own — they opened a recording studio on the island, Soundside Recording. The studio enables the group to record at home and provides a marketing tool for other Outer Banks artists, which, in turn, further enhances a sense of community.

Last year's Hurricane Isabel tested those who live in that community, and Molasses Creek responded. "We took action," says Tweedie. "We wanted to do what we could to raise the spirits of those folks." The group orchestrated free concerts at Mattamuskeet and Hatteras. Both were standing room only. "The response we were given was remarkable," says Kitty. "It's hard to imagine what they all experienced — but judging from our reception, it was a needed relief for them."

Molasses Creek also fosters the feeling of community at home on the island. Ocracoke native Elizabeth Chamberlin who, with her husband, Captain George, provides visitors with accommodations at their Captain's Landing Hotel, sings the praises of the group. "Kitty, Gary, and David have done so much to enrich and preserve Ocracoke history and culture," she says. "Our guests are always happy to hear a performance at the Deepwater Theater is scheduled when they visit." Chamberlin is proud of her island's cultural heritage. "When Molasses Creek began playing here, they were inspired by Ocracoke — now Ocracoke is inspired by Molasses Creek."

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