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Joe's throws special birthday bash for Don Cheek & friends

By Lorin McLain

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Courtesy The Cheektones perform at the Entertainment District this past summer.

"That's what's so weird. I was always the drummer back in those days, and I sang a lot of harmony. But I never really thought I'd be fronting my own band. I never thought I was a good enough singer, for one thing," he said.

Retiring from a career as the IT director with a Phoenix school district about three years ago, Cheek moved to Prescott, where he spent summers in his pre-teen years wandering downtown with friends while his dad, Albert "Red" Cheek, sat in on guitar with regulars at The Palace in the early '60s.

"It was just a natural place, to come back here," Cheek said, adding that before moving to Prescott, the only times he played guitar for people were occasions like parties or around the campfire.

"That's what was really strange about the formation of The Cheektones - I didn't come to Prescott deciding, 'I'm going to start my own band' or anything, that was the farthest from my mind," he said.

For the last year and a half, The Cheektones have made Coyote Joe's a popular place to let loose near the outdoor stage or pool room every Saturday night.

This Saturday night marks a special occasion and milestone for the band, as it celebrates with their fans the 60th birthday of its leader, Don Cheek, with a festive night of the Cheektones mix of jam-heavy classic tunes and originals with guest appearances.

Though the unusual makeup of the band might testify to its cross-generational appeal (the other members are 30, 35, 40 and 50), the funny thing about Don is he never fronted a band until forming The Cheektones, about two years ago.

Cheek, who started playing in high school, said he never thought he would be playing rock 'n' roll 42 years later.

"I started going to open mic, just playing some of my songs. With the pressure of work out of my head, it allowed me to focus. I guess is what you'd call it. Although it feels like the opposite of focusing, 'cause that's what you do when you work. But it allowed me to start writing more. The stress of work just clogged my head."

Bassist Marty Love, 30, accompanied Cheek in his solo Sunday night gigs, before drummer Gary Ukura joined, followed by guitarist Jimmy Hayes and violinist Ines Vitols.

Cheek's wife, Jane, sometimes adds harmony and percussion.

Growing up inspired by artists like Jackson Brown, The Band, Tom Waits, John Hiatt, Bob Dylan, The Beatles and Rolling Stones, Cheek said he never wrote a song until he was 45.

"I don't even know why I wrote the first one. My wife was going to bed, and I said something like 'I think I'll stay up and write a song.' I don't know why I said that, but I ended up writing one that night, and finishing it, pretty much," he recalled.

"It turned out to be kind of a cool song, called 'Portales,' the town in New Mexico. I had never been to that town, or met the woman in the song. It was kind of a cool exercise in songwriting. And as I wrote more, some of them were based on my life, or something I observed, or something that happened to a friend, or something like that."

Cheek said though the original intention of the band was attracting people of all ages to shows, he would really like to draw music fans who that thrived on live rock shows in their earlier years but don't go out anymore.

"It would be really cool to re-awaken that in some of the people who have kind of slid back from it," he said. "That would be a nice thing to make them a bigger part of the audience."

The Cheektones will release a six-song EP sometime in November.

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